

Thriving in Academe

KEEPING YOUR CLASSROOM C.R.I.S.P.

Motivate and assess students with classroom response systems.

BY HAL BLYTHE AND CHARLIE SWEET, EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Are you and your millennial students losing your focus in the classroom? Here's a solution that works.

Watched yourself on tape teaching class recently or even been to observe a colleague? This past semester in our role as faculty developers we've visited a lot of classrooms on ours and other campuses.

For the most part we've seen instructors dash in after the bell, plunge into class in medias res, like the opening of a Greek epic, race through the class as if it's a speed-dating session, and finish by shouting instructions to scurrying students disappearing down the hallway for their next class. Not a pretty picture.

In truth, though, why should we expect more from instructors? Most of us had no grad-

uate classes in pedagogy or classroom management; most of us do not have a mentor; and there is not much emphasis on faculty development in our colleges and universities.

As committees breed like rabbits, our employers expect more service, and a greater number of publications for promotion, tenure, and merit. Twelve and fifteen-hour course loads are often the norm. And our burden of newer responsibilities—email, program assessment, Blackboard, etc.—grows each year.

Is there something faculty can do to regain that focus in the classroom that leads to greater student learning? Absolutely, and it's not that difficult.

MEET HAL BLYTHE AND CHARLIE SWEET



HAL BLYTHE

Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet are co-directors of the Teaching & Learning Center at Eastern Kentucky University. Former professors of English, they have a combined 72 years teaching experience. Frequent collaborators in teaching and writing, they have ten books (four in the New Forums Press' "It Works for Me ... " series) and over 600 publications. In addition to appearing in academic journals (*Hemingway Review*, *Pedagogy*), they have also published fiction (stories in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Bloody Ground*, a story collection) as well as articles on writing in popular magazines (*The Writer*, *TV Guide*). They can be reached at charlie.sweet@eku.edu at hal.blythe@eku.edu.



CHARLIE SWEET

Tales from Real Life

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

Thirty-eight years ago I started my first full-time job in academia by walking into my chair's office. He handed me copies of the common texts for the Freshman (it would take me 35 years to call them "first-year students") English and Sophomore Lit sections I would be teaching.

Then, with the admonition, "This first year I want you to be the best teacher you can be," he dismissed me, and like the Deists' god he was never again visible to guide me through the semester.

On the plus side, I had a passion for the profession and an excellent knowledge of the content of the courses (some admittedly obtained seconds before entering class), but, predictably, I was a terrible teacher.

That sophomore text—I assigned all of its over-2000 pages and was clueless as to why students looked at me through weary and crossed eyes.

So how did I teach those undergraduates? Simple. I replicated my best graduate seminars and copied my favorite teachers.

But, without even the map of a G.A.'s department- required syllabus, I meandered from topic to topic like a blind person trying to cross the Gobi desert.

Thirty-five years later, though, I would win the Acorn Award as Kentucky's best college professor of 2005. How did I get there? I discovered a compass called a working pedagogy.

—Charlie Sweet
Eastern Kentucky University

Keeping Your Class C.R.I.S.P.—A Refresher Course

Here are five things you can do so your daily class organization promotes learning:
Contextualize. Review. Iterate. Summarize. Preview.

HGTV (Home & Garden Television) has become quite popular by showing viewers how to decorate their homes. The cable channel's methodology is simple—every room needs one focal point, and everything in the room ought to contribute to that end with the final goal of unity—pulling the entire home together.

If there were such a thing as The Pedagogy Channel (TPC), it would doubtless stress that classrooms work the same way: not only seeking unity for each individual session but also developing a seamless flow for the entire course—sort of a pedagogical feng shui. So until TPC launches, we'll offer you some tips to redesign your classroom for more effective, unified learning through the C.R.I.S.P. approach.

Contextualize!

Rather than jumping into the day's topic, begin your class with what Gerry Nosich calls “the fundamental and powerful concept.” For example, instead of starting the class with a general announcement such as “Today we'll be examining Poe's ‘Ligeia,’” provide a focal point that informs the entire hour: “Today we'll be looking at Poe's ‘Ligeia’ through the dark magnifying glass of the Gothic tale.”

At that point, you might move on by providing a brief PowerPoint presentation that includes a definition of the concept, perhaps by conducting a mini-lecture about the conventions of the Gothic tale, or you might have preselected a group of students to research and present that information. Even low techies can write GOTHIC TALE in bold letters on the board as a reminder of the day's focus.

This focus on a singular concept will also serve your students well in the entirety of their domain/field. Ideally, you are helping them develop a knowledge base, and transferable skills. Understanding how “Ligeia” exemplifies the gothic tale illuminates much Romantic Literature as well as introducing a key element in Southern Literature. In addition, the notion of convention (e.g., the Gothic motif of the dark and stormy night) is fundamental to all literature and will aid students in further literary analysis regardless of the specific course.



Once students know where you are going with the class, immediately tie that focus into previous class foci.

Review!

Once students know where you are going with the class, immediately tie that focus into previous class foci (to aid this process, encourage your students to study their notes after each class and skim over them just before the next class starts).

Research demonstrates that students learn best when they can attach new knowledge to old knowledge. When you review, you also prime their pumps on that learning process by exemplifying and modeling how it works:

“A few weeks ago we were studying the Neoclassic Age, with its emphasis on reason, as the way by which people knew and understood the world around them. Coming at the end of the 18th century, the Gothic reflects a tension between this old way of confronting the universe and a newer way, the Romantic's reliance on emotion and intuition's ability to grasp things beyond the reach of reason. Do you see any of this tension in ‘Ligeia’?”

Students can now dive into this new world of Poe from a strong platform, no matter the methodology you choose from this point.

Iterate!

Throughout the class, continually emphasize the powerful and fundamental concept around which the session is built. While you could simply point to your writing on the wall periodically, you create deeper learning

experiences by having your students actively engaged in the iteration process. One method Nosich recommends to provide students a framework for learning the day's new concept is the SEE-ing I.

Have each student take a few minutes on paper to State his/her definition of the Gothic, Elaborate on it with a paraphrasing sentence beginning with “In other words ...” Exemplify it with a sentence starting “For example ...” Illustrate it with a sentence beginning “It's like ...” Then have them share their thoughts through a brief discussion.

Importantly, this exercise leads students beyond memorizing and parroting yours or a group's definition. For variety, you can facilitate deeper learning by such techniques as pair-and-share moments. Additionally, have students draw analogies between “Ligeia” in your course and other examples of the Gothic they recognize in television

(Buffy the Vampire Slayer), movies (Van Helsing), and other courses (“A Rose for Emily” in Southern Lit).

While keeping their focus on the Gothic, move your students along the revised Bloom’s taxonomy. Have them apply the convention of the Gothic mansion to Poe’s ruined abbey in “Ligeia.” Analyze the conventions that do and do not appear in the story, evaluate several possible meanings of the “ruby-colored fluid,” and create an interpretation that takes into account seemingly disparate details in Poe’s story, such as the semi-Druidical carvings, the pentagonal-shaped room, and the placement of the bed.

Don’t forget that if you are conditioning your students through these active learning methods, you should design your assessments—tests, papers, and exams—to reflect this approach. Multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests and encyclopedia-like papers run counter to the learning strategies you have been promoting.

Summarize!

No matter how well class is going, stop five minutes before the end. Whether you’re in the midst of a brilliant PowerPoint, an insightful lecture, intense Socratic questioning, or effective group work, you need to make a definite segue into this segment with a conditioning prompt such as “Let’s summarize today’s main ideas.”

Since you are promoting active learning, try to have the students provide the key points and how they work together relative the session’s organizing concept. Finally, ask if there are any questions about the session—in this case, details in “Ligeia,” conventions such

as the damsel-in-distress or the mysterious stranger, or how the Gothic atmosphere in this story relates to that seen previously in Irving’s “Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

Preview!

Before your students make that lemming-like rush for the exit, give them specific directions on what they need to be looking for in their next assignment. Rather than the generic, “Don’t forget to read ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ for next time, guide them to “Identify the same four or five conventions of Gothic lit that you just covered in the summary. See if you can find the same tension between rational and supernatural explanations for the eerie events that occur.” Again, you have provided your students with a focus for their reading, a bridge between where they’ve been and where they’ll be going.

Research demonstrates that students learn best when they can attach new knowledge to old knowledge.

Conclusion

Remember that old strategy from speech class: “Tell `em what you’re gonna tell `em, tell `em, and tell `em what you’ve told `em”? The C.R.I.S.P. approach promotes the same goals of organization, unity, and flow. Not only do students feel comfortable knowing exactly what’s going on at any class session and how the material fits into the course as a whole, but also you have helped to make fundamental and powerful concepts stick, whether teaching a course in American Lit, BIO 101, or Poly Sci.

When food is crisp, it’s more digestible. When your class is C.R.I.S.P., your students are more able to eat up what’s cooking, and deep learning is more apt to occur.

BEST PRACTICES

“Finding the Core of the Idea”

In *Made to Stick* (2007) Chip and Dan Heath demonstrate that the key to making an idea stick—i.e., understood, remembered and have a lasting impact—is to keep it simple by “finding the core of the idea” (17). Through an analysis of advertising and political campaigns, the Heaths essentially support Nosich’s “fundamental and powerful concepts” idea. The Heaths’ insight is applicable to education as I recently discovered when I was asked to teach an American Literature I class (a course I have taught many times) for a colleague. Taking someone else’s class is always daunting because the guest lecturer doesn’t know the students, what they have learned so far, what has been



stressed, or even the usual class format. Before guest facilitating a discussion on Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” I determined in a brief discus-

sion with my colleague what we considered the course core: literary conventions. I then made the class C.R.I.S.P. by contextualizing the concept of conventions, reviewing what conventions the class had covered recently (i.e., the Gothic), iterating the conventions of the detective story as found in “The Purloined Letter,” summarizing these conventions toward the end of the session, and previewing the material for their next class—Hawthorne’s use of another set of conventions, those belonging to the Romance.

The result was a 50-minute session that unified that class, previous classes, and future classes, thus increasing the chances for student learning.

References & Resources

Blythe, H. & Sweet, C. (1998). *It Works for Me!* Stillwater, OK: New Forums.

---. (2004). *It Works for Me*, Online! Stillwater, OK: New Forums.

---. (2002). *It Works for Me*, Too! Stillwater, OK: New Forums.

---. (2006). *It Works for Us*, Collaboratively! Stillwater, OK: New Forums.

Brookfield, S. (1990). *The Skillful Teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Davis, B. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Feldman, K. (1989). Instructional effectiveness of college teachers as judged by teachers themselves, current and former colleagues, administrators, and external (neutral) observers.

Research in Higher Education 30: 137-194. Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to Stick*. New York, NY: Random House.

McKeachie, W. (2002). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*. 11th ed. Boston, MA: HoughtonMifflin.

Nosich, G. (2005). *Learning to Think Things Through*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Overcoming Common Problems

Deal with detrimental assumptions.

Won't being C.R.I.S.P. cause me to sacrifice coverage?

Of course. The sciences are especially concerned with complete nomenclature. They are worried that if a Biology 101 student doesn't learn every bone, muscle, and organ in the body, the student won't be prepared for Biology 102 as well as advanced study in related fields such as nursing and exercise and sports science. However, since studies indicate that students will "forget" (they actually only put the information in their short-term memories) 75 to 90 percent of the material in three-months anyway, shouldn't you worry more that students develop skills and fundamental concepts? If students truly comprehend, for instance, how the bones work in general, shouldn't they be able to figure out how a specific bone functions or know where to look it up?

Isn't C.R.I.S.P. just another way of saying "Education Lite"?

Wordsworth contended in "The Tables Turned" that "We murder to dissect" when we try to break nature down into simpler concepts. Robert Dorit, a biology professor at Smith College, argues, "If we want to understand the world, perhaps it is true that we must first deconstruct it. But an unexamined belief in the power of reductionism . . . may indeed limit the creative power of insight, the very power that allows us to interpret what we dissect." Reducing



something to its core, however, is basically a means to end. Our ability to reduce it helps us comprehend it and make it transferable to other situations. While we haven't the time, inclination, or perhaps even the intellectual ability to expand on every bit of core information, we have a starting point, or as Roethke says in "The Waking," "I learn by going

where I have to go." All ideas are important, but C.R.I.S.P. allows us to focus on what we consider the most important.

But won't the constant use of C.R.I.S.P. become S.T.A.L.E.?

A valid concern. Trying to C.R.I.S.P. every class session can become formulaic and lead students to feel bored since, "We go through the same routine every day." The strategy is designed to allow you to experiment: one day you might emphasize the iteration portion of the class, having your students run through a series of experiences to drive home the fundamental concept; on another day, you might leave more time for the preview period, even using a video clip or slide show to whet your students' appetites for what's coming the next period, a la "Stay tuned for scenes from the next episode of . . ." Just as serving only vegetables, no matter how crisp, can become unappetizing, organizing your class exactly the same way each day can render it stale, so constantly search for new ways to keep your presentations fresh.

THRIVING IN ACADEME

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of the National Education Association and the Professional and Organizational Development Network www.podnetwork.org in Higher Education. This section is intended to promote ever more effective teaching and learning in higher education through dialogue among colleagues. The opinions of this feature are solely the authors' and do not reflect the views of either organization. For more information contact the editor, Douglas Reimondo Robertson, (robertson2@nku.edu) at North Kentucky University or Con Lehane (clehane@nea.org) at the NEA.