Dr. Ross Haenfler, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, is the 2009 Liberal Arts Teacher of the Year. Haenfler compares teaching a course to crafting a beautiful necklace. He wants students in his courses to have a beautiful learning experience. To make a course such an experience, he works to craft each individual class as an exquisite gem. And each gem fits with all others to achieve the beauty desired in the whole course necklace.

Dr. Haenfler works on each session starting with the objectives at the top of a blank page and then considers how each session facet leads toward the desired objectives. For example, an objective to transform students’ thinking about race to use a sociological point of view might become the anchor for the session. Each part of the lesson plan must fit that anchor. In the experiential learning process Haenfler uses, he wants students actively wrestling with the issue/anchor in class. He poses a provocative question, “Why are so many collegiate basketball players African American?” Most students have an opinion from their experiences, but Professor Haenfler’s motive is to help them think about the question and the responses sociologically so that an answer becomes more than opinion-based. Each subsequent facet of the class builds on previous facets and the anchor until it is time for a powerful ending of the class. This ending, another “gem,” is what Haenfler wants students to remember if they take only one thing from the class that day. It must be engaging, inspiring, memorable, and a part of what he wants students to recall if someone asked about the class in a year.

As Dr. Haenfler describes his classes and individual session construction, one wonders how he came to think about teaching as he does. Professor Haenfler mentions two role models from the University of South Dakota who pushed students to consider social justice issues and think cross culturally with moral questions like, “As western culture expanded around the globe, what was the impact on other world cultures?” As Dr. Haenfler ponders the transformative teaching such questions may lead to with his students, he says, “No one person can be the role model teacher for everybody, but if I can be that person for one semester for a student, then I can get that student involved in lifelong education. What a privilege!”

Other faculty members might consider Haenfler’s approach to course planning using a similar philosophy. Think about what a course is to accomplish, how the beginning of the course and individual sessions anchor the content, how readings, assignments and tests fit to support the whole, and how teaching actions mirror the whole teaching philosophy to improve student learning. “The single most powerful question about teaching is how to be creative about it.”

Planning teaching creatively stimulates both the faculty and students. Otherwise faculty may use a default mode of teaching resulting in a course necklace not as beautiful as it could be.
Student Entitlement?
by Susan Mossing, Assistant Director

Do today’s students feel entitled to good grades? What does it mean to feel entitled? How is entitlement different from deservingness? How does entitlement develop? How does it impact our work as educators? And most importantly, how can we respectfully modify students’ sense of entitlement to an understanding of deservingness?

Norman Feather (2003) studied and wrote extensively on the difference in “entitlement” and “deservingness.” He found that people see a distinction between deserving something and being entitled to it. His research says that deservingness is based on judgments of effort and is seen as being earned. In contrast, entitlement is based on an external frame of reference such as laws, rules, and social norms; it is seen simply as a right.

Many educators across the country are concerned that today’s students have an over-inflated sense of entitlement (Gill, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008). Anecdotal evidence seems to support the notion that students expect A’s and B’s for showing up and doing a minimum amount of work. Have you experienced an unrealistic sense of entitlement in your students?

How does the sense of entitlement develop? Correlational studies offer insights. Greenberger et al. (2008) studied academic entitlement in college students and found several factors to which academic entitlement was positively and negatively correlated. First, academic entitlement was positively correlated to a broader, more generalized sense of entitlement. Academic entitlement was also positively correlated to narcissism. Academic entitlement was negatively correlated to a personal orientation to work and a commitment to society. Surprisingly, academic entitlement was negatively correlated to self-esteem. Greenberger also studied parental factors of academic entitlement and found the practice of comparing their child’s performance to others (social comparison) was the most significant parental factor. This social comparison practice itself was correlated to high levels of academic anxiety and an extrinsic (versus intrinsic) reward orientation of coursework in students.

Some educators see grade inflation as being caused by and causing students’ sense of entitlement. Roosevelt (2009) cites a study at the University of California at Irvine, which found that “a third of students surveyed said that they expected B’s just for attending lectures, and 40 percent said they deserved a B for completing the required reading.” Related to grade inflation, grade disputes are also seen to be the result of students’ entitlement expectations (Roosevelt). Taking this further, incivility in the classroom and bullying of professors and teaching assistants, the subject of a recent thread on Professional & Organization Development Network in Higher Education (POD; Feb 12-14) is also viewed as being related to feelings of entitlement.

Finally, if we consider students’ overinflated sense of entitlement to be a problem on our campus, what can be done to respectfully modify this sense to an understanding of deservingness? While there are no easy answers, a few potential solutions are noted below:

• Outline clear rules and expectations in the course syllabus so there is little room for disagreement.
• Speak in terms of students’ earning grades rather than receiving them.
• Emphasize learning objectives and de-emphasize grades as course goals.
• Recognize that discussions of test statistics (e.g., mean, median, range of scores) reinforce students’ extrinsic orientation.
• Model learning processes (e.g., questioning).
• Eliminate “extra credit” assignments when they serve only as grade boosters.
• Apply course content to real-world scenarios to increase interest in learning.

References
The University of Mississippi recently hosted the Southeastern Conference Academic Consortia’s Academic Leadership Development program and had as a presenter Dean Barbara Wells. In her presentation, she gave general principles for leadership communication, adapted from Baldoni (2003), which also have application in teaching communication. Consider the following general principles:

• Saying something important once is rarely enough.
• All students in a class must get the same big picture and know the big ideas.
• Timing in teaching and learning is everything.
• Humor can be a valuable tool if used appropriately.
• Teachers should be humble and not pretend to know the answers to everything.
• Your teaching message should resonate with your students by pointing out differences or similarities in their background and previous learning, by appealing to their senses and emotions, and by transforming complex issues into simpler concepts that everyone can understand.
• To bring home the points of a class, all should finish with a strong close.

In her presentation, Dean Wells suggested that there are certain tips to help deliver the message. Those tips also speak to teachers for delivering class content.

• Be yourself.
  Are you comfortable with your presentation style? Is your chosen style of teaching resulting in awkwardness? Would you be more comfortable working with lectures or group work for example?

• Be sensitive to the audience’s mood.
  If you have an early morning class or an afternoon class, does your presentation mode keep students alert and on their toes, or does it allow them to be reticent and retiring?

• Do not take yourself too seriously.
  This is not to suggest that teaching is not a serious business or that the material with which you work is not serious, but are you showing that classwork is one of your passions or that it is truly enjoyable as well as being serious?

• Maintain eye contact.
  Reading notes from a podium or reading slides from a PowerPoint does not allow a teacher to maintain eye contact with students. Moving around the room and looking students in the eyes can alleviate many issues with cell phones, *The Daily Mississippian*, and any number of other student distractions.

• Rehearse the delivery.
  Regardless of the style of teaching one uses, a good rehearsal is always in order. Which are the most important points to be stressed and how those points will be delivered could not be more important for faculty members.

• Pay attention to how the message in being received.
  Being aware of how students are taking in your thoughts, notes, comments, and how they are digesting them are most valuable tools for a teacher. Considering how to change what you are doing in the middle when something goes awry is a great sign of flexibility and will make the classes more responsive.

• Be clear.
  Some material is difficult for students and some is difficult for faculty members. Be as clear as possible when working with students. Asking frequent questions about the intent of the material, your intent in presenting the material, and their level of understanding of the material is necessary. This may need to go beyond, “Did you get this?”

• Thank the students for their participation in class.
  Teachers have a somewhat captive audience. However, students could be elsewhere. Thank them for being in class and for their attention and participation.

References
Cialdini (2001) and Baldoni (2003) are business people who have good recommendations that could help teachers. See the following sources:
Many of the study skill strategies suggested to students involve their creating questions for which answers are needed. Questioning is a logical component beginning any learning activity. A question elicits curiosity, provides direction and focus, motivates a person to seek an answer, and evidences “thinking”. In seeking an answer to a question, a person learns and discovers things often leading to more questions that need answers. This type of activity is an academician’s fun, but many students self-report that they do not employ this “questioning” tactic at all. Moreover, they find little value in the activity. In most students’ views, it is the instructor’s place to ask the questions the students need to answer. After all, the instructors are the “experts.” Unfortunately, this view facilitates little student movement up the learner expertise scale or provides no background for being literate in the future when the “experts” are not around to provide the questions.

Could it be that many students do not have the ability or inclination to question? Seemingly, the non-questioning students have existed on a steady diet of instructor’s notes, explicit study guides and tests designed to measure what they know of the guides instead of measuring what they know of the curriculum content. Their concept of research may involve only exploring to gather facts or statements about facts, but nothing further. Their definition of education is simply to get the grade; their goal, to collect enough grades to graduate. Their focus lies with the appearance of achievement where the grade indicates mastery. Most students in this vein would be hard-pressed to tell you what they have mastered other than “the class.” Consequently, one hears students state their “mastery” goals in the following terms: a “C” is enough, an “A” is not required, or a 2.0 is sufficient for graduation.

Students who lack the experience and motivation to question beyond “what’s going to be on the test?” or “what do I need to do to pass this class?” could benefit from watching an expert learner model the types of questions that motivate his/her own learning. Students probably have the concepts associated with the “who, what, when, and where” types of questions as these are generally associated with easy data gathering, but questions exploring deeper in a content area, or exploring the relationships among topics would be useful demonstrations. For example, an expert learner, or instructor, may think aloud by posing questions and exploring answers as a part of a lesson, eventually allowing students to pose questions in order to guide lessons and assignments. Asked questions might include the following:

Would I have done anything differently?
Is this really possible?
What if…?
How is this different?
What’s the next step?
What’s another way of doing this?
Where else could this be used?
Do I agree with this?
Why?

Teaching a student to question is a good habit of mind to learn. In this technological age of quick-find data and informational bytes, there are many issues on the horizon, i.e., social, environmental, and economic, requiring much more than easily-gathered data answers. The issues arising daily need thoughtful answers and evidence-driven answers, but the issues also need a populace that can pose the truly difficult questions about the issues. Theoretically, today’s students are the people who will ask the difficult questions. By helping them form the questioning habit of mind, we prepare them not only for the daily classwork but also help provide a valuable skill for the future.

References
In 2005, Moore reported that in a study on the academic benefits of class attendance in a large introductory biology class: students in sections of the course in which the importance of attendance was stressed throughout the semester came to class more often and made higher grades than did students in sections in which the importance of attendance was not emphasized (despite the fact that students received no academic credit for coming to class). (p. 26)

Moore further reported that imposing a penalty for excessive absences neither improved grades nor attendance.

Similarly in a study of 300 undergraduates enrolled in a general education class (Introduction to Japanese Culture) at a large Midwestern state university, Gump (2005) reported that “students who wish to succeed academically should attend class, and instructors should likewise encourage class attendance.” Unlike Moore, in Gump’s study, 12 discussion sections of the class were analyzed with some professors allowing a part of the grade to be based on participation (where non-attendance affected the grades) and quizzes given in the sections. However, like Moore, Gump found no significant differences in grades as a result of “points” for attendance. It was the attendance itself that appeared to matter.

Other studies have produced similar results (e.g., Beaulieu, 1984; Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb, 2001; White, 1992). White also wrote that absences can hurt the overall well-being of classes. Friedman, et al. and Gump found that classes before 10:00 AM and after 3:00 PM had no more absences than classes held between those hours.

What are the implications of such research at The University of Mississippi? The University has the First-Year Attendance-Based Initiative (FABI) that tracks freshman attendance and achievement.
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Moore (2005) writes, “Ongoing reminders to students throughout the semester—especially after the initial weeks that show highest average attendance—may be a stimulus for increasing overall attendance.” But according to Gump’s study (p. 23), seniors have on the average more absences than other classes. Is there a possibility that FABI should be expanded, or should faculty find other ways to remind students that attendance is a good idea?

And because neither penalties for non-attendance nor “points” for attending seem to be significant, a relevant question is whether faculty should reward attendance points in classes. Do such rewards affect grade inflation?

In all studies reviewed, it is noted that there is no causal relationship between attendance and good grades but it is presumed that those students with the maturity to attend class will also have the maturity to study outside of class and have the desire to learn material. It is not presumed that mere attendance ensures learning, but the wealth of studies found that it is more difficult for students who do not attend classes to achieve good grades.

References

Teaching Tips

- Tips to reduce cheating in classrooms are found in the following: http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/tips-for-reducing-cheating-in-the-college-classroom/

- Some faculty members use oven timers for different purposes in their classes. These are noisy and bothersome to students in testing situations. Consider using a cell phone’s clock instead. It can be set to alarm when the time for an event is to be completed.