The Learning Curve
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Learning Center Collaborations in the Academic Community

For the growth and success of Learning Centers, collaborations are essential. Identifying others in our academic community with whom we can partner offers two benefits/outcomes: success with our project, but, perhaps equally important, success in spreading the word of what we do.

Certainly, we know what we do each day. The crush and rumble of any given day – working with students – keeps us well in touch with the trenches. We have a good sense of our perspective on academic support, but how clear is the perception of our community? Can we render our mission statement and philosophy into language that serves potential partners? It may be very helpful to don other glasses and look at our services as they might be perceived by others.

In building new collaborations, we will not be looking at those with whom we already work. Instead, we'll be looking to new audiences, or to expected audiences with different perspectives. Starting with students, we can begin to look at other *(continued on page 2)*

by Andrew Delohery, MA

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We have a good sense of our perspective on academic support, but how clear is the perception of our community?

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UNITING TO SHARE EXPERTISE, RESEARCH & STRATEGIES

Teaching 21st Century Learners

One of the largest responsibilities that college instructors have is to prepare students for real world experiences and to imbue a love of life-long learning. With that comes the dual responsibility and challenge for instructors to keep abreast of relevant world experiences, as well as to remain open to learning new and interesting ideologies. For some instructors, that could well imply deliberate attempts to change the way they teach students. Some instructors lament that students are coming to college less prepared than students of old. Perhaps, the difference lies in the world experiences and expectations that today's students bring to learning environments.

Today's "traditional" college students were born after 1980 and are often dubbed as Millennials, Generation Y, the Net Generation or Digital Natives. Meanwhile, college instructors, Baby Boomers (born 1946 through 1964) or Generation Xers (born 1965 through 1981) are left to wonder what happened to create the generational gaps between themselves and today's students. (See the Table on page 3 for a comparison of environmental influences for each generation.)

Consider that today's students prefer working in teams, or study groups, are visual and kinesthetic, *(continued on page 3)*

by Lynn Jones Eaton, Ph.D.

Lynn Jones Eaton is the Associate Director of the Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment

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ways they group themselves beyond simply "service users." For example, a student government association, always interested in the welfare of their constituents, represents a good opportunity for collaboration. Although busy, these student officers are often happy to have access to programs that promote student success. In fact, some would argue that the programs themselves are better served when they take into account the opinion of the end user. Other student perspectives can include the Greek Life Council, student clubs (also a good source for interested tutors), student government groups, student athlete groups, and honors societies.

Possible collaboration partners for a Learning Center include:

- Student groups
- Faculty and administration
- Other student support agencies on-campus
- Admissions
- Development Office

Other potential partners are faculty and administration. Given our training and experience in supporting students, we can offer useful insight, but we need the opportunity to do so. The data we collect may provide this opportunity. Offering a professor (with an adequate nod to FERPA) some information about the topics his or her students discuss with you can begin a working relationship. Adequately filtered, information identifying trends – topics by class, by section – is useful to chairs or deans. Other initiatives enjoying the focus of the provost – retention, for example – can be informed by Learning Center data. The data we collect so diligently for our own development and budget discussions can be parsed to offer insights to these audiences as well. Finding opportunities to share this information might require some homework: attending faculty meetings, departmental meetings, and various presentations, workshops, or seminars offers potential connections. These audiences can offer clear statements of need as well as vague hints at intent that can begin conversations.

Chat with other adjunct support groups – academic technology, career services, international education, etc. – to find opportunities. Very often, our perspective is unique; we hear what students find challenging from the students themselves. Challenge implies need, which is the inside track for many departments' development. It may be that nothing more than a conversation resulting in a clear understanding of what each other does will result in an increased perception of utility.

Admissions also represents a helpful perspective. Admissions information can put a more personal face on the expectations of incoming students and their parents. Something as easy as helping to train campus tour leaders can result in growth. Admissions staff, meeting with potential students, field questions based on expectations. In exchange for hearing what potential students seek, Learning Center staff can help admissions drive its own mission while enjoying the benefit of new students being sensitized to the services offered, which may increase service demand.

Another often over-looked partner is Development. Seeking to support the school's mission, they may prove very interested in hearing how the Learning Center might support their goals. A chat with potential donors about what you do, addressing parents during Parents' Weekend, or perhaps a simple pamphlet in their reception area might be a way to help them as you grow your own presence.

Certainly, once you begin to look through other lenses, more and more opportunities for collaboration become evident. Remember, however, to get out and advance your projects. It can be quite surprising to see who else is doing work where collaboration can take both parties farther than they could have gone alone.

A Message from the Editor

This *Learning Curve* edition coincides with both the occasion and theme of the *College Reading and Learning Association* (CRLA) and the *College Academic Support Programs* (CASP) annual conferences – Uniting to Share Expertise, Research, and Strategies.

One of the things most of us in the field of learning assistance are familiar with is the (sometimes lively) discussions with our colleagues about the meanings underlying terminology we use every day. Common, seemingly well-defined constructs such as motivation, cognition, and even learning strategies are discussed at length, with each of us bringing our own teaching and learning experiences to the dialogues. However, I thought it might be interesting to take a look at what a wordsmith expert – *dictionary.com* – has to say about the primary terms used in our theme: expertise, research, and strategy.

Expertise: 1) expert advice or opinion; 2) skill or knowledge in a particular area; 3) skillfulness by virtue of possessing a special knowledge
Research: 1) scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry; 2) close, careful study
Strategy: 1) a plan of action resulting from strategy or intended to accomplish a specific goal; 2) the art or skill of using stratagems in certain endeavors

These definitions, especially when considered as parts of a whole, reinforce the idea that each of us brings our own experiences—as well as strengths and weaknesses—to every learning juncture. What is fortunate for us is that the theme also includes the phrase "uniting to share." An interpretation of how *dictionary.com* might define this phrase is "bringing together so as to form a whole, for the purpose of using or enjoying something jointly or in turns." Thus, as we move forward in our interactions with our colleagues and our students, let's remember that we do not have to perform our jobs in isolation, but that each of us has the expertise, research, and strategies of many others from which to borrow.

Teaching 21st Century Learners – continued from page 1

digitally connected, experiential and accustomed to immediate responses (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Then consider that most college classrooms are still mostly lecture-based. The results are a major disconnect and a recipe for failure. Sure, students readily admit that they want some lecture in their courses, but what they really want is variety. Does this mean that college instructors need to "stop teaching" and yield their roles to technology or to the students themselves?

Caruso and Kvavik (2005) found that over 40% of students want a moderate use of instructional technology (IT) in their classes, over 30% want it used extensively, more than 20% want it used on a limited basis and less than one percent wanted no use of IT. That information provides the rationale for instructors to integrate lecture, discussion, individual work, and team projects in the learning process, with the understanding that some of it is expected to be facilitated with the use of blended communication, such as face-to-face interaction, online interaction, and social networking (e.g., Facebook and myspace.com).

There are thoughts that *(continued on page 8)*

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Table I: Environmental Influences for each Generation

Baby Boomers	Generation X	Net Generation
Television	Video games	Web
Typewriters	PC	Cell Phone
Telephone	Email	Instant Messaging
Memos	CDs	MP3s
Family focus	Individualist	Online communities

Product of Environment (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005)

Assessing Your Teaching

by Joel Heikes, Ph.D.

Joel Heikes is the Instructional Evaluation Specialist for the Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment

Why Assess Your Teaching?

Do you ever wonder why your class isn't doing better on exams or why the whole class seems to be struggling? While students' performance is certainly influenced by their abilities and learning strategies, it is also influenced by instructors' teaching strategies. Without assessing teaching it is not possible to know whether less than desirable student performance is due to student approaches to learning or instructor approaches to teaching.

Regular, ongoing assessment of your teaching can help you to:

- monitor whether student learning goals and course objectives are being met
- improve instruction by making appropriate adjustments in teaching practices
- detect and address teaching challenges
- improve the quality of students´ learning

Fortunately, with proven strategies and the right tools, assessing your teaching can easily become a normal part of your instruction.

Effective Assessment Strategies

Good assessment begins with planning that includes understanding who your students are, their instructional needs, and how your course fits within the larger curriculum. Reflect on teaching challenges you're experiencing to help you identify the areas for improvement and review student learning objectives to determine whether they are meeting students' instructional needs. Finally, decide which aspects of your teaching you are willing to change and what things you cannot or will not change. The answers to these questions will determine the focus of your assessment and the topics for your questions to students.

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Once you have established one or two areas of your teaching to investigate, consider how you would like to gather information from students, when it would be best to gather it, and how much time you are willing to devote to reviewing their feedback. Based on these considerations, you should choose a data gathering tool that best fits your needs and plan time during the course for gathering student input. The Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment's Instructional Assessment Resources (IAR) web site (*http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/assessment/iar*) provides a full complement of planning, data gathering, and data analysis resources to help you assess your teaching.

Helpful Assessment Tools

Whether you are looking for quick ways to gather in-class student feedback, gather more extensive student responses through a survey, or participate in informal peer observation, there are readily available online tools and resources to assist you. The best of these include:

- **Interactive Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) Tool**

http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/cats

An electronic version of Angelo and Cross' (1993) often used handbook that can help you identify the appropriate quick, in-class technique for gathering informal student feedback.

- **The Ongoing Course Assessment (OCA) Tool**

http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/oca

An electronic survey tool that allows you to get anonymous feedback from your students by using existing templates and questions or writing your own. Available only to UT Austin instructors.

- **The Blackboard Survey Tool**

http://www.utexas.edu/academic/blackboard/tutorials/assess_d/create.html

An electronic survey tool within the Blackboard course management system that allows instructors to write their own surveys and administer them to their students.

- **How to Write a Survey**
  http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/assessment/iar/how_to/methods/survey.php
  This helpful IAR resource provides step-by-step instructions for creating and administering a survey.

- **Peer Observation**
  http://www.utexas.edu/academic/diia/assessment/iar/how_to/methods/observation.php
  Complete, step-by-step instructions for conducting classroom peer observation that includes links to additional resources.

Using these feedback tools throughout the semester allows you to consider student input and immediately modify your teaching to improve student learning.

Additional services are available through DIIA's Research, Evaluation, and Assessment site: *http://www.utexas.edu/academic/mec/research/services.html*

or by direct email request to: *mec-research@lists.cc.utexas.edu*

Learning is a Privilege, Not a Chore

by Wendi Miller

Wendi Miller is a former Peer Mentor at the UT Learning Center and now a Marketing/Office Assistant at DoubleDave's Pizzaworks Systems, Inc.

I am positive that this attitude is the paramount reason that college was such a wonderful experience for me. At times it became difficult to maintain such a positive approach, and I developed determination as a result. Along the way, there were many individuals and experiences (probably more than I can possibly realize) that gave me valuable skills and knowledge. I was able to develop expertise that impacted my own college experience, improved the academic experience of others, and prepared me for the future.

I will be the first to admit that college did not come naturally to me. I struggled and had to work very hard to do well in school. I know I could not have done so had it not been for the realization that I was truly fortunate to have so many opportunities to learn. Once I had made up my mind to be excited and thankful, learning became almost effortless. I realized that there was an occasion to learn around every corner: about myself, about an unfamiliar subject, about other people, about everyday life. The knowledge and expertise available to me was endless and unbounded, and I strived to preserve the attitude that I was privileged rather than burdened.

One of the most rewarding opportunities of my life was working as a Peer Mentor at the UT Learning Center. Fellow students came to see me weekly for guidance on how to do well in school, and I worked to help them become successful, independent, efficient lifelong learners. Each week I offered tips, advice, and support, and after two years of being the expert, I concluded that the students I was supposed to have mentored had actually taught me more than I ever could have imagined. Of the many wonderful things I learned in those two years, perhaps the most valuable lesson was that I will never truly be an "expert" in any subject. There will always be more to learn and I am thankful for this.

I recently graduated from college and entered the workforce where I have started the learning cycle all over again. I am a true "freshman" employee in my office with so much to learn and master. I know that in the cycle of learning, though, I will soon be sharing skills and expertise again with others. For now, I try my best to maintain the positive attitude that has contributed to my success in the past and that hopefully contributed to the success of the students I mentored as well.

If there is anything I have come to terms with in my transition from school to career, it is that we all have a lot to learn from one another. In one month's time, I went from advising my fellow students to being the new employee at work with the least skill and expertise. I am truly thankful, though, for the opportunities to be both an "expert" and an "amateur." I know that I am privileged to be surrounded by new opportunities to learn, and I look forward to the many upcoming opportunities to grow and to teach.

Once I had made up my mind to be excited and thankful, learning became almost effortless.

The Art of Changing the Brain

Book review by
Tracy Pomerinke

Tracy Pomerinke is the Program Coordinator for Campus Services at the UT Learning Center

Over the past 25 years or so, neuroscience has revealed a remarkable understanding of brain structure and function. Imaging technology provides access to amazing views of the world within. But the translation of brain understanding into teaching is not automatic, and literature interpreting neuroscience for educators is lacking. This book aims to bridge that gap.

The Art of Changing the Brain takes on the question: Can cognitive science inform teaching? Some have argued that our understanding of the brain is as yet insufficient to develop a biologically-based pedagogy. Alas, scientists studying how the brain works seem to have little interest in what goes on in the college classroom. But, argues Zull, that does not negate the value of looking to biology for ways to help people learn. Ultimately, he says, we must reconcile everything we do with nature; educating students is no exception. Teaching—and, by extension, I would include our work in learning assistance—must be compatible with the biology of the brain.

Ultimately, we must reconcile everything we do with nature; educating students is no exception.

While not trained as a neuroscientist, Zull is uniquely placed to address the intersection of brain biology and education. He is professor of biochemistry and biology, and Director of the University Center for Teaching and Education at Case Western Reserve University. Zull studied the process of human learning with David Kolb, and draws heavily on his work with the experiential learning cycle.

Kolb identified learning as the major process of human adaptation, a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Likewise, Zull characterizes learning as change, and traces learning to its physical basis as change in the brain. Ultimately, the author seeks to ascertain what conditions lead to such change, and to make teaching the "applied science of the brain."

In biological terms, function depends on structure—so it makes sense that to understand the function of learning we must look at structures in the brain. Part I of the book is dedicated to mapping out basic brain structures, with particular attention given to four regions of the cortex: sensory, back integrative, front integrative and motor. The function of each region is described and then linked to its analogue in the experiential learning cycle. The role of emotion is identified as critical to cognitive functions, and learning is framed in the context of being motivated by things that we want (or want to resist).

Part II moves to the microscopic level, looking at the neuron and the complexity of neuronal networks. Knowledge is not only stored in these networks but is produced by the brain via the formation and change of these networks. Within minutes of stimulation—say, from an engaging lecture or class activity—

To Err is Human

If prior knowledge is revealed to be incorrect, it must still be identified and addressed. Yet a misperception can't simply be erased by stating it is incorrect—neuronal pathways don't just vanish. So how then is erroneous prior knowledge to be handled?

Zull suggests that consistently talking about an error in thinking may actually reinforce the wrong network. When too much attention is given to a perception that is incorrect, it is that network that is inadvertently strengthened. The author recommends "errorless learning" as an alternative, which focuses on the repetition of correct connections.

The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning
James E. Zull
Stylus Publishing, 2002

Making, Breaking and Strengthening Connections

In simplest terms, changing the brain is all about altering connections, and that means the synapse is key. The number of synapses can change (more or less), the strength of the connection may be altered (increased or decreased), and the pattern of signalling can be affected.

Two things yield a change in a synapse:

1) the frequency/regularity with which the synapse is used, and
2) the importance of the signals traveling through the synapse.

dendrites begin sprouting from existing neurons and new synapses are created. That, says Zull, is a biological confirmation of the importance of prior knowledge: every learner comes to the classroom with existing neuronal networks and these are vital to all future learning. Prior knowledge is the beginning of new knowledge, and both manifest in a very physical way.

Every learner comes to the classroom with existing neuronal networks and these are vital to future learning.

This has very real implications for educators. In the most general terms, being "learner-centered" becomes essential, because we must start where students are—with the physical reality of neurons and synapses in the learner's brain. Zull suggests educators take a broad approach to search for the students' relevant past experience, because existing networks are individual and personal. Also, by asking questions such as "What does this make you think of?" students can be encouraged to identify existing networks on their own and make connections to what they already know.

Part III is rich with application, with a chapter dedicated to each major area of the cortex and how it might be engaged to encourage deeper learning. Zull challenges educators to create learning opportunities in which the whole brain can be engaged. A traditional didactic approach to teaching puts too much emphasis on the acquisition of information, external to the learner, while an approach to teaching based solely on action or discovery risks trivializing learning and losing scholarship. The author advocates for a balanced use of front and back cortex regions for a more complete learning experience.

Zull states from the outset that his intent is not to revolutionize education, but to enrich it. As educators learn more about brain biology, we deepen our understanding of how and why learning occurs as it does, which can then be applied to create the conditions and environments that best promote learning. We may not be able to jump from an MRI scan to the identification of an effective teaching strategy, but *The Art of Changing the Brain* presents an understanding of the brain that at the very least invites discussion on the link between learning and teaching—and that's a connection worth strengthening.

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the interaction of our youth with technology and the multitasking that they endeavor (such as playing video games, using iPods, and blogging, etc.) is actually increasing their cognitive faculties, not dumbing them down (Johnson, 2005). Additionally, the results displayed in Table 1 do seem to support Thomas Friedman's (2006) declaration that as a result of the immeasurable amount of influence of technology in the 21st century, the world is indeed flat. The opportunity to create and share knowledge abounds.

To challenge is to be challenged. Don't abandon the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) or the helpful knowledge about how people learn (National Research Council, 2000). But perhaps a sign of the times is that students have changed – and so must the course of actions that instructors follow to reach these students in ways that allow them to fully grasp desired learning outcomes.

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