

Teaching Matters Monthly | May 2015 Newsletter

Teaching Matters and Assessment Center, Rutgers University–Camden

Dr. William FitzGerald, Director | Tara Aiken, Research Assistant

Director's Note



With Spring semester over and final grades filed, Teaching Matters offers you another chance to check out stuff you meant to look at, but never did, in our annual digest. Below, you will find links to books and articles related to teaching and to the politics of higher education. In addition, you will find a special feature whose aim is to trouble settled notions of the value of teaching the “research paper” in its various forms. (In a previous newsletter, I suggested we stop using “research paper” as a term of art.) Did you assign a 10 or 15 or 20-page paper with X number of outside sources this year? Was it as painful to read as it was to write? Do you wonder if there are better ways to draw students into a culture of academic research than a big end-of-term exercise?

We hope you will join us in the year ahead for important conversations on the kinds of writing we assign in our courses as well as our expectations for research across the disciplines. We also look forward to continuing the collegial conversations of the Camden Faculty Reading Group, which has found John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* to be fertile common ground for sharing experiences and re-thinking practices. Please consider attending several sessions in Fall or Spring.

This final newsletter of the year also gives me a chance to thank my fabulous graduate assistant, Tara Aiken, for the pleasure of her company and her professionalism in organizing events, maintaining the TMAC website, and producing this very newsletter. She receives her well-earned master’s degree in English next week and I wish her all the best!

The Dreaded Research Paper...

Rethinking the Research Paper: Rebecca Schuman whipped up an educational furor in December of 2013, writing on Slate.com: “We need to admit that the required-course college essay is a failure.” Schuman’s rationale: “Students Hate Writing Papers. Professors Hate Grading Papers.” Since Schuman’s post went viral, any number of online responses have cropped up—defending the typical college essay, suggesting new approaches to this central writing activity, and critiquing the sorts of characterizations of education that arise from “click bait” traffic on sites like Salon.com. But Schuman’s post echoes with a lively, ongoing conversation in the field of Writing Studies.

Improving the Research Essay: When professors are reluctant to assign research essays, they often claim that students cannot write clearly and logically, synthesizing sources and evaluating data to draw closely argued conclusions. Most often, these weaknesses are not the result simply of poor writing skills, but also of poorly defined criteria that students don't grasp. Fortunately, Kate Kiefer and fellow contributors from the *WAC Clearinghouse* provide several strategies that teachers can use to improve the research essay.

Why the "Research Paper" Isn't Working: Barbara Fister explains that “The first year “research paper” has always sent a mixed message. You’re supposed to be original, but must quote someone else to back up every point you make - while in constant fear that you’ll be accused of stealing from them. The obscure rules of citing sources only exacerbates the confusion and focuses attention on mechanics.” Fister goes on to explain exactly why we should “abandon the traditional research paper.”

Barbara Fister: Playing for Keeps: Rethinking How Research Is Taught to Today's College Students Known for her outspoken “blessays” on scholarly publishing, Barbara Fister is a regular contributor to some of the most influential publications in librarianship as well as a columnist for *Inside Higher Ed* and *Library Journal*. Project Information Literacy (PIL) talks to Barbara about why the research paper is a flawed pedagogical practice but continues to be assigned, and what rethinking of research as “play” may mean to teaching today's college students.

In The News



What Students Write: Professors often bemoan their students' writing skills. But how good are professors at creating quality writing assignments? There's no recent, national study of how and what professors are asking their students to write, despite lots of research suggesting that rich, varied writing assignments and opportunities for feedback mean better student papers. Colleen Flaherty explains how Dan Melzer’s *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing* (Utah State University Press) seeks to fill that data void and argues that what professors are asking their students to write is as important as what students end up writing.

Teaching "Creative Confidence": The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University: Imagine a different type of undergraduate education, one that completely breaks from the division between general education and the major. In fact, there are no majors in this system, nor any of the disciplinary boundaries that majors entail. Instead, students declare a “mission”—a statement of intent to address a real-world problem—and take a broad range of courses that will help them develop the skills and knowledge they need to pursue their missions. Students also have the opportunity to work collaboratively with faculty in “Impact Labs” around the world, where they can apply their knowledge in real-world settings.

TMAC Digest: Year in Review

Reading and Writing: The Fundamentals

Strategies That Foster Critical Reading: Get the bottom line on strategies such as the 'Believing and Doubting Games,' which faculty can use to promote careful reading and critical thinking.

Reading Circles Get Students to Do the Reading: The success of Reading Circles depends on two things: everyone coming prepared by having read the assignment and everyone participating. Sounds good; right?

In "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year," Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz explore some of the paradoxes of writing development by focusing on the central role the freshman year plays in this development. Why do some students prosper as college writers, moving forward with their writing, while others lose interest? Based on the evidence of their longitudinal study, they conclude that the story of the freshman year is not one of dramatic changes on paper; it is the story of changes within the writers themselves.

We live in a changing world: global economies, new technologies, and exponential growth in information are transforming our society. As new technologies shape literacies, they bring new opportunities for teachers at all levels to foster reading and writing in more diverse and participatory contexts. NCTE's Policy Research Brief breaks down common myths about *21st-Century Literacies*.

How We Get Our Students to Read the Text Before Class: The authors describe an email-based approach to reading assignments that has been very effective in getting students to read texts before class. The dramatic impact this approach has had on their courses is explained through sample assignments and student responses. They also share the results of seven semesters of student evaluations and address some implications of using these assignments.

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.

News In Review

For Adjuncts, a Lot Is Riding in Student Evaluations, an article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, covers the ground even-handedly, and points to some better practices, what's at stake, and what's unfair for so many now. (10/6/14)

The Chronicle of Higher Education cites a [new online journal](#) that offers "daily dips into JSTOR's Deep Archive" and "bridges the gap between news and scholarship." (10/1/14)

"**The Bossypants Conundrum**" emerges from *Inside Higher Ed.* and "Confessions of a Community College Dean," in which a veteran of cultural studies seminars in the '90s moves into academic administration and finds himself a married suburban father of two. Foucault, plus lawn care. (10/26/14)

"**Teaching in Thin Air**" weighs in on an issue of concern to many writing instructors: class size. The article equates too many students to "the death zone" as it highlights the correlation between class size and student failure in writing courses. (10/29/14)

[Common Core: It Really Is All About the Tests \(and Corporate Profits\)](#) - Some commentators have defended the Common Core and blamed opponents of high-stakes testing for distorting the public's understanding of the benefits of the national standards. But Alan Singer argues that when you look at the history of the push for national standards you realize Common Core is all about testing. (11/17/14)

[College Shouldn't Prepare You for Your First Job. It Should Prepare You for Your Life.](#) As the college admissions season moves into high gear, Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, urges students to consider college not just as a chance to acquire particular expertise but as a remarkable opportunity to explore their individual and social lives in connection to the world in which they will live and work. (11/26/14)

[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)

[Can Outcomes Save the Liberal Arts?](#) One of the great battles ongoing in American higher education centers on the continued vitality and relevance of a liberal arts education. Dr. Brian Mitchell, Director of the Edvance Foundation, explains that we must “develop a new defense for a liberal arts education. In doing so, this argument must combine equal measures of language and outputs. And, happily, it can be done without sacrificing the integrity or spirit of the older arguments.” (2/9/15)

[The Important Things Standardized Tests Don't Measure:](#) Marion Brady writes an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* about standardized testing. She argues that figuring out how to measure original thought isn't the only challenge test manufacturers need to address, and she lists 33 other problems. It's a very useful article, unless you like standardized testing. (3/8/15)

[Teaching History the Pearson Way:](#) Alan singer writes a scathing review for *Pearson My World Social Studies: The Growth of Our Country*. Here's a snippet: “Pearson promotes Common Core and Common Core creates markets for Pearson. Teaching history the Pearson way means teaching it the Common Core way, without any meaningful content. The text, no matter how inaccurate or misleading, rules. Myth replaces history, if teachers have the time to include social studies at all while prepping students for Pearson standardized tests.” (3/16/15)

[How Many Ways Must We Say It?](#) There has been a great deal of talk recently about college being a business and students being customers. Do you agree? In this publication from AAUP, Joel Thomas Tierno argues that we should denounce these claims as literally false and metaphorically dangerous, and he lists 31 ways to do so.

[Collaborative, Faculty-Led Efforts for Sustainable Change:](#) As higher education institutions respond to numerous challenges and opportunities, their efforts to adapt depend on faculty and staff collaborating across departments and divisions. In this shifting environment, some faculty focus solely on what is under their immediate control: their own courses and research. In contrast, other faculty recognize that, in an inevitably evolving environment, their front line perspective can influence campus change efforts as a shared responsibility.

[We're All in This Together: Techniques for Student Engagement:](#) Engineering professor Alan Russell shares his award-winning teaching techniques for connecting to an ever-changing student population. Russell discusses how to improve student investment in your classroom, create classroom community, and help students visualize how disciplinary knowledge connects to exciting future careers. Watch a [video](#) of his presentation!

From our Teaching and Learning Peers

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

The [Faculty Development Center](#) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) offers a variety of resources on teaching and learning topics including active learning, testing and grading, motivating students, writing and critical thinking, and much more.

The [Style Academy](#) is an online collection of resources to improve writing. Tutorials and exercises are designed for writing students at any level

The Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT) at Colorado State University offers a wealth of [Teaching Resources](#) as part of its Professional Development Program.

[Stanford Teaching Commons](#) delivers useful resources for aspects of teaching such as integrating your teaching and research as well as a frequently updated blog that covers a variety of teaching topics.



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.

In this [Introduction to Threshold Concepts](#), Glynis Cousin, from the Higher Education Academy, outlines the features of threshold concepts and points to the distinctive value for curriculum design.

["The Value of Troublesome Knowledge: Transfer and Threshold Concepts in Writing and History"](#): Using "threshold concepts" as a lens, this [article](#) examines several issues related to learning within and across two general education courses. The article ultimately suggests that threshold concepts might prove a productive frame through which to consider questions related to writing and transfer, and also to general education more broadly.

[Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning](#), edited by Meyer, Land, and Baillie (2010).

E-Portfolios

E-portfolios provide a place where students can display and discuss the significant submissions and experiences that occur during their learning process. They provide an online record of education with actual evidence of achievement, and they facilitate students' reflection on their own learning, leading to more awareness of learning strategies and needs...

The [Lafayette Language Portfolio](#) is a digital archive that documents the achievement of specified goals and learning outcomes within language learning. Because students document their learning throughout their college careers, the e-portfolio provides a unique vehicle for tracing the evolution of language proficiency and cultural competence. Rather than basing assessment solely on traditional exams or papers, the e-portfolio showcases what students can actually *do* with a language.

The University of Central Florida's Department of Writing and Rhetoric provides a [guide and resource site](#) for e-portfolios, complete with a thorough overview, recommendations for development, and student samples.

The University of Wisconsin's *Teaching and Learning Technologies* site explains why e-portfolios aren't just for artists or architects! They are an excellent and efficient way for students to organize their work and share their accomplishments with parents, teachers, advisors, and potential employers. See the [examples and resources](#).

Teaching with Technology

Technology and education are virtually intertwined these days and nearly every teacher has a few favorite tech tools that make doing his or her job and connecting with students a little bit easier and more fun for all involved. Yet as with anything related to technology, new tools are hitting the market constantly and older ones rising to prominence, broadening their scope, or just adding new features that make them better matches for education. Stay up-to-date and explore this list of "[50 Education Technology Tools Every Teacher Should Know About](#)."

[Students Take a Road Trip using a Green Screen](#): Using a few apps, students create a one page comic their virtual trip, complete with photos, and information about each location which describes the importance of the place. It's a fun assignment in which students select a vehicle to travel in and create a map, using the vehicle as a symbol for where they stopped. [The Edublogger](#) story includes links to the apps as well as the planning packet used; plus, you can find inspiration for other cool assignments that utilize 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](#).

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

- [Socrative](#) is a smart student response system that empowers teachers to engage their classrooms through a series of educational exercises and games via smartphones, laptops, and tablets.
- [Padlet](#) is a virtual wall that allows people to express their thoughts on a common topic easily. It works like an online sheet of paper.

- **Explain Everything** is an app that allows teachers and students to create presentations or record screencasts to demonstrate a concept or illustrate a tutorial. Combining inking, images, text, and voice, Explain Everything offers a one-stop shop for student created work.
- **Educreations** is a community where anyone can teach what they know and learn what they don't. It is a unique interactive whiteboard and screencasting tool that's simple, powerful, and fun to use.
- **Piktochart** is a free web-based infographic creator that can be used to enhance visual presentations in the classroom or create visually interesting assignment sheets or syllabi. It can also be a way for you or your students to visually represent how ideas relate.
- **VoiceThread** is a web-based annotation tool that allows students and teachers to offer audio and video comments, including responses to student papers. Using VoiceThread, you can create a conversational timeline which can be played back to jump start class discussions. Now fully integrated with Sakai; sign up to access premium features.
- **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.
- **Google Docs** is a powerful tool for use in education, especially now that "Scarlet Docs" (with 30 GB of storage) is available to all students and faculty at Rutgers. Because the service is available from any computer or mobile device, course notes and presentations can be worked on from any location without the need for a flash drive. Beyond its value as a planning tool, the Docs service facilitates collaboration through sharing of editable documents.
- **Camtasia Studio** is a freeware editing suite useful for creating video tutorials for instruction both in and out of the classroom. Record your screen while performing a task and give your students a visual representation of the task at hand, whether you're teaching the writing process or best practices in disciplinary research.
- **Evernote** is a note-taking application with multiple uses in and out of the classroom. Available in a web interface or as an app for iOS or Android, Evernote lets you edit a lesson plan on a computer and teach from that plan from a tablet in the classroom. It also helps you organize notes in various ways through subject tags.

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

Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst's *They Say, I Say*, published by Norton, is a required text in Rutgers-Camden's Composition 102 classes and a useful one across the disciplines in teaching academic argumentation. Read a [review](#).

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)

Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup give practical, effective advice to both beginning and established writers in *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Published by Longman, *Style* is an excellent book to assign in writing-intensive courses across the curriculum. Read a [review](#).

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)

Higher Education in America is a landmark work--a comprehensive and authoritative analysis of the current condition of our colleges and universities from former Harvard president Derek Bok, one of the nation's most respected education experts. Sweeingly ambitious in scope, this is a deeply informed and balanced assessment of the many strengths as well as the weaknesses of American higher education today. Bok provides a thorough examination of the entire system, public and private, from community colleges and small liberal arts colleges to great universities with their research programs and their medical, law, and business schools. Drawing on the most reliable studies and data, he determines which criticisms of higher education are unfounded or exaggerated, which are issues of genuine concern, and what can be done to improve matters. (Princeton University Press 2013)

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