



# TEACHING MATTERS

newsletter

UNB Saint John

## "ENGAGING STUDENTS"

BY DAVID CREELMAN & SANDRA BELL

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Students learn best when they're engaged with the material, and teaching is most fulfilling when you have engaged students. For a teacher, there are fewer things more satisfying than leaving a class in which a group of well prepared students have vigorously engaged with the materials and ideas of the course. But engaging students is not an easy task. Students are increasingly busy outside the classroom as jobs, family, and community activities "distract" them from their studies. And sometimes, even within our classes, there are challenges to keeping our students engaged. Large class sizes, demanding course material, and other concerns challenge our attempts to capture our students' imaginations and involve them actively in their own education. In this edition of *Teaching Matters* we have assembled a variety of articles which speak to the art of engaging students and transforming them into active learners.

Two of our articles are from UNB Saint John faculty: Donna Sears in Business discusses the difference between entertainment and engagement in the classroom, and Janet Fraser at the Ward Chipman Library introduces an effective ice-breaker. These are complemented by two articles by participants in the recent Association of Atlantic Universities Teaching Showcase, held at UNB Saint John in October of 2008: Dr. Erin Steuter and Dr. Judith Doyle from Mount Allison University outline their simulation of 'think tanks' in the classroom, and Dr. Julian Hermida, Department of Law and Politics and member of the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee at Algoma University explores how we can develop in our students the skills of 'deep reading' necessary for academic work.

### CALL FOR PAPERS

Are you interested in contributing to UNBSJ's own teaching journal?  
Check out the following call for submissions to our next edition.

#### Teaching Matters Winter 2009

While we spend a lot of time teaching at UNBSJ, we are also busy with research projects and community enterprises. Here is an opportunity to share with colleagues and the larger community some of what it is you do both inside and outside of the classroom. The Winter edition of *Teaching Matters* wants to know how your activities as a researcher or your involvement in the community shapes what you do in the classroom.

Entries should be between 250-2000 words.  
Submission date is 13 March, 2009

## BRINGING LIFE TO THE CLASSROOM BY TAKING THE CLASSROOM TO LIFE

BY DONNA SEARS - FACULTY OF BUSINESS, UNB SAINT JOHN

**H**ow can we design classroom experiences that will engage students? While many of us may stiffen our spines at the whole notion of viewing students as customers, there are lessons that can be learned from the experience design literature. Over the past ten years, the managerial literature has emphasized the importance of providing consumption experiences, rather than simple products or services.

Pine and Gilmore (1999), pioneers in this literature, developed a four-facet model of consumption experiences that includes: entertainment, educational, esthetic, and escapist. These authors suggest that experiences should both entertain and engage customers in a memorable way. This is accomplished by using the service as a stage and goods as props. Pine and Gilmore (1999) make a distinction between two types of customer participation: passive and active. Passive participation occurs when customer behaviour does not affect the performance at all (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Active participation occurs when customers play key roles in creating the experience (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The other dimension is that of connection. Absorbed consumers watch from the 'sidelines' while immersed consumers 'experience from the infield.' In other words, the goal is to engage rather than entertain.

The problem is that most of us prefer to be entertained rather than engaged. But, why? Possibly because it is infinitely easier to be passively entertained than actively engaged. It is easier to sit in an audience, allow your mind to wander (or not) and 'soak up' all that the 'entertainer' at the front of the room has to offer. This is the movie theatre model; participation comes only from munching popcorn and sipping from a cup so large it requires two hands to support it. In contrast, there are other entertaining experiences that require the audience to be more engaged. This is the dinner theatre model; participation may be required when a cast member jumps on your table, sits on your lap, asks a spontaneous question, or requires you to sing. Pine and Gilmore (1999) would describe this as immersion rather than absorption.

Students consistently provide positive feedback on practical projects that "take them to life." For instance, the Services Marketing class picks a service provider and gains permission to do a service audit. The audit requires the students to develop an intimate understanding of the business through personal interviews, in addition to other research.

There are three outputs from the process: a 'poster session,' a written service audit, and a class presentation. Mid-semester, students develop a poster presentation that is designed to showcase their service audit firm. This poster session is one part research poster and one part trade show. This allows students to be creative, often creating miniature atmospheres that portray the business and include food, drinks, costumes, and other examples of the company offering. Props have included everything from a mannequin in swimwear (for a fitness centre with pool) to recreated drinks and hors d'oeuvres (restaurant) to a miniature hotel scene with check-in desk and 'bed.' Faculty, staff, and people from the business community are invited to this event and typically provide the students with very useful feedback.

The second output is the written service audit. This audit allows students to demonstrate their knowledge by applying the theory they have learned in class to this real-life business. In addition to demonstrating their knowledge of the company, students are required to develop managerial recommendations for improvement in service organization. These reports are similar to what would be expected of managerial consultants, and are often provided to the businesses when the semester is complete.

Finally, students develop a presentation that highlights the content of their service audit. This is an opportunity to demonstrate their learning and showcase their great ideas for improving service delivery in the companies they have studied. Students are typically very interested in the material classmates present, and ask great questions as well as offer further suggestions.

Just like someone who wanders into a dinner theatre, expecting a movie theatre experience, students are sometimes surprised to discover that engagement is expected in the classroom. However, over time, they consistently report that those engaged experiences are the ones that they remember and that prove useful in their 'real lives' after their university experiences are complete. Pine and Gilmore (1999) explained that, "Companies stage an experience when they engage customers in a memorable way" (p. 4). 'Engaging' and 'memorable' are vital. Isn't that exactly what we aspire to in the university experience?

Pine II, B.J., & Gilmore, J.H. (1999). *The Experience Economy*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

## THE CEPHALONIAN METHOD: LIVELY, ENGAGING AND FUN!

BY JANET FRASER, LIBRARIAN, UNB SAINT JOHN

This past May I had the privilege of attending what I think is one of North America's best educational conferences: Workshop in Instruction in Library Use. Not an enticing conference title for what is actually a popular and eagerly-awaited annual gathering of post-secondary teaching librarians, who for three days engage in inventive workshops using cutting-edge technology, passionately discuss and debate information literacy issues, and love a good party! In 2008 the conference was held at UBC's heavenly Okanogan Valley campus just outside of beautiful Kelowna. A perfect setting as it turned out, to learn about the Cephalonian Method.

The Cephalonian Method? Ah Cephalonia, not as well known as Crete or Rhodes, but just as beautiful. Could its method be one of cooking, as in the delicious Cephalonian Hot Pot, tender beef simmering in Marscapone and raisins and cinnamon and...? Could it be a method of colourful scarf dancing to the sensuous folk music so popular in Greek villages? Close but no Onassis cigar. The Cephalonian Method is a tongue-in-cheek term devised by Linda Davies, a Cardiff University science librarian, after holidaying in Cephalonia. She had enjoyed a simple and effective ice-breaker when she attended the holiday rep's orientation session. The rep had assigned his group of tourists printed questions which they were required to read aloud, so that he could provide island information in an engaging way.

Linda Davies created out of this experience a method of induction teaching designed to appeal to the senses and to engage students in a lively and often funny way. Appreciating the possible loneliness and alienation of the first-year student attending a huge class, she distributed colour-coded cards to the students as they arrived, then began the session by asking a student to ask a 'blue' question, then a 'green' question, then a 'red' question and so on. Each colour was a category related to library resources and services. The questions had matching coloured Power Point slides containing responses. Much of the humour derives from the unpredictability of the questions and the ways in which the questions are designed to provoke a positive and enthusiastic response. For example:

Student. *Is the library open in the evening?*

Librarian. *I'm so glad you asked that! Yes, until midnight! And the Reference desk is open almost that late, until 11pm!*

Student. *Is there a place where I can print out my email photos of my pet rats?*

Librarian. *Yes! There certainly is...*

Music is also an important part of this method. Current research led Davies to offer calming New Age background music in the morning sessions, invigorating Latin sounds in the afternoon. As well, teachers using this method have developed comic strip slides which seem to amuse students. Statistical surveys that have been done indicate that 97% of the students thought that the Cephalonian Method was an effective introductory session, and 80% of students were keen to attend more library information sessions.

While I participated in a mock Cephalonian Method session at the WILU conference, I've not yet tried it out at UNB Saint John. At this time I would like to invite faculty to contact me at [jdfrazer@unbsj.ca](mailto:jdfrazer@unbsj.ca) or 5996 and double-dare me to give it a try. More importantly I would like to encourage my colleagues to adapt it to their individual disciplines. If students can be overwhelming enthusiastic about a subject as dry as information science, think about how popular such a method could be with your students!



## THINK TANK WANNABES: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

DR. ERIN STEUTER AND DR. JUDITH DOYLE - MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY

Over the last decade, higher education has witnessed an increasing number of curricular innovations designed to improve student engagement and hopefully then success during the first year of university. Student engagement is increasingly seen as an indicator of successful classroom instruction. The phrase has been identified as the latest buzzword in education circles. Students are engaged when they are involved in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work. Student engagement refers to a student's willingness, need, and desire to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process promoting higher level thinking for enduring understanding. Five indicators for student engagement at the university level include: the level of academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; enriching education experiences; and a supportive learning environment. Clearly, the opposite of engagement is disaffection. Disaffected students are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges. They can be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry about their presence in the classroom. They can be withdrawn from learning opportunities or even rebellious towards teachers and classmates.

As many professors can probably attest, disaffected students are more frequently found in first year courses, often having a dampening affect on the whole classroom experience, and active learning can be difficult in large classes. This paper details one of our strategies for encouraging student engagement through simulating the activities of a think tank in our Introduction to Sociology course. Think tanks are idea generators that study issues and policies, issue research reports, hold conferences, and work with government, business and community groups to develop policy solutions. An intern with a think tank will have the opportunity to assist in research, and participate in other activities sponsored by the think tank. Among employers that hire new college graduates, internships rank as the most effective way to recruit them, according to Job Outlook 2002, an annual survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Our virtual internships met our learning outcomes for the course which were to encourage a range of cognitive skills, including active thinking skills, intellectual engagement and motivation, and to develop a variety of academic skills such as written and oral communication abilities, reading and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data, and team work. As a first year course

largely taken to meet distribution requirements, we also had what has been called democratic outcomes for the course which emphasized the development of skills that students will need to be citizens and leaders in the post-graduate world such as perspective-taking; mutuality and reciprocity; interest in the wider social world; and citizen participation.

### Literature Review

A new student-centered paradigm has come to dominate thoughts about teaching in higher education. To a greater and lesser degree this thinking has been adopted by individual professors, departments, institutions and disciplines. There is not one definitive name for this new teaching paradigm, sometimes characterized as a shift from seeing professors as the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side." Within this paradigm there have been particular pedagogies such as discovery learning, active learning, collaborative learning as well as learning communities. Although there are differences amongst these approaches, generally these approaches stress student-centered learning wherein students develop their knowledge of the subject through participating in a series of activities and exercises usually done in some form of group work that stimulate critical thinking. These approaches are generally said to help students find patterns and connections in class work and encourage them to test theories, ask questions and come up with possible answers, and to investigate concepts using real life examples and their own experiences. Increasingly, these approaches are seen as having the added advantage of facilitating and contributing to student engagement (McKinney and Reed 2007; Zhao and Kuh 2004). For these reasons, these approaches are seen as good teaching practices for higher education (Chickering and Gamson 1987, 1991; Pascarella 2004).

As we have learnt from the many AAU conference and proceedings, there is a variety of techniques to get student engagement. One way student engagement can be achieved is through experiential learning opportunities which allow students to actively participate in projects that bring content area knowledge and skills to real community problems. Students develop projects and propose solutions on behalf of community and/or gov-

ernmental representatives. Students learn to be active citizens and community members and deepen their understanding of government, community, and work place skills and behaviors as part of their life-long education. What follows is a brief list of just some of the ways in which sociologists have sought to bring active learning into the classroom. Lowney's (2008) project in which students create a city inside the classroom illustrates how simulations can encourage student engagement. Coburn-Collins (2004:209-214) has shown how Webquest assignments can engage students through the internet. Finally, Carroll (2007:87-90) shows how online statistics can be used to investigate urban crime and crime rates and race and ethnic changes in cities.

### **The first year experience in Sociology at Mount Allison University**

After a five year experimentation with a myriad of teaching innovations, the first year experience in Sociology at Mount Allison University has now been recognized as an exemplary innovation by the university administration and now meets our stated goals for student engagement. The course provides students with an engaging introduction to the study of society via dynamic class interactions and assignments that are designed to build conceptual and applied skills. Developments to the course organization have maximized the opportunities for discovery learning and have made the class an enjoyable teaching experience that contains fewer of the problems of student disengagement often found in other first year courses. The core innovations that have been developed are as follows:

**Lectures** - One interactive lecture per week that follows assigned Social Problems textbook. Occasional use of films or guest speakers.

**Social Problems Lab** - A weekly social problems lab complete with lab workbook developed to engage students in discovery learning projects. Lab worksheets are not collected or marked but participation in the lab and completion of the worksheets is essential to success on the assigned tasks. Lab activities are often client-based and encourage student interdependence. (See Steuter, Erin and Judith Doyle. *The Joyful Noise of Learning: Active Learning Strategies for Large Classes*. Atlantic Universities Teaching Showcase Proceedings, Volume XI, Fall 2007. Pp.101-112.)

**Fictional Clients** - Lab activities that feature fictional clients are used to help students engage in solving contemporary social problems in a manner that reveals the contemporary relevance and application of knowledge regarding social

problems. We start the lab classes by identifying a client who would theoretically be interested in the social problem we are discussing and then assign the students a task to undertake for that client. We have asked the students to identify the pros and cons of environmental policy initiatives on behalf of a government client and provided media talking points for leaders of a controversial needle exchange program.

**Student Interdependence** - Lab activities are designed in "working group" formats in order to encourage students to interact with each other to complete the worksheets. The classroom is organized to facilitate group interaction and interdependency, so that students have the opportunity to work effectively in small groups. In addition, we seek to encourage them to listen carefully to their peers and thus we have designed many of the workbook activities to be made up of a series of components that require student cooperation in order for them to fully understand the whole project.

**Simulated Think Tank** - Research assignments are provided via the ESPRIT (Evaluating Social Policy Research Investigation Team) think tank. ESPRIT is a web site designed by the course instructors to look like a social policy research institute. Course assignments are designed in the format of tasks for ESPRIT Research Policy Centre "interns." Tasks focus on applied knowledge that draws on insights developed through lab activities. There are three tasks that are worth 20% each with a 40% final exam.

**Book Analysis** - The course assignments are themed each year on a case study such as Racism, Aids, or Corporate Power. To support the theme, a contemporary best-selling book is part of the required reading. These books invite students to participate in current debates about issues of social importance.

This course serves as the Sociology department's Introductory course and is required as a pre-requisite for any further courses in the department. It is a 12 week course offered in two weekly 75 minute blocks. There are 100 students in each of three sections of the course. The course material is developed cooperatively by the two of us but each of the three sections is taught separately. The course text is Lorne Tepperman, James Curtis and Albert Kwan, *Social Problems: A Canadian Perspective*, 2nd Edition, published by Oxford in 2007.

## The Simulated Think Tank

Another component of our course is the ESPRIT web site. The ESPRIT acronym stands for Evaluating Social Policy Investigation Team. The web site is designed to look like a think tank or research center whose mission is to analyze contemporary social problems and develop policy solutions. The students in the class are told that they are to act as interns for this center and conduct research and prepare materials on behalf of the think tank much in the way that actual interns do. We highlight examples of some of our recently graduated students who have actually done work such as this in the real world. The major research and writing assignments in this course are provided to the students in the form of tasks for the ESPRIT center. The ESPRIT web page is colorful and attractive and showcases the research work done by previous interns. Each year, we choose a social problem's topic to serve as a theme for the course assignments. Previous topics includes: AIDS, Hurricane Katrina, Olympics, and Representations of Women and Men in the media. Most recently, we worked on racism and were able to address several connected issues through the assignments. There are three assignments (one every 4 weeks, worth 20% each). The assignments are referred to as "internship tasks" and the expectations and details for the assignments are posted for the students on the ESPRIT web page.

In the first assignment we try to build knowledge of the assigned theme and relate it to central concepts in the analysis of social problems. We try to avoid traditional essay formats, and instead ask the students to provide written documents that would be more common outside of academia. For example, one of the first tasks that we have assigned involved asking the students to prepare a 1000 word newsletter on behalf of the ESPRIT center that focused on the issue of racial profiling. The task required the students to explain clearly why racial profiling by police is a social problem and demonstrate how blaming the victim is part of the process of racial profiling. Finally, they were asked to discuss the negative consequences of racial profiling for all citizens. The lectures and previous workbook activities provided the students with the necessary skills to complete this task in a thoughtful and sophisticated manner. In addition, the students were asked to include insights that they had learned from an assigned text on Racial Profiling (see discussion of the book component below). The students were asked to present their work in the format of a research center newsletter. We told the students that preparation of a newsletter such as this is often done by freelance consultants who are often paid by industry and government

for work of this type. We told them that we wanted to see a final product that was worthy of a consultant's fee. The majority of the students took our tasks very seriously and produced very high quality work. Because some of our students live with their families in our small college town, we have occasion to meet their parents who spoke to us about this assignment, saying that their child was working hard on the newsletter and that the whole family was learning a lot about racial profiling. This type of interaction rarely takes place when our students work on traditional essays. We were pleased the issue and real world nature of the assignment made the project a legitimate topic for family engagement.

The second assignment is designed to build data analysis skills and apply them to the theme in manner that would be expected in the world of business or government research. This year we gave the students a series of statistical tables detailing various forms of discrimination reported by visible minorities. The students were asked to provide an overview of the state of racism in Canada by analyzing these tables and reporting their findings in the form of a report typically produced by government bodies. We provided them with several examples so that they could see the expected format. The analysis had to demonstrate knowledge of what the tables indicated and the text needed to be analytical but still accessibly written for the intelligent and interested reader. The students were a little apprehensive about working with the numbers but our lab activities had prepared them with the necessary skills. These assignments were very well done and the students felt very proud of what they had accomplished.

The final assignment was the preparation of a policy document on hate crime that would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of how to analyze a social problem and recommend viable policy suggestions. This task was 2000 words and the students were asked to provide an overview of the social problem that moved from the general to the specific, providing quantitative and qualitative evidence to show the scope of race-based hate crimes. They needed to identify the negative consequences caused by this social problem and explore how all parts of the society are affected by the social problem not just those directly experiencing the problem. The students were asked to identify the social causes of hate crime, ensuring that they explained the social context of the situation and identified relevant concepts and processes. They were asked to address the arguments of those who opposed social policy solutions for hate-crimes and provide a clear argument in favor of the need to make changes. Finally the task re-

quired the students to present three policy recommendations that successfully address hate crime. These assignments were very gratifying to mark because they showed the tremendous amount of learning that students had achieved in a short period of time. Many students were eager to talk about the policies that they discovered in their research and had endorsed in their papers. This was particularly helpful as a way of connecting with the students outside of class, so when we met one of them on the campus or in the community, they would often stop and tell us about the hate-crime policies they had recommended in their final projects.

### Results

To assess the impact of the changes we instituted, we organized a study in 2007-2008 which involved 141 participants who were enrolled in various sections of the introductory Sociology at Mount Allison University. 129 participants were first-year students and were surveyed electronically by way of a course evaluation at the time that they completed the course. An additional 8 from the same demographic were contacted for personal interviews. To further evaluate the impact of the changes we had made starting in 2005, we interviewed four students who had for various reasons taken the course twice: once when it was lecture and multiple choice exam based and for a second time when it was active learning based. The interview and survey questions sought the students' opinion on the various facets of the course.

The vast majority of students indicated in both personal interviews and the online survey that the experiential learning activities were enjoyable. The ESPRIT website was well received by students, the majority (93%) of respondents felt that it was easy to use and a convenient resource for the class. The Internships tasks themselves were enjoyed overall (80%) by the students who responded and described as engaging and exciting. Some students remarked that it really made them feel like they were part of the solution – to be able to thoughtfully analyze a social problem and to make recommendations. Others commented that they simply enjoyed the break from the long-established university formula of “assignment, midterm, paper, final exam”. Of the 20% of students who responded that they did not enjoy the internship tasks, the largest group indicated that they felt they were too difficult.

### Student comments

I loved the tasks. They were realistic assignments and perhaps something that is mirrored in the real world.

I felt that I learned skills that will be helpful and very useful in the workplace later in my career.

I think the way that the course was set up, to have the students acting as though we were working for Esprit, gives a good idea to what a sociologist might do.

Of course this is an Intro course and I don't think any of us are even close to understanding all of the job opportunities that are out there in the sociology field, but the course has opened some doors for us.

I felt that the tasks made us think critically and really put an emphasis on writing about what is happening in the world that we are surrounded by.

Overall, this course is a teacher. It teaches you to look at your community, society and world on different levels that you may not have otherwise looked at or ever would have considered looking at. It forces you to think about how you would react in certain situations and what personal policies you can live by that will help you be successful and happy with yourself.

Because of the creative guidelines, the tasks forced us to really reach different types of audiences. I learned a lot from the tasks overall!

### Concluding Thoughts

Organizing a simulated think tank has been a successful experiment in our course and has helped achieve the level of student engagement that we have been seeking in a large first year class. The students are eager to engage in real-world style challenges and by offering a simulation we have avoided the obstacles associated with running an actual internship program for over 100 students who are only just developing their skill sets. We also have started to see the benefits of our first year experience for upper level students who have taken this course in their first year. Senior students are selecting our program with the expectation that it will be an interactive experience and they generate creative and applied projects that showcase their problem solving abilities. We have noted that they are more policy oriented in their thinking and that they are more willing to take risks in the development of assignments that go beyond the traditional essay. The innovations we have developed are more challenging and more rewarding for both students and for faculty.

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ACADEMIC READING SKILLS IN FIRST YEAR COURSES

DR. JULIAN HERMIDA, DEPT OF LAW & POLITICS, ALGOMA UNIVERSITY

Success at the university level mainly depends on existing pre-entry college attributes, including the mastery of some fundamental academic skills (Tinto, 1993). These include reading, writing, critical thinking, oral presentation, and media literacy. Despite the importance of these skills for academic success, professors seldom teach them (Bean, 1996). They generally take them for granted, as they tend to presuppose that all students already acquired these skills either as part of their secondary education or elsewhere in college (Erickson, Peters & Strommer, 2006). The reality is that most first-year students lack academic reading skills, especially because University-level reading greatly differs from High School reading. Thus, most students employ non-university strategies to read academic texts, which results in students taking a surface approach to reading.

The objective of this paper is to discuss some strategies, examples, and resources aimed at promoting students to take a deep approach to reading. The major tenet of this article is that if teachers explicitly teach students how to read academic texts in aligned courses where students have ample opportunities to engage in reading activities throughout the term, students are more likely to adopt a deep approach to reading.

This paper begins with a discussion of the difference between a surface and a deep approach to reading. I then recount an action research study that I conducted to analyze whether explicitly teaching academic reading skills, coupled with the introduction of teaching and learning activities designed to encourage students to actively engage in deep reading in aligned courses, makes a difference in the approach students take to reading. Then, I explore the categories of analysis needed to read academic texts and the importance of aligning courses. Finally, I share some of the teaching and learning activities aimed at fostering students' adoption of a deep approach to reading.

### Surface and deep approaches to reading

Learning a discipline involves developing familiarity with the ways of being, thinking, writing, and seeing the world of those experts in the discipline. Reading academic texts published by those disciplinary experts permits students to immerse themselves in the culture of the discipline and facilitates learning its conventions, discourse, skills, and knowledge (Erickson, Peters & Strommer, 2006, p.122). But, this is only possible if students take a deep approach to reading.

A surface approach to reading is the tacit acceptance of information contained in the text. Students taking a surface approach to reading usually consider this information as isolated and unlinked facts. This leads to superficial retention of material for examinations and does not promote understanding or long-term retention of knowledge and information. In contrast, a deep approach to reading is an approach where the reader uses higher-order cognitive skills such as the ability to analyse, synthesize, solve problems, and thinks meta-cognitively in order to negotiate meanings with the author and to construct new meaning from the text. The deep reader focuses on the author's message, on the ideas she is trying to convey, the line of argument, and the structure of the argument. The reader makes connections to already known concepts and principles and uses this understanding for problem solving in new contexts. Simply put, surface readers focus on the sign, i.e., the text itself, while deep readers focus on what is signified, i.e., the meaning of the text (Bowden & Marton, 2000, p. 49).

Research studies show that most university students today take a surface approach to reading and learning (Biggs, 1998, p. 58). This phenomenon occurs because teachers usually lecture the texts and evaluate students on their retention of facts and principles conveyed in the lectures (Wendling, 2008; Hobson, 2004, p.1)

### Study

I conducted an action research project to assess the approach towards reading among a group of first-year University students in a Legal Studies course. The objective of this project was to evaluate whether my students took a deep or a surface approach to reading. My ultimate goal was to assess the quality of their learning outcome, as the approach to reading is considered to be directly proportional to the quality of their learning outcome (Bowden & Marton, 2000, p. 51).

I adapted a study conducted by Marton and Saljo to the characteristics of my students and the subject I teach. In Marton and Saljo's study, which took place at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden in the 1970's, the researchers asked students to read an article written by a professor of education on some proposed university reforms in Sweden. They told students that they would ask them some questions about the text once they finished reading it. Marton and Saljo met with the students and asked them open-ended questions to assess their approach to reading and

their understanding of the text. Additionally, they specifically asked the students how they had gone about studying the text (Bowden & Marton, 2000, p. 47).

Marton and Saljo (1976) report that while reading the text, some students simply identified some isolated facts mentioned in the text, which they believed the researchers would ask them about during the interview, and then memorized those facts. These students could not make any connections between these facts and failed to see any connection to their realities. Another group of students tried to understand what the author was saying, focused on the underlying meaning of the text, and sought to integrate the different facts mentioned in the text. The first group of students focused on the surface level of the text while the second one adopted a deeper approach.

On the third week of the second-term of their first year, I asked all of my 30 students in my Legal Studies course to read a short article. Students had taken courses with instructors who did not teach them to read academic texts during their first term. The article dealt with a legal problem on rights over the Moon (Reynolds, n/d). It was a biased text where the author implied that the Moon Agreement acted as a barrier to exploitation activities on the Moon. The author deliberately introduced comparisons with another international treaty (the Convention of the Law of the Sea) to persuade readers that the international regime to deal with the exploitation of the Moon would be the same as the one that governs High Seas.

The language, complexity, and level of the selected text were the same as those of the textbook and other articles students read in first year Legal Studies courses. The reading took place in the University library and I explained to my students that they could consult any book, journal, and database available in the library to complement the reading of the assigned text.

Most of the students took a surface approach to reading. They did not question the author's arguments; they took the author's ideas at face value, and none realized that the comparison between the Convention of the Law of the Sea was a strategy adopted by the author to lead readers to believe that the regimes were the same while in fact they were not. These students stopped at the facts mentioned in the text and failed to connect the problem in question to broader legal issues. Except for one student, none made relations to other topics analyzed in class before. Only two students consulted other texts to understand the assigned articles and only one student read other articles by the same author to get an idea of his ideology.

After this first part of the study, I introduced a series of strategies to teach my students how to read academic texts and I designed a series of student-centered reading activities –discussed below– which we worked on throughout the term. At the end of the term, I asked my students to read another short paper on Legal Studies of equal complexity. The result was very stimulating. Now the majority of students took a deep approach to reading. They were able to contextualize the author's argument, they managed to identify and assess the evidence used to support the arguments, and they weighed the policy implications and the social consequences of the proposed arguments. Furthermore, they related the author's arguments to problems we analyzed in the course –some even connected to issues discussed in other courses, and most of them proposed alternative solutions to the ones put forward by the author. A majority of students also reported having consulted several other sources to understand the context, the author's arguments, and debates mentioned or alluded to in the text.

### **Reading academic texts**

Reading is a process shaped partly by the text, partly by the reader's background, and partly by the situation the reading occurs in (Hunt, 2004, p. 137). Reading an academic text does not simply involve finding information on the text itself. Rather, it is a process of working with the text. When reading an academic text, the reader recreates the meaning of the text, together with the author. In other words, readers negotiate the meaning with the author by applying their prior knowledge to it (Maleki & Heerman, 1992). But this process is only possible if the reader uses a series of categories of analysis, some of which are specific to each academic discipline. Thus, working with a text and recreating its meaning entail both non discipline-specific and specific strategies. The expert reader has incorporated these categories and applies them almost intuitively. But, first-year students ignore these categories of analysis. So professors in each discipline need to teach both the general analytical tools and the discipline-specific values and strategies that facilitate disciplinary reading and learning (Bean, 1996, p. 133).

### **Categories of analysis**

General categories of analysis to interact with academic texts include the following: (i) reading purpose; (ii) context; (iii) author's thesis; (iv) deconstruction of assumptions; (v) evaluation of author's arguments; and (vi) consequences of author's arguments. The expert reader approaches an academic text with a specific purpose, e.g., to

get ideas about activities that promote deep learning, to compare Kelsen's and Austin's notion of law, to analyze the use of swimming pool images in Lucrecia Martel's films, or to examine the characteristics of dysfunctional families in Alejandro Casavalle's dramaturgy. As novice readers in academic disciplines, first-year students do not know why they have to read the assigned texts. In my courses, I produce reading guides in the form of questions for every single reading assignment. The reading guides help students navigate through the texts and help them focus on the fundamental issues of each text. I also preview the readings in class, and explain their relevance and purpose. Since some teachers do not clearly explain the purpose of each reading assignment to students, I encourage my students to ask these teachers why they need to read a given text, what they need the text for, and what they are expected to do with the text.

Understanding the context helps students understand the background, environment, and circumstances in which the author wrote the text. In order to analyze the context of any given text, I encourage my students to do some research about the author. I want them to understand whether the author's opinion usually reflects the mainstream school of thought in the discipline or whether the author writes from the margins of the discipline. I also ask my students to analyze the audience of the text as well as when and where the text was written. In order to truly appreciate the context, I ask my students to read two or three articles written by the same author. For example, when I ask my students to read some Space Law articles written by Glen Reynolds, students read a few articles the author wrote on gun control and violence (Reynolds, 2001 & 1995), which are closer to the experiences and backgrounds of my students, and which permit them to have a unique insight to the author's ideas. When reading the author's Space Law publications, which are more sophisticated, this familiarity with the author's ideas becomes very helpful in understanding the author's Space Law texts.

Students also need to be taught how to identify the author's thesis, main claims, and arguments dealing with the issues they are interested in. For this purpose, I encourage my students to try to understand what the author intends to do. They need to consider whether, for example, the author intends to challenge an existing position, whether she wants to examine a variable that previous researchers have missed, or to apply a theory or a concept in a new way. Students need to be taught to identify the different positions used by the author, the arguments used to hold these positions as well as the counter-arguments. Bean rec-

ommends an activity where students are asked to write what a paragraph says and what it does. This exercise helps students to identify the purpose and function of academic texts (Bean, 1996).

Unlike authors of textbooks specifically designed for the college classroom, authors of academic books and articles take for granted many concepts, principles, and debates of the discipline as they presuppose that their audience is familiar with them. So, it is important to help students become aware of these assumptions and to learn to deconstruct them. Thus, students need to examine the concepts not analyzed in the text. Students need to look up these concepts in college textbooks, encyclopedias, or other reference books. Similarly, if the author refers to a debate in the discipline or is responding to another article or book, they need to briefly read about these debates or articles in other publications.

Perhaps the single most important step of reading academic texts is for students to judge the strength or validity of the author's arguments. I constantly stress the importance of not taking the author's argument at face value. Teachers need to show our students the importance of evaluating the argument's effectiveness in making its claims, and considering the evidence the author offers in support of her claim. Students also need to ponder counter-arguments used, and the logical reasoning used by the author. Furthermore, they need to evaluate any inconsistencies of thought, and the relevance of examples and evidence. For this purpose, I always give my Legal Studies students an article where the authors try to convince the readers of the logical rationality of legal arguments (Aldisert et. al., 2007). While written in very persuasive language, the article shows some contradictions as the authors themselves end up recognizing that legal arguments do not always follow logics. Besides, more serious works in Philosophy of Law prove the contrary point (Murphy, 1967). I ask my students to identify the main claims of the text and to judge the validity of these arguments. For this purpose, I remind my students of the need to consult other texts.

Finally, it is important to help students consider the non immediate consequences of the arguments used by the author. I help them reflect about the implications and applications of the author's thesis. I ask my students to make connections to other texts, to relate the arguments to other topics learned in class, and to relate the author's arguments to their own experience. For example, we

read an article on terrorism in the aviation industry where the author proposes a series of measures to prevent terrorist acts. While these measures may undoubtedly deter new terrorist attacks, a careful look at the author's proposal leads to the conclusion that very few people will qualify to fly. So, my students usually argue that measures that will exclude the majority of passengers from flying are not a very sensible way of controlling terrorism.

Each discipline has also its own specific categories of analysis, which need to be taught alongside these general categories. For example, if teaching Legal Studies, we need to help students master the following Legal categories of analysis: (i) approach to law; (ii) legal theory; (iii) rationality of the legal argument; (iv) legal tradition; (v) comparative law solutions; and (vi) policy implications and social consequences of legal problems. In Criminology and Criminal Justice, students need to be taught the specific categories of analysis in these disciplines i.e.: (i) Criminology theories; (ii) Criminal Justice model; (iii) rationality of argument; (iv) solutions to the crime problem adopted in other countries; (v) flaws in the collection of criminal data if the author relies on criminal statistics; and (vi) policy, legal, and social implications of the author's argument, among others.

Constructive alignment

John Biggs proposes aligned teaching to foster a deep approach to reading and learning. In aligned teaching, there is maximum consistency throughout the system and each component supports the other. John Biggs (1999) conceptualizes constructive alignment as a "fully criterion-referenced system, where the objectives define what we should be teaching, how we should be teaching it; and how we could know how well students have learned it". There are two basic premises to constructive alignment. First, the teacher aligns the planned learning activities with the learning outcomes and the assessment, and second, students construct meaning from what they do to learn. So, in order to promote a deep approach to reading, teachers need to design a course whose main objective and learning outcomes should be to encourage students to take a deep approach to reading and learning and to use higher order cognitive and metacognitive skills to understand, process academic texts, and to negotiate meanings with the author of academic texts. It is important that we as teachers make those objectives and learning outcomes explicit to our students, as most students tend to see only facts and principles as the sole content of courses (Herteis, 2007). Eileen Herteis explains that "when our students think about content, they usually think it comprises only facts and principles; the rest are activities (group work, cases, presentations) or assessments." So, "teachers have a dual responsi-

bility: we must do a better job of explaining to our students that these "hidden" things are actually content, and we have to give them the opportunities to learn them." We need to teach reading processes, attitudes, and skills explicitly and move them to the forefront of our actual curricula instead of taking them for granted (Chris Knapper, 1995).

The teaching and learning activities have to be designed in order to promote a deep approach to reading and learning in consonance with the proposed objectives and learning outcomes. If, for example, the teacher lectures the textbooks, students will probably not read the texts as they will rely solely on teacher's oral explanations and the notes they take from these lectures.

While all three components of the system –objectives, teaching and learning activities, and assessment– are important, assessment is the one that plays the most influential role in students' decision on whether to take a deep or surface approach to reading and learning (Gibbs, 1999 & Forsaith, 2001). Students are heavily influenced by the hidden curriculum. They look for clues and use these to drive their study effort. Very little of out-of-class student learning is unrelated to assessment. So, the assessment has to measure whether students use higher-order cognitive skills to read assigned materials, whether they can effectively negotiate meanings with the author, whether they can evaluate the strength of the author's arguments, whether they can deconstruct hidden assumptions in the texts, and whether they can see the non immediate implications and applications of the author's arguments (Carlino, 1999). Barbara Millis also suggests the use of classroom assessment techniques (CATs) to promote deep reading and learning throughout the course (Millis, 2008).

### **Examples of teaching and learning activities that foster a deep approach to reading**

In my Legal Studies course, apart from explicitly teaching students how to read academic texts in an aligned course, I resorted to a series of student-centered activities designed to encourage my students to actively engage in deep reading. For example, we play several games which they are familiar with. We play the Amazing Race where students in teams have to run from the classroom to the library, then to my office, then to the computer lab, and then back to the classroom. In each of these stops, they have to analyze academic texts and answer some questions. For instance, a group has to find the book "Looking at Canada's Legal System" by Patrick Fitzgerald and Barry Wright and summarize and explain the legal method used

in civil law as described in the book. Another group has to summarize and explain the quote from B. Nicholas found on the book *Canadian Legal System*, 5th edition by Gerald Gall and they have to give examples not mentioned in the book. In the computer lab, they have to find a report entitled "Aboriginal Peoples and the Criminal Justice system" prepared by the Canadian Criminal Justice Association and explain in their own words the conflict between aboriginal and non-aboriginal values in a court setting. The first team that gets back to the classroom gives a complete oral account of all the reading tasks while the rest of the teams contribute actively to the discussions.

Another activity I use in my first-year Legal Studies course is the Apprentice. I tell my students that I approached my friend Mark Burnett -The Apprentice executive producer- and convinced him to do an Apprentice show where teams have to read some articles and books in order to give a presentation on a certain Legal Studies topic. Teams are given some reading guides which foster them to evaluate, judge, compare, and synthesize information from these texts. Students then have to make a presentation to the rest of the class. The worst teams are fired and the best one is hired.

More conventional activities include the use of double-entry journals, concept maps, and reading journals.

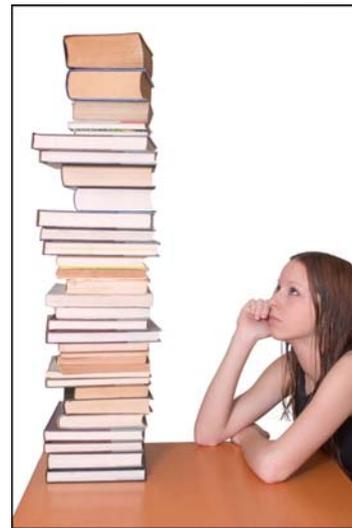
The double-entry journal is an assignment where students take down notes of their readings and enter them in a column. In a parallel column, students enter their reactions to their readings. These entries may include comments, questions, connections to their personal experiences, and relations to other issues discussed in class. Millis suggests using double-entry journals to begin discussion, for classroom assessment of readings, or for other classroom and group activities (Millis, 2008).

Concept mapping is a technique where students represent their understanding of a text by producing graphs which display the relationships between concepts and ideas. Students use concept maps to link concepts, develop interrelationships, create meaning schemes, connect their previous experiences, and construct knowledge. Barbara Daley (2002) quotes a student who used concept mapping and explains her experience with this technique: "[it] is a way to take the idea, apply it, and get a deeper meaning out of it at the very end. It is not just a matter of learning a concept, learning about theory, defining a word and spitting back a definition. It is actually applying it to what you know so that it makes more sense in the actual world." For Novak (1984) concept mapping helps students understand

their own learning and fosters a learning-how-to-learn approach.

Reading journals are logs where students record their comments on the assigned readings. They may react, question, argue, provide additional examples, or write about what the readings mean to them personally. Some teachers prefer to use more structured reading journals where they ask specific questions to their students to answer in the journals. (Erickson, Peters & Strommer, 2006, p. 125).

All these activities have in common the fact that they encourage students to use higher-order cognitive skills to process academic texts while at the same time they motivate students to read the texts.



## Conclusions

Research studies on postsecondary education reading and learning show that most University students today adopt a surface approach to reading and learning. In general, these studies try to explain this phenomenon by focusing on students' attitudes, activities, and skills. The research study presented in this paper shows that when teachers design an aligned course that places academic reading at the forefront of the course, where the selected class activities encourage students to use higher-order cognitive skills to construct meaning from academic texts, and teachers implement assessment tools aimed at evaluating whether students use such skills to read academic texts, the result is that students tend to take a deep approach to reading and learning.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ACADEMIC READING SKILLS IN FIRST YEAR COURSES

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## A NEW TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTRE FOR UNB SAINT JOHN

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Recently the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) opened on the Saint John Campus with Judith Buchanan appointed as its interim coordinator. The position is supported by the existing Vice-President's Excellence in Teaching Committee (VPETC). As such, the coordinator will work with VPETC to continue to offer orientation sessions for new faculty, workshops, conferences, discussion groups and a formal diploma program in university teaching, as well as producing an in-house pedagogical publication, *Teaching Matters @ UNB Saint John*, featuring the "voices" of UNBSJ and Saint John College faculty and teaching staff.

The TLC will serve as a resource to all UNBSJ faculty and staff, and will continue to develop, support and maintain UNBSJ's reputation for teaching excellence through:

- Expanding the awareness and practice of the scholarship of teaching and learning;
- Creating training and professional development activities for all educators at UNB Saint John and Saint John College, including those related to the application of advances in educational technology;
- Offering mentoring services for new faculty, and personalized academic support for faculty and staff (e.g. course re-design or development, preparing a teaching dossier);
- Increasing dialogue within the UNBSJ teaching community as a means to foster interdisciplinary sharing of ideas and resources, potentially creating new learning opportunities for UNBSJ students; and,
- Accessing opportunities for collaborative partnerships with educators from the broader Saint John post-secondary education community, and through national and international networking.

Future TLC initiatives will be based on the results of an upcoming survey of all educators at UNB Saint John and Saint John College.

Please drop by the Teaching and Learning Centre located in the Ward Chipman Library, room 234A. You may also contact the TLC by e-mail at [sjteach@unbsj.ca](mailto:sjteach@unbsj.ca) or by phone at 648-5910. And by the way, keep your eyes open for an official "TLC Opening Celebration" after the March Break.



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**Judith (Judy) Buchanan**, formerly a senior teaching associate with the Department of Nursing, has contributed to the culture of teaching excellence at UNB through campus-wide committee work and leadership in the Diploma in University Teaching program. She remains actively engaged in all aspects of teaching, including the use of innovative teaching strategies and new course delivery methods. In 1996, Judy received UNB's Allan P. Stuart Award for Excellence in Teaching, in 2005 was named a University Teaching Scholar and 2007 was awarded the Neil Scott Educational Leadership Award. Judy took up her post with the Teaching and Learning Centre on January 27 and looks forward to the challenge of co-creating its mission and activities with the support of the Vice-President's Excellence in Teaching Committee.

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