

ITL report for the Innovative Classroom Activity Lab

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Did recipients complete what they set out to complete?

In our proposal, we set out three goals for our ITL project:

- 1) Regular meetings throughout the Fall 2016 semester, facilitated by members of the group and focused on particular topics concerning class activities.
 - We met eight times throughout the Fall 2016 semester. The topics that we covered in those meetings were: (a) developing a classroom persona, (b) project-based learning, (c) embodied pedagogy in classroom activities, (d) dealing with the dreaded 'r' words (reliability and relevance) in class activities, (e) group discussion activities, (f) inclusive and culturally-aware pedagogical strategies, (g) assessment of student learning.
 - Our meetings were structured around readings, some of which came from books purchased from the grant budget¹ and others came from online sources.
- 2) Regular non-evaluative peer observations throughout the Fall 2016 semester.
 - We had robust participation in non-evaluative peer observations. As it worked out, we extended this process into the Spring 2017 semester. Most members of our group were able to both observe and be observed and we had informal conversations about those class meetings. However (and we will address this more in response to a later question), a more organized structure for scheduling and debriefing after the class observations may have further enhanced this aspect of the grant.
- 3) A guidebook that lays out a set of activities that we find particularly useful in our own classrooms.
 - We have decided that, as it stands, this is not the best route to accomplish what we wanted to do. First, creating such a document would require a much longer-term project than a one-semester set of meetings. Second, though, in reading the literature from the first semester, we realized that much of what we would do would be largely redundant. Instead, we have included a reading list that sets out chapters of books, specific articles and web pages, etc that are particularly helpful when thinking about class activities. This reading list is included as an appendix to this document.

¹ We were able to purchase copies of three different books for members of the grant: (1) *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* by James Lang, (2) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* by Stephen Brookfield, and (3) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

What are the products of their efforts in terms of content, format, and public dissemination?

There are a number of different products of our efforts, some that are tangible and others that are less tangible but nonetheless present and vital. Here are, briefly, some of the products of this ITL:

- We have developed an in-progress reading list of sources that seem particularly helpful for those interested in developing class activities.
- Lauren Osborne gave a presentation about peer observation to the new faculty as part of their regular meetings on pedagogy.
- All of us incorporated different activities and exercises into our class as a result of our class discussions.
- We were introduced to new pedagogies (particularly feminist pedagogies) that have broadened our perspectives on ways to teach. (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was particularly influential here.)
- We cultivated a community of faculty members who are all interested in this topic and who can act as a support structure in future semesters.

Do any of these have potential long-term positive effects on the curriculum or academic program more generally?

As is clear from the previous question, we think that this has great potential to have sustained positive effects on our own teaching and on the curriculum more generally. This ITL group had representatives from all three divisions at the non-tenure-track, pre-tenure, and post-tenure levels. Included amongst us are mentees and mentors, department chairs, the director of the mentoring program, and the director of the COWS. Working together to think about productive class activities makes us more prepared to go out into our own communities of influence and advocate for thoughtful, engaging, reflective pedagogical practices.

How many students were directly involved or indirectly impacted by the grant?

Given the nature of the ITL grant, the students in our classes this year and in the future will benefit from our efforts. Moreover, we all engage in various kinds of peer support, broadly defined. Thus in mentoring other faculty (both formally and informally) we can expand the scope of influence beyond our own classrooms.

Did the project enhance the quality of learning experiences offered to students?

Yes. Broadly speaking this allowed us to be self-reflective about our practices in the classroom. Our group meetings let us brainstorm and troubleshoot activities that we then used in our classes, usually to good effect.

Here are some particular examples of class activities that we did as a result of our participation in this ITL:

- Inspired by the reading of an article exploring the importance of quality questions for classroom discussion, students in Janis' Spanish 320, an intermediate film and conversation course, were asked to overtly reflect upon what makes a good question and put this into practice in class discussions throughout the semester
- Several of us did freewriting as a way to develop engaging class activities. For example, students in Janis' Spanish 344 (a gateway course on visual literacies) engaged in a newly designed dual free-write/oral activity that combined strategies discovered in the pedagogical readings.
- Lauren, Michelle, and Lydia used a number of activities presented in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, including the jigsaw discussion technique, the hatful of quotes technique, and the snowballing technique.
- Stemming directly from a conversation about the role of active discussions in the classroom, Michelle revised her syllabus to better articulate both the purpose and expectations for quality in-class discussions.
- Lauren had an issue with students who were not being good participants; specifically, one student in particular tended to dominate discussion and drive it away from that day's assigned text. Rachel was able to observe a small group discussion exercise that was meant to address this specific issue, and discuss what she saw happen in the class session.
- Justin was able to navigate post-election stress amongst students by using classroom discussion techniques that were discussed in meetings.
- Rachel used a debate technique we discussed where students are divided up and asked to argue opposing sides of a controversial issue.

What evidence do you have that demonstrates impact on student learning (if applicable)?

This is something that will require more time to assess.

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

We proposed an ambitious project that likely would have been even more successful if carried out over two semesters. It would have worked better if we had planned a year-long ITL project where, in the first semester we would have met as a group to discuss innovative class activities and then, in the second semester, focused our attentions on peer observations of classroom visits with whole group meetings to discuss those peer observations, to troubleshoot, etc. Many of the activities we discussed needed to be set up and planned as part of the larger class schedule and so it was actually unfeasible to learn about, discuss, and implement those activities in the span of one semester. Moreover, by condensing this to one semester we spent all of the time in our meetings talking about the different pedagogical techniques and about our classes broadly speaking but did not have the time in those meetings to fully debrief and discuss the classes that our peers had observed. By spreading this out to a full academic year, we would have the time in the first semester to explore the literature and discover new techniques to use in our classrooms as well as build the community of trust in our ITL community. We could then, in our second semester, focus on implementing those techniques, scheduling peer observations and debriefing about those observations and new activities in regular ITL meetings.

Last Thoughts

Much like the first time teaching courses, we learned a lot about how to do one of these kinds of ITL projects this time around. While it was perhaps a bit too ambitious for a one-semester project we nonetheless believe that it worked to establish a cohort of peers focused around relevant pedagogical questions. Indeed we continue to think that this general framework could work well for future ITL projects that are asking other (or perhaps more focused) questions. For example, we think this would work well for a cohort who is interested in looking further at feminist and queer pedagogies or for a cohort who is interested in looking at pedagogical techniques that might make our classrooms more inclusive to those from diverse or under-represented backgrounds.

Appendix: Reading List

Below is a set of readings that we read over the course of our ITL that we found particularly helpful.

- “Cultivating a Teaching Persona” by Jay Parini, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 September 1997
- “Engaged Pedagogy” by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*
- “Pedagogy Beyond Performance” by Spencer Dew at <https://craftofteachingreligion.wordpress.com/2016/01/18/pedagogy-beyond-performance/>
- “We Aren’t Here to Learn What We Already Know” by Kayla Wazana Tomkins at <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2016/09/13/we-arent-here-to-learn-what-we-know-we-already-know/>
- Sondra Perl’s Composing Guidelines, at <http://www.focusing.org/perlprocess.html>
- Chapters 4-6 of *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* were full of good, short classroom activities.
- *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, second edition, by John C. Bean.
- The Stonehill College Center for Teaching & Learning has some online resources about non-evaluative observation that may be helpful to others who would like to pursue a similar project (most especially pages 10-13 in the pdf handbook linked from this page): <http://www.stonehill.edu/offices-services/ctl/programs/teaching-squares/>
- <http://www.teachthought.com/uncategorized/the-difference-between-instructionism-constructivism-and-connectivism/> (A quick reference to different types of classroom approaches.)
- “Situating Constructionism” by Seymour Papert and Idit Harel, at: <http://www.papert.org/articles/SituatingConstructionism.html>.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-06cPuXf30> Gary Stager on Constructivism and Seymour Papert
- Ellen Clay’s ‘The Class Mission Statement’, part of the MAA’s *Assessment Practices in Undergraduate Mathematics*, available at <http://www.maa.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ebooks/pdf/NTE49.pdf>
- Nancy Hagelgans ‘Combining Individual and Group Evaluations’, also from the MAA

- Some pieces on ‘relevance’ and ‘relatability’ (for assessing and debating the pros/cons of making such concepts central in pedagogy).
 - <http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2013/09/students-relevance.aspx>
 - http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/chat/chat267.shtml (on 'edutainment')
 - <http://davidharbinson.com/make-it-relatable/>
 - <http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/how-to-make-learning-relevant/>
 - http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2014/04/11/relatable_the_adjective_is_everywhere_in_high_school_and_college_discussions.html