

Teaching Matters Monthly | January 2015 Newsletter

Teaching Matters and Assessment Center, Rutgers University–Camden
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Director's Note



Welcome back! This Spring, Teaching Matters looks forward to continuing lively discussion with colleagues in the Camden Faculty Reading Group. We also look forward to hosting events for new and veteran faculty and TAs including a Brown Bag series on grading, a workshop on developing and assessing learning goals, and our major TMAC event on "Threshold Concepts Across Disciplines." We look forward to seeing you at one or more of these events.

Perhaps you have heard the news, detailed below, that one of the largest investors in for-profit colleges has acquired a controlling interest in *Inside Higher Ed*, a leading trade publication. (The *Chronicle of Higher Education* is a subsidiary of Newsweek Corp.) This move seems of a piece with an ever-expanding educational-industrial complex, now reaping many billions of dollars from standardized testing in K-12 and beyond and increasingly controlling educational policy at the state level. Such efforts to monetize every facet of the work we do as educators strikes me as one of the majors challenges we face going forward.

Finally, I take this opportunity to follow up my invitation, last month, to ask me why I objected to using the term "research paper" for those large-ish writing assignments many of us include in our courses. (I was pleased someone did actually ask me!) In response, I shared my belief that "research paper" is too generic a title for any meaningful activity of inquiry and argument we ask our students to do. For John Bean, writing in *Engaging Ideas*, the research paper is a "fossilized school genre" with little relation to "actual genres of academic research." When we assign the "research paper," we encourage students to import their knowledge of writing in first year composition and in high school, when we actually want students to engage in more discipline-specific methods of research and writing with sources. Indeed, I prefer to think of these assignments as forms of researched writing or source-based writing, and I recommend more specific names for assignments. Now that I have broached this topic, there are multiple challenges to teaching students how to write using sources and how to conceive of research. For a librarian's related take on these issues, see Barbara Fister's "[Why the 'Research Paper' Isn't Working.](#)"

I sort of interviewed myself there. Next month, we'll feature another faculty member in our "Spotlight."

All best in 2015.

Announcing...

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS WORKSHOP RESCHEDULED! You are invited to an all-department event on "Threshold Concepts Across Disciplines" on Friday, March 13 from 12-2:15 p.m. in the Campus Center, Executive Meeting Room. (This event was originally scheduled for January 23.) Using the notion of "threshold concepts" for the critical things students must learn in order to advance, we will together articulate concepts for success in college in general and consider how Gen Ed courses contribute to learning those concepts). Working in small groups, we will flesh out threshold concepts of our respective disciplines and conclude by exploring how to build these concepts into course and departmental learning goals. Lunch will be provided! Please RSVP [here](#).

Brown Bag Discussion Series on Grading: Approaches to Grading I: Rubrics and Beyond – February 19; Approaches to Grading II: Best Practices and Policies – April 14. In this two-part series—come to either or both—we will discuss the challenges of grading at the assignment level and the course level and doing so fairly, meaningfully, and efficiently.

View TMAC Resources on [Grading and Rubrics](#) and [Threshold Concepts](#).

The Camden Faculty Reading Group is underway. We have started with *Engaging Ideas* by noted educator John Bean. We will read chapters 5-6 for our January meeting on:

- ◆ Thursday, January 29, from 3-4 p.m. in the Faculty Lounge, **or**
- ◆ Friday, January 30, from 12:15-1:15 p.m. in the Small Conference Room.

If you are interested in joining, contact us at: teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu

Call for Assignments: TMAC is adding to its website an **assignment gallery**. This curated collection will celebrate excellent teaching at Rutgers-Camden and allow all to benefit from imaginative and well-constructed assignments--projects, papers, and other learning activities--across the curriculum. Each assignment will be introduced by a brief teacher's note describing the context, the thinking behind the design, and the positive outcomes of the assignment. TMAC will work with contributors to format submissions.

Our hope is to expand the gallery by several assignments each month and to represent the full range of disciplines, levels, and teaching practices. We look for contributions that, among other things, encourage effective reading and time management, foster strong research habits and skills, sponsor successful writing and speaking, help students study well, promote academic integrity and social responsibility, stimulate critical thinking and reflective practice, and lead students toward deeper engagement as scholars and citizens.

Have an assignment to contribute? Contact teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu



In The News

For-Profit College Investor Now Owns Controlling Share of Leading Education Trade Publication: Quad Partners, a New York private equity firm that is invested heavily in the for-profit college industry, and whose founder has aggressively opposed regulation of that troubled industry, has acquired a controlling stake in the respected trade publication *Inside Higher Ed (IHE)*, which often reports on for-profit colleges and the policy disputes surrounding them. (1/14/15)

Gender Bias in Student Evaluations? Many in academia have long suspected the practice of student evaluations of professors is inherently biased against female professors. Students, after all, are just as likely as the public in general to have the same ugly, if unconscious, biases about women in authority. Just as polling data continues to show that a majority of Americans think being a man automatically makes you better in the boss department, many professors worry that students automatically rate male professors as smarter, more authoritative, and more awesome overall just because they are men. Now, a [new study](#) out of North Carolina State University shows that there is good reason for that concern. (12/9/14)

Shedding Light on Mental Illness through Movies and Social Media, a *Rutgers Today* Feature from December 3rd, offers a 'Classroom Close-up' of students who tweet their insights while watching movies like *Forrest Gump* and *Silver Linings Playbook* during an innovative Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School course.

#worthassigning: [Laura Hudson on Twine, the Video-Game Technology for All](#): Nick Carbone blogs about Twine, what makes Hudson's piece a compelling read, and why he would assign it as a course reading.



Books on Style and Academic Writing

The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century: Why is so much writing so bad, and how can we make it better? Is the English language being corrupted by texting and social media? Do the kids today even care about good writing? Why should any of us care? In *The Sense of Style*, the bestselling linguist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker answers these questions and more. Rethinking the usage guide for the twenty-first century, Pinker doesn't carp about the decline of language or recycle pet peeves from the rulebooks of a century ago. Instead, he applies insights from the sciences of language and mind to the challenge of crafting clear, coherent, and stylish prose. Filled with examples of great and gruesome prose, Pinker shows us how the art of writing can be a form of pleasurable mastery and a fascinating intellectual topic in its own right. (Viking 2014)

Stylish Academic Writing: Elegant data and ideas deserve elegant expression, argues Helen Sword in this lively guide to academic writing. For scholars frustrated with disciplinary conventions, and for specialists who want to write for a larger audience but are unsure where to begin, here are imaginative, practical, witty pointers that show how to make articles and books a pleasure to read—and to write. (Harvard 2012)

Voice and Vision: A Guide to Writing History and Other Serious Nonfiction: It has become commonplace these days to speak of "unpacking" texts. *Voice and Vision* is a book about packing that prose in the first place. While history is scholarship, it is also art—that is, literature. *Voice and Vision* is for those who wish to understand the ways in which literary considerations can enhance nonfiction writing. At issue is not whether writing is scholarly or popular, narrative or analytical, but whether it is good. With eminent good sense concerning the unique problems posed by research-based writing and with a wealth of examples from accomplished writers, Stephen Pyne explores the many ways to understand what makes good nonfiction, and explains how to achieve it. (Harvard 2011)



Reading is Fundamental

Imagine what you could do in class if all of your students did the readings! [Getting Students to Do the Readings](#) offers suggestions and resources for selecting course materials, teaching effective reading strategies, and selling your students on the readings.

Looking for Strategies that Foster Critical Reading? [This guide](#) explains approaches like the 'KWL Tool' and the 'Believing and Doubting Game' that faculty can use to promote careful reading and critical thinking.



The Write Stuff

[Gaming Across the Curriculum](#): Steve Holmes, Assistant Professor of English at George Mason University, highlights the need to address the role of medium in student composition. He suggests some new possibilities for thinking through videogames as forms of multimodal writing within the classroom, and takes stock briefly of some of the existing scholarship in relationship to WAC and gaming.

[Write Nerdy to Me: Utilizing Fanfiction in WAC/WID Courses](#): Caitlin Dungan, WAC Graduate Research Assistant and Mason PhD student, shares an emerging research project in WAC/WID.

Crossing the Threshold

[Before and After Students 'Get It': Threshold Concepts](#): James Rhem, executive editor of the National Teaching and Learning Forum, looks at the notions of "threshold concepts" and "troublesome knowledge" as ways to excite faculty and engage them in deeper inquiry into the dynamics of teaching and learning in their subjects.

[Reading at the Threshold](#): Recent considerations of threshold concepts in the rhetoric and writing studies discipline fail to consider the role that reading plays in the learning of student writers. This article from *Across the Disciplines* reports results from a three-part, two-year, empirical study of seventy-five learners enrolled across four sections of a writing-intensive course. The study used observations, surveys, and interviews to examine the relationships among the course, the learners enrolled in it, and the reading associated with it. Results indicate that the reading that occurs in a writing-intensive course is transformative across the disciplines.

From our Teaching and Learning Peers: Center of the Month

[The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning](#) at Harvard University offers services and [resources](#) that focus on pedagogical innovation, classroom dynamics, course design, creative assignments, and the uses of multi-media in the classroom.





Teaching with Technology

Online teaching has generated plenty of discussion in higher education, but it's still used by a relatively small percentage of professors. A comprehensive study sponsored by the *Higher Education Research Institute* (HERI) has identified a more pronounced trend in teaching at colleges and universities lately: a greater move toward student-focused teaching practices such as class discussions and group learning, and a corresponding move away from lectures and other teacher-centered styles. See the [full report](#), [press release](#), or [research brief](#).

We continue to build an [ever-expanding list of apps and technology](#) that our faculty here at Rutgers Camden are using...

- [Poll Everywhere](#) allows real time voting via web browser or cell phone—it doesn't have to be a smart phone! The web-based application can build polls in seconds and is particularly useful in large lecture courses to conduct informal quizzes or gauge comfort with concepts. One beta feature allows Poll Everywhere to insert polls directly into PowerPoint presentations.
- [Annotation Studio](#) creates a platform from which you and your students can read and annotate texts. This free and easy-to-use system is designed to facilitate group discussion about assigned class texts or uploaded student papers.

Check out all of the apps and technology resources on our [website](#)!

Are you using an app or teaching tool not on the list?

Send it to us at teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu



From the Bookshelf

Eight Essential Questions Teachers Ask: A Guidebook for Communicating with Students, by Deanna Dannels, acknowledges and addresses the essential questions and concerns that emerge for teachers in all stages of development. Using a narrative style that incorporates actual voices of teachers, this book offers readers relevant research, peer mentoring, communication-focused recommendations, and reflective practice opportunities. This unique resource provides useful strategies for addressing communication questions that emerge in the teacher development process. (Oxford 2014)

Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters - Contentious debates over the benefits—or drawbacks—of a liberal education are as old as America itself. From Benjamin Franklin to the Internet pundits, critics of higher education have attacked its irrelevance and elitism—often calling for more vocational instruction. Thomas Jefferson, by contrast, believed that nurturing a student's capacity for lifelong learning was useful for science and commerce while also being essential for democracy. In this provocative contribution to the disputes, University president Michael S. Roth focuses on important moments and seminal thinkers in America's long-running argument over vocational vs. liberal education. (Yale 2014)

Conferences and Workshops

Announcing AAC&U's Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success: June 9–13, 2015 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

This [Institute](#) helps campuses, higher education systems, and consortia achieve inclusive excellence and advance goals related to engagement, inclusion, and success for all students. Campus teams of five individuals representing both academic and student affairs perspectives are invited to apply for participation in a program that follows four primary tracks:

- high-impact and highly effective educational practices and pedagogies;
- problem-focused, evidence-based work for deep learning and degree attainment;
- methods of building and scaling up student success initiatives; and the politics of change

Applications due March 4.

Follow us on Twitter: [@RUCamdenTMAC](#)

If you're interested in being interviewed for the Faculty Spotlight, or if you have a link or topic you'd like to share, please email us at teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu.

