

Teaching Matters Monthly | November 2014 Newsletter

Teaching Matters and Assessment Center, Rutgers University–Camden
Dr. William FitzGerald, Director | Tara Aiken, Research Assistant

Director's Note



This month, we offer a cornucopia of materials on teaching and learning. Of particular note is TMAC's Spotlight interview with Jim Brown (Assistant Professor, English) to mark the opening of our Digital Studies Center on Thursday, November 13. We're also pleased to point to the Camden Faculty Reading Group to begin this month, to resources on grading and teaching with rubrics, and much more. In a box below, we announce a call for favorite assignments to be featured in an online gallery. Let's celebrate and share good work with our colleagues. Finally, mark your calendars for January 23, the first Friday of Spring semester. From noon to 2 p.m., TMAC will host a professional development opportunity (and lunch) for all departments: "Threshold Concepts Across Disciplines: What Students Must Know to Really 'Get It'." Details to follow in our December newsletter.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Faculty Spotlight

Welcome to our continuing series of conversations with Rutgers Camden faculty on teaching and learning. This month, TMAC sat down with **James Brown, Jr.**, Assistant Professor of English and Director of the [Digital Studies Center](#), to discuss his plans for the center as they relate to teaching.



TMAC: We speak for the whole campus in expressing excitement about a new Digital Studies Center taking root at Rutgers-Camden. In addition to being a hub for research and innovation, what can you tell us about the DSC as a site for teaching?

James: The Digital Studies Center's mission statement was written before I arrived, but it's one of the main reasons I was so interested in coming to Rutgers-Camden. It explicitly mentions teaching and education, meaning that the DSC has always been envisioned as a place where digital research and pedagogy could be linked together. That's one of the most exciting things about the DSC to me.

TMAC: And how does the Digital Studies Center advance its pedagogical mission?

James: The Digital Humanities Certificate is 18 credits, and it allows students to take courses from across the University. In addition, students take a capstone seminar in which they work on a Digital Humanities project of some sort. This could be anything from a videogame (incidentally, our first DH Certificate student will be doing just this in the spring) to an extended piece of writing that examines some digital technology from a humanistic perspective. Students in the certificate program will also be required to teach a workshop on some component of their research. If they used a digital tool, they'll teach a workshop on that, and if they used a specific theoretical approach that allowed them to study digital technology in a novel way, the workshop

could address that approach. Workshops will be open to students and faculty, and we think this will offer students a great opportunity to both showcase and solidify what they've learned. As any teacher knows, the best way to really get to understand something is to teach it.

TMAC: That's absolutely true. So how might a teacher work with the Digital Studies Center to advance his or her scholarship and teaching?

James: We're also developing a Digital Studies Fellows program in which scholars from both within and outside of Rutgers-Camden will apply to simultaneously teach for the certificate program and conduct research at the DSC. Part of the application process for that program will involve pitching a brand new course for the certificate, and we're hoping to attract scholars who are willing to link their digital research with their classroom practices. A scholar interested in computational analysis of historical texts could teach those computational methods to undergraduates, or someone interested in studying the links between physical computing and urban studies might teach students how to create objects that can record and track data in Camden. These are just a couple of fictional examples, but they get at the kernel of what we hope the fellows program will be: an invitation to experiment in the areas of both research and teaching.

TMAC: The Digital Studies Center celebrated its opening this week. What other exciting events can we look forward to?

James: We're planning a number of workshops for the spring that we hope will address two different ways of thinking of digital pedagogy. The first would be a conceptual angle, one that might initially have little to do with specific digital technologies and more to do with workshoping learning outcomes or goals for an assignment. This kind of approach starts with an idea and then seeks out the technology that best helps an instructor execute that idea. Of course, this kind of approach always has to be paired with actual tools, and we want to provide space for teachers and students to just tinker with a new technology. So, we're hoping to trigger innovation from both angles, in terms of concept and in terms of tool.

We'll have a workshop on the Twine platform, which students are using in my "Literature and Videogames" class this semester. I've been working with a teaching assistant, Michael Russo, to teach students how to use Twine to create text-based games, and the platform is a really nice fit because it allows students who might not have written any code before to learn how to do things like create and track variables or construct narrative experiences that shift depending on an interactor's choices. We're also planning a digital video workshop. Given that our Associate Director, Robert Emmons, is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, this is a no-brainer. But beyond his skill at building narrative with video, Robert also brings a background in visual methodologies to the table. So, it won't just be a "how to" workshop--it will also be one that addresses how the visual allows us to ask an answer different kinds of questions.

TMAC: It sounds like the Digital Studies Center is poised to have a transformational effect at Rutgers Camden (and beyond). We could not be more thrilled for you and for us. Good luck!

Announcing...

The Camden Faculty Reading Group is about to get underway. We are starting with *Engaging Ideas* by noted educator John Bean. We will read the first two chapters for our November meeting on:

- ◆ Thursday, November 20, from 3-4 p.m. in the Faculty Lounge, or
- ◆ Friday, November 21, 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

Here is a link to the [first chapter](#) to get you started.

You are invited to an information session on hybrid and online teaching, hosted by TMAC and presented by Emily Corse and Christie DeCarolis from the Office of Instructional Design and Technology . When? Friday, December 12, 11 am - 12:30. (That's the day of the Chancellor's Holiday Party.) Light lunch (pizza) served. Where? Armitage 124.

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

"[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)

"[Does England Have the Solution to the Grade-Inflation Problem?](#)" In America, more and more universities are imposing strict grading curves or abolishing grades altogether. The UK takes an entirely different approach, and it's working. (10/20/14)

Nick Carbone blogs about "Peer Feedback and Why it Matters for, and Leads to, Better Revision": [#worthassigning Feedback and Revision: The Key Components of Powerful Writing Pedagogy](#)

From the Assignment Desk

[Creating Effective Assignments](#) is part of the overall process of course design, and it is important to communicate your expectations. The Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning at the University of New Hampshire offers suggestions and resources with that in mind.

[How Do I Create Meaningful and Effective Assignments?](#) Assignments offer insights into our students' learning. And just as creating a reliable test takes thoughtfulness and skill, so does creating meaningful and effective assignments.

From the *National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science: Setting Water on Fire: A Case Study in Hydrofracking*. This case study is used to teach undergraduate students about hydraulic fracturing (hydrofracking), a controversial method for extracting methane from shale.

Reading is Fundamental

When Students Don't Do the Reading, What Can You Do? We love it when students come to class well-prepared, engaged by the material, and ready to learn. But what happens when they don't do the reading? What can you do aside from giving (still more) quizzes? Find out [here](#).

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

Why do some students prosper as college writers, moving forward with their writing, while others lose interest? 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.

In *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean argues that instructors should comment on student writing using a hierarchical approach. This [chart](#), summarizing Bean's hierarchy, helps instructors set priorities and better manage time spent on the commenting process.

For Grad Students (and Others)

The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations, and Books offers strategies for structuring time to get writing done. It's a unique book because Zerubavel's a sociologist who has studied time and how it gets structured culturally, and he writes the book from the perspective of a busy academic trying to find time to write.

Crossing the Threshold

"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.

RU Using Rubrics?

TMAC recently presented a workshop on grading and rubrics for new faculty. See the [handout](#) and additional [resources](#).

From our Teaching and Learning Peers: Center of the Month

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.

Teaching with Technology

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

- ◆ 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.
- ◆ 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.

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

In *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing* (Utah State University Press, 2014), Dan Melzer analyzes over 2,000 writing assignments and makes a compelling case for the influence of the WAC movement as he provides a panoramic view of college writing in the US.

- ❖ "What Students Write," from *Inside Higher Ed.*, highlights Melzer's book and WAC programs as it examines professors' writing assignments for students. (8/21/14)
- ❖ Click [here](#) for a highly recommended article-length presentation of Melzer's findings.

The latest edition of *Effective Grading* (Wiley, 2010) has been thoroughly updated with the most recent research. The book offers a hands-on guide for evaluating student work and examines the link between teaching and grading. Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson show how to integrate the grading process with course objectives and offer a wealth of information about student learning.

Conferences and Workshops

Call for Participation! The Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado Boulder presents a Conference on Community Writing: [Building Engaged Infrastructure](#).

Conference Dates: October 16-17, 2015. **Submission deadline is February 2, 2015.**

This is not your average conference, and the theme, Building Engaged Infrastructure, isn't just a concept—it's a challenge, a call to action.

How do we, on a local and a national scale, create engaged infrastructure? What does that look like? What barriers do we foresee? What resources and support structures do we need?

The conference will consist of presentations, dialogues, workshops, and DeepThink Tanks, which the conference committee will arrange to create a narrative structure that moves attendees through theories and proposals and project examples interspersed with sessions to reflect, incorporate, and collaborate. From the pre-conference hikes and planned outings to the final, full-conference DeepThink Tank on Professionalization and Engaged Infrastructure, we will build relationships and forge networks of engagement and support.

Please [contact](#) the conference committee with any questions.

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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.

