



Teaching Matters and Assessment Center (TMAC)

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Director's Note

We are pleased to offer some holiday fare, in food for thought through this late December newsletter. Here, we return to a topic introduced last month on the challenges of reading at the college level. The basic point is that literacy education is a shared responsibility and that we have work to do help our students to become critical and adept readers and users of information. We will be focusing on information literacy and research skills in the semester ahead.

In each newsletter, we feature a broader educational trend affecting higher education. Here, we point to a profile of New York City's Success Academy charter school system for where privatized and industrial models of education are headed. And to hail the wisdom of old school sensibilities, we offer a critique of laptops in the classroom that suggests these tools have their limitations.

In the remainder of the newsletter, we highlight the insight that good teaching can happen in classes of all sizes with a link to the Engage Conference. And we open the floor to discussion on the "going grade-less" or, at least grading less. Let us know if you have taken steps toward contract grading or similar approaches that de-emphasize grading. Finally, TMAC offers resources to support preparing and submitting courses for Gen Ed review (and approval).

Best wishes for a restful break and a happy, prosperous 2018!

In The News

On Reading: Continuing the Conversation

After last newsletter's discussion on reading, it seems worthwhile to continue the conversation with an additional perspective on why so [many Americans](#) seem to struggle with complex reading comprehension. This difficulty is seen in the widespread effectiveness of [fake news](#), as well as in

[assessment of readers](#) who stopped formal education following high school, and often have difficulties in comparing scientific evidence or financial documents.

According to a New York Times [opinion piece](#), the difficulties these readers face comes not from the distraction of the internet, but in failings of the way reading is initially taught in schools. Advantages are given to wealthier students with a broader exposure to many types of background knowledge, as so much of what's tested in reading comprehension can be supported by a generalized familiarity of the subject at hand. The article cites a study of third graders asked to read about soccer. Those students who knew a lot about the sport but were poor readers performed higher reading comprehension skills about the text than those unfamiliar but otherwise stronger readers.

In this, the author suggests that student reading abilities will improve if they are provided not just with reading strategies to apply to any subject, but also by giving lots of general knowledge that can be used to assist their later literacy practices. [Several schools](#) are moving towards teaching 'content-rich' reading programs, rather than 'random topics' that privilege those who have the advantage of outside materials.

Studying Success Academy

A recent [profile](#) in the New Yorker looks at the educational practices of [Success Academy](#), a unique charter school program that has spread over the past 10 years to nearly every borough in New York. While it's been lauded for achieving high results on standardized tests with generally underprivileged students, there has also been [some criticism](#) of the schools for their strict disciplinary methods and lack of creative spaces allowed for students to go beyond the specific lessons provided.

Throughout the [profile](#) there is a return to the idea that Success Academy is working to straddle two worlds of educational thought. Similar to the [K.I.P.P. schools](#), Success Academy installs a sense of strong discipline and structure in their students, yet they distinguish themselves by seeking to find ways to allow students to make and learn from their mistakes. The work of Success Academy seeks to be both traditional and progressive in structuring lessons in different spaces, an approach that can cause students to face difficulties jumping between the two types of learning they are being asked to accomplish. Read the full article for an in-depth discussion of the history and pedagogy behind this widely influential school system.

Laptops in Lecture

In most college and even high school classes, students are overwhelmingly moving towards note-taking (and occasional off-topic multi-tasking) on laptops rather than notebooks. Some instructors are moving towards [banning electronics](#) because of the distractions they provide, and [research](#) shows that even for those students who do stay on task, there are marked advantages to writing notes longhand.

For one, it forces students to be selective about which points in a lecture or class discussion they choose to record, rather than quoting extensively verbatim without processing the content in real time. Beyond students making choices that affect their own learning individually, additional research shows that distracting laptop usage in class can have detrimental use [on other students](#) as well. While laptop use may be a necessary accommodation with students with disabilities, [studies show](#) that indiscriminate use of laptops in classroom can decrease test scores and overall learning.

Sizing Up Your Classes

It often feels that much of the success of a class is dependent on its size: large lecture classes obviously function differently than small discussion-based courses, but that's not to say that profound learning is restricted to either type. A [panel](#) at the October 2017 [Engage Conference](#) discussed ways to bridge the difference between these two types of courses. Featuring speakers from several disciplines, this panel, *Size Doesn't Matter: Making Big Classes Feel Small and Small Classes Work Better*, looks at ways to personally connect to students in large classes, as well as smooth over difficult classroom dynamics in small courses. A [full recording](#) of the panel is available online.

Teaching Without Grades

For many educators, among the most dreaded parts of the semester comes when it's time to assign grades, especially for more subjective assignments like papers. Assessment is a huge tool in improving student work, which the notion of a [writing process](#) or moving towards a greater goal can often get lost in the shuffle of assigning particular grade values on work. To combat this difficulty, many teachers are moving towards [contract grading](#) to improve student learning by taking the emphasis away from 'what did I get?' and toward 'how am I improving?'.

Rather than doing away with all grade markings entirely, educators may instead choose to limit the number of grades they give in favor of the holistic learning experience, and then assess the students' overall learning at the end of the course. [One interview](#) with a group of teachers 'going gradeless' discusses some of the misconceptions and stereotypes around these less-graded classrooms, as well as the many benefits they see in doing so. It appears to be a particularly helpful practice for those teaching writing classes, which allows both the student and teacher to focus instead on students' strengths and areas of growth, rather than marking to degrees of correctness.

Reengineering General Education

As we turn to the spring semester, there is often rich conversation to be had surrounding General Education classes: how one can get a Gen Ed class approved, and what it takes to qualify. If you are developing or seeking approval for one of these courses, the steps below can be a useful tool to ensure that your class is 'Gen Ed Ready'.

1. Familiarize yourself with Gen Ed Requirements and Expectations
 - a. [Gen Ed Categories and Learning Goals](#)
 - b. [Writing Intensive Courses](#)
2. Ensure your course is on the [Master Course List](#)
 - a. If a new course, submit to the [Academic Policy Committee](#) for approval.
3. Begin submission on the [Gen Ed Portal](#)
4. Ensure that course and [Gen Ed category](#) (Themes and Approaches or Cross-Cutting) connect through learning goals, and fully explain.
5. Submit course syllabus including both course-specific and Gen Ed category learning goals.

TMAC Calendar

Looking Forward, Looking Back

Spring Research Symposium

TMAC Director and author of [The Craft of Research](#) William Fitzgerald will lead participants in a early-spring symposium on the teaching of research, designed for implementation across departments. From 12-2 on February 2nd, join TMAC for a guided workshop on approaches to teaching researched based writing. Look beyond the ‘research paper’ for ways to get students engaged with research in their individual disciplines.

In case you missed it..

If you were unable to attend our events from earlier this semester, you can find many resources from the sessions on the TMAC website, including the following:

- [From Due Dates to Learning Goals: On Syllabus \(re\)Design](#)
- [The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing](#)
- [Responding to Student Writing: Tom Deans, UConn](#)
- [Syllabus and Assignment Design: Dartmouth University](#)

If your department would be interested in holding a particular pedagogically focused event, please reach out to teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu.

For additional resources, visit tmac.camden.rutgers.edu, or write us at teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu

