

Self-Assessment

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I will always love Columbia University. This no doubt has something to do with its educational excellence, but principally it's because it was at Columbia that I decided, finally and resolutely, to do something about the OCD.

Songs from the Black Chair

Charles Barber

I have now been at the University of Dubuque for nearly three and a half years, and things are finally falling into place. Two scary actions have had significant dividends: the time I spent seeing a therapist, and a Marriage Encounter that Jamie and I attended in the fall of 2007. In addition, I attended an NSF workshop on teaching introductory geoscience classes, resulting in a complete revision of my introductory geology course. All in all, the latter half of the fall semester through the present have been on average among the happiest in my adult life.

ESC 115 Physical Geology

In reflecting on my teaching, I view the greatest change as the restructuring of my physical geology course. I revised it around four questions:

- Where are we?
- Where would we like to travel?
- What are the hazards if we move to a new area?
- How should we live?

Answering these four questions allows me to cover much of the same content as before but organized around questions relevant to most of my students. It also means that at times I cover similar material the second time through, reinforcing basic concepts. For example, in response to the first question, I go through the geologic history of Dubuque, including lead mining and the course

of Mississippi River. For question 3, I can link lead mining to concern about radon gas, and I can link river patterns to flooding.

Perhaps most important is the actual conducting of the class. Though I still have slideshows prepared for every class, many of the shows have “sketch time” built in—we stop, raise the screen, and draw simple diagrams on the whiteboard. I have found that the act of sketching helps students make real and retain concepts. For example, they must sketch and label the rock cycle, indicating not only the types of rocks but the processes through which they form.

This change in teaching style also requires a change in testing style. There are no multiple choice questions on any of my tests. (Examples are on my website.) For the majority of the questions, I show slides relevant to the answers. In addition, I require multiple sketches such as we created in class.

A result of this testing and teaching approach is that I have given some of the lowest grades ever—if students don’t prepare, guessing seldom helps. On the other hand, the number of students making A’s has also increased. My sense is that the approach empowers students to have greater control over the outcome in the class—if they want a good grade, they know exactly what they must do.

New Orleans: Geology and Jazz

Teaching *Geology and Jazz* with Jim Sherry was a high point of my UD experience. I love Jim and what he does with students and music. I think the students benefitted tremendously from the both the differences and the similarities between Jim and me. We both love New Orleans, care about issues of justice, know how to have a good time, and want our students to increase their knowledge and understanding. Perhaps the most powerful part of the trip for me personally was walking through my former home. The front window was broken out and the side door was missing. The drywall and insulation was removed, leaving the framing. However, ceiling fans and the screen-in porch that I put up myself remained. At that point, I think Hurricane Katrina became a lot less abstract for the students.

Another powerful part of the trip was meeting with former students who had chosen to return to New Orleans. One was among the first returning after Katrina. His task was to get the gasoline stations back up and running. He worked seven-day weeks and got drunk every night. Another student tried to commit suicide. Another nearly married a cocaine addict. The list goes on, and the pain continues.

Wyoming: Wilderness Ethics

Teaching *Wilderness Ethics* with Paul Jensen has been another great experience. Last summer we went to the Boundary Waters together. This year we’re heading

to Wyoming. No doubt Paul and I are considerably different, but I have loved our talks and time together. My teaching has benefitted from working with him. I have no doubt that the connections across campus that come from such collaborations enrich my life and campus life.

Community in the Classroom

During the last year, discussions with Henry Pittman about assessment have affected my conceptualization of my role in the classroom. Henry is a fan of Parker Palmer and often refers to his work. Better grasping Parker's ideas has helped me integrate my past experience with Quakerism with my role in the UD Mission. A key Palmer concept that I have felt intuitively but not articulated clearly is the importance of establishing community in the classroom. Parker argues that the first week of class is crucial in creating a learning atmosphere with students. The students must feel challenged, no doubt, but supported and cared for. Particularly at UD, helping students have the confidence and sense of security to actively be a part of the classroom is crucial. Sure, there is a place for friendly competition. However, support and cooperation is more important. Unlike many big schools, UD is not about "weeding out" students who don't live up to some abstract standard. Instead, we believe that nearly all students are capable of rising to the standard required for their vocation, and that by supporting them, we can help make their achievement possible.

Conclusion

This has been a good year. I still need to do more in terms of research and in recruiting students. However, things are falling into place. I'm glad I'm where I am.