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Winter 2009 Teaching Skills Study Award Report
April 24, 2009

Winter 2009 Teaching Skills Study Award Report

This report covers the 2009 Lilly West Conference on College and University Teaching held at CalPoly Pomona from March 20-21, 2009.

Sessions Attended

The better sessions attended included the following:

Welcome Keynote: Bridging the Breach: Confronting Newer Challenges and Opportunities in Education;
Online Questioning Techniques that Enhance Critical Thinking;
Designing Group Projects which Facilitate Learning and Development;
Curricular Maps and Assurance of Learning: Guideposts for Effective Assessment; and
The Nuts and Bolts of Facilitating a Faculty Learning Community.

Presentation of Special Interest

The presentation on “Online Questioning Techniques that Enhance Critical Thinking” offered interesting ideas regarding distance learning applicable to my evolving online and blended classes. The presenter started with a description of effective questioning techniques in the traditional classroom. She indicated that good teaching practice first focuses on creating a safe environment. This might include starting with easy questions where responses are dignified while the instructor listens, repeats, and/or paraphrases student responses. Instruction can transition then to higher cognitive level questions. These may be open-ended and posed before, during, after assignments. The instructor suggested that is important to allow three-plus seconds to ensure that class members have sufficient time to process the question and formulate a response. In probing, redirecting, and reinforcing responses, real-time traditional instruction can be specific, praise when warranted, and encourage full and even participation. Instructors can collect baseline data, question at and slightly above average levels, and explore assumptions, fallacies, and misconceptions.

The typical traditional classroom techniques were then contrasted with the online environment. The online environment was described as asynchronous where everything is written and non-verbal cues are unavailable. The questioning and responding environment is not sequential and not spontaneous. Immediate time constraints vanish, comments can be revised, and everyone needs to participate or suffer lost participation credit.

After a general description of research methodology, the presenter indicated she had surveyed 60 courses across disciplines and followed that with interviews. Critical thinking strategies were most directly linked with online discussions, written assignments, and practical, reflective exercises involving journaling.

More specific discussion focused on experimental techniques for managing online discussion. Organizing and using groups simplifies evaluating online discussion participation. Rotating group discussion leaders helps. This needs to be managed with timelines. Requiring substantive comments to be supported by citations increases the sophistication of student participation. Rubrics, including word counts, assist students to grasp the expectations for both substantive and responsive questions.

Concluding Comment

Every Lilly West Conference has given me important ideas to better my teaching. Additionally, the collegial “teaching improvement” workshops are valuable, refreshing links to the importance of our teaching mission and the reminder that we are not alone in our effort to do better.

I highly recommend more faculty members at CSUSB take advantage of this inexpensive, enjoyable, local training opportunity. Perhaps, a TRC session during the fall could be devoted to a few past participants sharing their positive experiences with interested faculty to promote greater participation, both as an attendee and as a presenter.