

Teaching Matters

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Constructing Networks of Knowledge: The Biology of Learning

As discussed in last month's *Teaching Matters*, effective instruction begins with curricular design: aligning our lessons and courses to specific outcomes. Intentional curricular design ensures that our students will have multiple opportunities to practice and hone new writing, thinking, problem-solving skills as well as extend and refine their knowledge of disciplinary concepts and theories.

The delivery of a well-designed curriculum through effective instructional practices is key to providing an engaging education to students. From a strictly biological perspective, learning occurs when neural connections (synapses) are established and strengthened. Effective teaching practices then, are instructional strategies that build and stabilize synapses.

Creating a climate conducive to learning is the first step in facilitating synaptic growth for our students. Creating a learning-rich environment, however, is a shared responsibility between students and professors. Learners' attitudes and perceptions about learning *and* about the content of the course influence their effort and intellectual flexibility. What follows is a brief list of strategies you can use to help you and your students create and maintain a climate that will facilitate learning.

1. Prepare and follow a well-designed syllabus (see the CTLA website for a template recommended by the SOU Curriculum Committee). Students want to be successful in their courses. When academic expectations are clear and consistent, students experience a sense of comfort and order, and their attitudes and perceptions about their potential success increase.
2. Explain to students that their attitudes about learning, in general and specifically about your course, will influence their success. Some students who perceive a course as challenging will increase their efforts; others may shy away from the challenge. Ask students to reflect upon and share their

attitudes and perceptions of the course – this helps us to determine what aspects of the course we can address as teachers and what lies within the locus of control of our students.

3. Establish a relationship with each student – learning students' names can make a significant difference in their engagement and success, even in a large lecture course. Dr. Kent Lawson of the SUNY Oneonta Physics Department, now retired, routinely taught classes of more than 200 students. On the first day, he took photographs of the class and asked people to sit in the same seat for the first few days of class. He then put names to the faces on the photos and memorized them. By the second or third class he knew all of his students by name. It amazed them and started the semester off with everyone in the class having a deep respect for him.
4. Establish equitable and positive ground rules for discussion, group work, and general classroom norms. Students who feel respected by their peers and professors feel better about themselves and their school, work harder, and learn more efficiently. When it comes to learning, the importance of social and emotional safety must not be underestimated – we must feel safe in order to fully engage in the learning process.
5. Recognize and provide for individual differences among students. Students come to your course with varying experiences, knowledge, abilities, expectations, and perceptions. Students' prior knowledge and experiences not only influence the intellectual connections they make, but also contribute to their sense of acceptance or isolation. Use literature from diverse sources and consider allowing students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways: multi-media projects, research projects, graphic organizers, short presentations, etc.

Continued page 3....

Spotlight on Dennis Slattery

Meet Dennis Slattery, Assistant Professor of Business, MBA, CPA, Coordinator of the Hospitality and Tourism Program and member of the University Studies Committee.

Raised by teaching parents, Dennis grew up in the Alaskan tundra. He began his academic career at SOU, when his parents retired to Grants Pass in the late 70's. To help make ends meet Dennis started working at a local hotel, "I managed the Ashland Hills Inn, now the Windmill Inn. I worked my way up from housecleaning to management." After twenty years in the hospitality industry, Dennis decided it was time to return to SOU to complete his bachelors; he graduated in 1996 with an undergraduate business degree in accounting and completed his MBA in 1997. Not one to let grass grow under his feet, Dennis opened his own CPA business. "I've had to reinvent myself several times in order to stay in Ashland," he laughs.

Why do you teach, Dennis?

"I resisted teaching until 1999 when I did some part-time teaching for SOU. My grandmother thought I should be a teacher, my parents thought I should be a teacher...and when I reflect upon my years in business, I was really more of a mentor and a coach. I have a belief that what you're trying to do with your co-workers is develop a belief in the business. I think when I was in business, I really was a teacher."

"Some years later, I was at a turning point. I knew that it was time to make a change: my mother-in-law had just passed away, I knew that it was time to step up my business and I had a brother-in-law I was encouraging to move closer to us. It was about 1:00 am and in my broad-based spiritual way, I asked for some guidance. Show me a sign about what I am supposed to do. I logged on to the SOU website to see if I could find a job for my brother-in-law and clicked on employment. There on the screen came this job announcement: Tenure track business and accounting position. Boy! Now that was service! I stayed up the rest of the night getting my paperwork ready and in the morning I called the Dean of the School of Business. I showed him all of my paperwork and he said, 'Gee, Dennis, you would be great in this position, but we just offered it to somebody down in San Diego.' I pushed my



Dennis Slattery is known for being outstanding in his field..... this one happens to be in Scotland!

papers across to the Dean and said, 'Well, I have it on good authority that this job is mine. When the other person pulls out, call me.' Sure enough, two weeks later I got the call: the other guy dropped out and I got the job. At the age of fifty, I got a spiritual calling."

What do you do at SOU?

"I teach management accounting. Managerial accounting is for projections. My colleagues teach financial accounting, which is more about the history of an institution. While both types of accounting work together, it is the projection environment that I prefer."

"I built the hospitality and tourism management program When Earl [Potter] was here I wrote a strategic initiative for this type of program. My initiative was accepted, but wasn't funded so we built the program with no funding. It's built though. We did a lot of work with the industry, asking them what they wanted entry level business majors to know. Then we designed the program around their answers. The response to the new program has been striking. We have more than thirty-five students in the program now, compared to just ten students a few years ago. For this region and for the world, this is a major industry. The growth potential in the hospitality and tourism industry is unlimited...and you can go anywhere you want to go in the world. For some-one who wants to build a professional portfolio, you can't beat hospitality and tourism."

"Hospitality and Tourism is an industry that benefits from students having a strong liberal arts or general education because business is part science, part art, and a lot about having an

Continued next page.....

Spotlight on Dennis Slattery, *concluded*

extensive understanding of society. Successful business people need to have a wide range of interests because they are relating to people on the other side of the product. You have to have a more expansive view of the world than just the rules of accounting, for instance. Rules are important, but they must have an overlay beyond the technical to the art and philosophy of the business. At times, I am inclined to encourage students to take an art history class rather than another business class. This broad-based type of knowledge makes you well-educated and when you sound educated, people want to do business with you...one spins off the other."

"I try to make accounting fun...I teach for engagement and I teach people how to learn. When I went to school it took me a while to figure out that what I was actually learning was how to make myself eligible to learn more. I have a lot of dialogue in my classes about learning. When young people choose business, they choose

The Biology of Learning *concluded*

6. Synapses are strengthened when the brain has the opportunity to engage in a variety of tasks: verbal, visual, active discussion, written, the contemplation of metaphors and analogies, etc. When patterns and interrelationships are illuminated for learners, the likelihood of retention increases. The value of providing students with a framework for their learning is easily grasped if you compare the effectiveness of storytelling versus colorless lecturing. The former provides a pattern with continuity, the latter provides simply facts. Consider which is retained longer.

Web Site of the Month

The Faculty Center for Teaching and e-Learning at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte offers a comprehensive overview of the best practices in college teaching. Topics include Lecture Practices, Group Discussion Triggers, Thoughtful Questions, Reflective Responses to Learner Contributions, Active Learning Strategies, Cooperative Group Assignments, Modeling, and more. <http://www.fctel.uncc.edu/pedagogy/basicscoursedevelop/BestPractices.html>

business for some reason...but I feel a need to give the students a real idea of what that road is going to be like."

"I do a lot of advising. I enjoy advising; it's just an extension of teaching. I give all my classes a lifetime warranty... I tell my students that as long as they can contact me at SOU, I'll go over that material one more time."

When you reflect upon your work at SOU, of what are you most proud?

"It's just all about the students. The payoff is when you have something to offer, you offer it to another, and then you see the light go on, and you know you helped that person acquire a viewpoint, to advance or apply the information in a proactive way."

"I *always* go to graduation. There's something wonderful about celebrating all that you have shared with those students over the years." ■

7. Enjoy your students: their insights, comments, and queries. Teaching is a complex web of personal and intellectual relationships that, in all its richness, keeps us coming back for more. ■

Feldman, K. A., (1998) in *Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom* 2nd ed.: Needham Heights, MA, Simon & Schuster, pp. 391-414.

Marzano, J. & Pickering, D., (1997). *Dimensions of Learning* 2nd ed.: Alexandria, VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wolfe, P. (2001). *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*. Alexandria, VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Call for Proposals

15th Annual International Conference on Advances in Business Education and Training
June 11-13, Malaga, Spain. Submission deadline: February 15. <http://www.edineb.net>

MERLOT: Still Blazing the Trail and Meeting New Challenges in the Digital Age. August 7-10, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Faculty development in the design, creation, utilization and evaluation of online teaching and learning materials.

Submission deadline: February 15.

<http://mic08.merlot.org/proposals/call.htm>