Transforming Teaching

"Nine tenths of education is encouragement."

- Anatole France

Teaching is challenging, exciting, maddening, absorbing—and potentially joyful. Every day, you have the opportunity to reach into the minds of your students and help them mature as learners. This course was designed to help you take your teaching beyond the mundane, and turn it into a deeply satisfying and meaningful experience for you and for your students.

This is a “guided course” about teaching in higher education. Through weekly conversations and experiences with your peers from across campus, you will sharpen your understanding of who you are as a teacher, and how you can become more effective in this role.

The course is designed for the lives of new faculty. We explore one topic every week, by coming together to discuss, exchange ideas, and share our resources. This course will be unusual for most of you, because it needs to draw much of its content from you.

Another exciting component of your work in the course is taking the first steps toward the development of your teaching dossier or teaching portfolio. The dossier or portfolio communicates your teaching intentions and successes to others (during the promotion and tenure process), and fosters and facilitates a self-reflective teaching practice.

A Philosophy of Transformation
Teaching, at its most elegant, grows through dialogue and conversation, whether it is with students, peers or mentors. It is my hope to build a community of teachers within this course who will learn from and inspire each other through discussion of teaching beliefs, values, approaches, strategies and experiences. The course is called “transformation” because it is about growth, change and lifelong learning. Great teachers are passionate teachers who inspire their learners, but they are also driven by a desire to continually transform themselves, no matter their level of expertise, into the best teachers they can possibly be.

Intentions
Through this course, I hope you will:

- Appreciate deeply what it means to you to be a teacher in higher education.
- Debate the basic principles of teaching and learning in various disciplines and instructional settings.
- Reflect on the design of your courses, including your lessons, learning outcomes, assessment strategies, student involvement, and activities.
- Transform your teaching portfolio into an opportunity to continually reflect on and improve your teaching.
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Articles and materials available online or handed out in class as needed.

Course Activities
I know you don’t have a lot of time in your professional lives, and I understand that the other pressures on your time will ebb and flow throughout the term. As a result, you may have some need for preparation for each class, but I will keep it small and focused. With this said, I still want you to commit to preparing for class every week. I also want you to commit to completing two activities outside of class time during the term. One activity is to begin the development of your own teaching portfolio by writing a teaching philosophy statement and gathering some materials from your teaching practice. The second activity is to attend one class taught by a member of our group, and discuss what you experience with that teacher (and only that teacher). I will call it “peer observation”, but it is really just about building a platform for discussing teaching with one of your classmates. These activities are elaborated at the end of this document.
# Transforming Teaching

## Dates, Topics & Activities

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- **“Self-Evaluation I” and play 6/49 – Your teaching identity – authenticity and defining yourself as a teacher.**

- **What is your teaching style?**
  - Who are your students?
  - How do you motivate learners?

- **Read:** Herteis, E. *The teaching portfolio.*
  - I will provide you with a copy.

- **Visit classrooms on campus.**
  - Road trip… bring some comfortable walking shoes

- **Bring a sample of a course syllabus to class**
  - (your own, if possible)

- **What is the best way to assess your students?**

- **Successful strategies to think about.**
  - Are you a “dabbler” or a “diver”?

- **Successful strategies to think about.**
  - What works for you?

- **Bring your teaching philosophy statements and any other materials you want to share from your portfolios. Bring your completed “Self Evaluation II” with you to class.**
Detailed Activity Descriptions

Below, you will find detailed descriptions of all of the activities you will do during Transforming Teaching. I err on the side of too much information rather than too little, so be aware that they look larger than they actually are. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

The activities described below include:
1. Self-Evaluations I and II
2. Gather samples of a course syllabus
3. Write a draft of a teaching philosophy statement
4. Visit a classmate’s classroom

Activity 1: Self-Evaluations I and II:
SE I: First day of class, Friday, Jan. 11
SE II: Last day of class, Friday, March 29

Past experience in this class has shown that most participants undergo a significant transformation; others deepen their prior teaching knowledge, beliefs, and practice through the opportunities for self-reflection. Using self-evaluation questionnaire, we take a “before picture” of your teaching beliefs at the very beginning of the course, and don’t return those questionnaires until the end of the course, when you’ve completed a second self-evaluation (the “after picture”). We make copies of each for our records (to see where the course has been most and least effective) and return the originals to you, so that you can compare the progress you’ve made, based on the goals you’ve set for yourself, and on your self-perceptions.

Approximate time required for each evaluation: 30 minutes

Activity 2: Teaching Philosophy Statement

A teaching philosophy is a statement that expresses your personal values and approach to teaching and learning. Through self-reflection, a teaching philosophy helps you to assess and articulate your teaching approach and the reasons why you teach. A well-written philosophy statement outlines who you are as a teacher, provides a framework that describes why you teach, documents teaching effectiveness, and demonstrates ongoing reflection and development of teaching practices. A philosophy statement should contain some discussion of teaching strategies, as well as the rationale behind these activities. It should also contain appropriate examples, stories, and anecdotes illustrating your personal approach to teaching and demonstrating examples of "philosophy-in-action" in the classroom.

Approximate time required: 1-2 hours

After writing your teaching philosophy statement, we may share our statements with one
another, examining each other’s statements (if you feel comfortable). Bring them to class on February 8th if you do feel comfortable.

**Activity 3: Sample of Syllabus**

Putting into practice all that we have learned in the course to this point, in addition to what we already know about teaching, we will critique sample syllabi that you bring in from your own discipline. While a copy of your own syllabus is ideal, a colleague’s syllabus will be satisfactory. Please bring this to our group meeting on March 1.

**Activity 4: Classroom Observation**

Obtaining meaningful feedback on our teaching requires that we seek feedback from multiple sources. While self-evaluation and student feedback are both excellent sources, the benefits of peer observation and feedback should not be overlooked. By visiting others’ classrooms we can provide objective and teaching-centred (not content-centred) feedback. The process is mutually beneficial, however, in that we invariably learn new strategies and approaches from the peers whom we observe.

For most of us, teaching is a very private activity—it is something we do with our students behind closed doors. This privacy is periodically interrupted when a colleague comes into our class to conduct a peer evaluation. Here, it is important to differentiate between teaching evaluation, and peer feedback. The purpose of peer feedback is to gain insight into our teaching practice, without the stress and pressure of knowing that our teaching will be evaluated and that that evaluation may become part of considerations for promotion, tenure, or be included in our personnel files.

Although we experience vulnerability when we invite another into our class, certain guidelines create a safety net for us so that the ways we offer and receive feedback are constructive and encouraging. Some essential guidelines are:

* **CONFIDENTIALITY**
  - Comment on the teaching behavior and not the teacher. For example, rather than saying, “You don’t have respect for your students,” you might say, “I observed that when a student offers a response that is not correct, you say things like ‘no, that’s wrong.’” To encourage ongoing participation, you might consider using phrases that are less intimidating to the student. For example, you might say, “Can you tell me how you came to that answer?”
  - Offer positive and genuine comments, in addition to constructive criticism.
  - Keep your comments focused on the teaching, rather than the class content.
  - Share with your partners what you have learned from observing their classes.

As a group, you may want to add additional, or modify existing, guidelines.
Conducting a Classroom Observation

During the course, you will visit at least one of your course colleagues’ classes, and likewise, will have a course colleague visit at least one your classes. You and your colleague can arrange for a class that best fits with your schedules. Be certain to arrange a visit where the observer can see you “in action” (i.e. not when the students are writing an exam or watching a video).

Before the arranged visit, try to meet with your partner for at least a half hour, to discuss what the instructor might want to know about his/her teaching or about concerns he/she might have about teaching. While it is possible to observe a class and make general observations, quite often it is most beneficial to the instructor and the observer to identify areas of focus (while still allowing for miscellaneous observations). I will share with you a list of possible items for observation. These might be useful in themselves, or might prompt other possible items for observation. These might be useful in themselves, or might prompt other possible foci.

When you arrive at the instructor’s class, it is up to the instructor whether or not he/she wants to introduce you and your reason for sitting in on the class. In my experience as a peer consultant, students are very appreciative of instructors who voluntarily make efforts to continue developing their teaching. The instructor may, however, prefer you to sit quietly at the back. This brings me to another point; the best place in the room from which to conduct your observation is as far to the back as possible. This allows you to assess the engagement of the back-row students (who are typically less engaged), to see how students are using laptops (e.g. are they following the lecture with PowerPoint slides, or are they cruising Facebook?), to experience the instructor’s audibility and the readability of visuals, etc. From here you will be able to sense students’ confusion, boredom, excitement, and revelations.

Take notes as the class progresses—write down questions you might have, great behaviors/practices/strategies you observed, references to resources or anecdotes that you feel might help the instructor, and any observations that you make that relate directly to the issues raised in the meeting you had with one another.

Following the classroom visit, organize your notes to be shared with your partner. Send the feedback to your partner electronically ahead of time if possible, and then arrange to meet for 30-60 minutes after the instructor has had a chance to review your observations. This is an opportunity to open a dialogue, to seek clarification, to elaborate on certain points, and to have a dynamic discussion about the process. We find it is a good excuse to have a cup of coffee or tea together.