Therese Huston reminds us in Teaching What You Don’t Know that putting together a course outside our fields of expertise and then trying to teach it is a complex undertaking. She does that by offering us a blend of classroom tips, syllabus ideas, encouragement, administrative tools, and commiseration. The result is that the book works like a Rorschach Test. Those looking for practical helps will find a book chock full of advice. Those seeking insight into their plight will find explanations of why colleges force faculty members to teach outside their fields of expertise. For those needing inspiration or help in managing a department too small to have expertise in all their course offerings, it’s there. Like most books that try to do everything at once, this one is simultaneously insightful and simplistic, inspiring and mundane, confident and stumbling — which sounds pretty much like us when we teach what we don’t know…or now that I think about it, when we teach what we do know.

That may be Huston’s most engaging observation in this book — implied, not stated: that whenever we find ourselves teaching something we’ve barely just learned, we can take courage in the knowledge that even in the best of situations, the classroom is a collaborative endeavor, a fragile ballet of student, teacher, and university, each with different goals and different levels of investment that come together for a brief time in hopes of creating a kind of alchemy. Sometimes it works, even when everyone in the room is a novice. Huston tells the story of one teacher whose course in some new and foreign subject was so successful that the departmental expert in that field later came to her for advice. All of us teaching a completely new course can take heart in that possibility. Yet I remember the semester I taught a course in a subject as focused as a laser on my fields of expertise and had it crash and burn like the Hindenburg. We like to be in complete control in a classroom — that’s what expertise and preparation are all about — but in fact, we’re not. Teaching a subject we barely understand drives that point home in spades. To survive such a trial, Huston writes, our goals should be to get better in the subject with every class, build enough trust with our students to admit to our shortcomings, and use the experience to broaden ourselves as scholars and teachers.

For all her efforts at practical help (and many of her tips are, indeed, good ones), Huston’s insights are occasionally demoralizing. She offers a convincing discussion on just how out of touch we faculty members, with our love of ideas and concepts, can be from our students, who want concrete applications. She reminds us that much of what happens in class emerges organically from some question or observation, and before you know it, we are out on a limb without a lifeline regardless of our preparation. She helps us understand that, though the university tries to hold the teacher responsible for the errant missiles that result from faculty teaching outside their fields, the institution derives enormous benefits from the sort of lean staffing that makes teaching outside our fields necessary, so it’s not going to change.

My first semester on a college faculty, I was asked to teach an eighteen-hour course load, six of them at a satellite campus three hours away. Four of the courses were in specializations completely outside my training. My engagement with Huston’s book, then, was filled with flashbacks of classes that didn’t work, embarrassing flubs (and a little self-loathing), and the lonely experience of sitting in my campus office long after the police had locked the building at midnight trying to insure that I had something to say in class the next morning. That was twenty-five years ago. Funny how after years of grad study and preparation and lots of wonderful experiences with my students and the classes I’ve taught, those memories of teaching what I didn’t know are still so close to the surface.
Please forgive an “old soldier” for some personal observations on the challenges and solutions that Therese Huston offers in her remarkably insightful book on teaching and learning. I’ve wrestled with these for a long time – and I still am. This book reminded me how lucky I’ve been as a learner and educator, and as someone who now teaches in three different disciplines.

Huston begins the third chapter of her book titled “Getting Ready” with this - “If you’ve just been assigned a course that’s outside your specialty and you’re barely hanging on…” and goes on to detail some “survival strategies”, each of which tickled my memories, as did many comments in Chapter 4 – Teaching and Surviving.

As a 22 year-old Second Lieutenant assigned to a Mechanized Infantry Battalion in Erlangen, Germany in the fall of 1966, this is the situation I faced. The cumulative total of my formal training in armor/mechanized operations was three days in my officers’ basic course. Now I was supposed to train and lead not one but three rifle platoons of primarily draftee soldiers, many of whom would, like me, soon be on our way to Vietnam. My battalion was seriously short of junior officers, hence my multiple assignments.

My “additional duties” in B Company included supervision of the company’s vehicle, weapons and radio equipment maintenance operations, the supply room, and the dining facility that served three meals a day, 7 days a week for 150+, none of which I had been trained to do.

Huston’s first strategy is “Planning Backwards”, a technique familiar to those trained in advanced military planning and decision-making. But with the sage advice of my first mentors – two remarkable sergeants and two experienced specialists, I learned how to identify, in each of my areas of responsibility (think new courses), what Huston refers to as “the end product …what do you want students to be able to do as a result of learning…” with the emphasis on the “DO”. Soldiers call these “mission essential tasks” which when mastered, form the basis for skillful collective action. I quickly discovered how much I did not know, but with help, I soon knew how to ask the questions that would reveal where we needed to go. This process of identifying the “end product” is where I start the design and redesign of every class I teach.

My mentors served Huston’s second strategic function as “two different kinds of allies”. The sergeants were “people issue” and technical experts who helped me understand soldiers as learners and to build on the fragile credibility that came with my rank and position. As we shared learning experiences – field training exercises, garrison support tasks, discipline challenges - my mentors offered, in Huston’s words “guidance on how to frame those questions so they connect with big issues in the field….while allowing me to think, ask and, yes, be stupid on occasion, about such linkages, but never not to learn from an experience. This principle of shared learning continues to guide my teaching.

As allies, my mentors made it clear to me that I had to earn their sincere trust and respect. I was taught a basic face-to-face leadership principle – never order someone to do something you will not do, or have not done yourself. I learned to “manage” maintenance operations by actually performing the tasks under the wise guidance of experienced mechanics and technicians. Years later, I learned the key lessons of college teaching with the help of honest feedback from skilled and caring colleagues.

My Army specialists, one an automotive mechanic, the other a supply clerk, showed me I did not have to be an expert in everything to effectively lead, but I did need to be willing to learn hands on to appreciate and understand the complexity of many tasks. And I did learn by doing, as my stained mechanics coveralls and hand written supply records attest. I learned to “test run” tasks new to me, doing it myself before assigning it to others, so I would know what it required and what standards had to be applied. I’ve continued to use this “rehearsal principle” with academic tasks, seeking at least one “good answer” or procedure that would satisfy the requirement I would be assigning to my students, and to understand what efforts and time were required.

With my mentors’ help, I was able to organize the training of my platoons and the logistic teams in ways that paralleled what Huston refers to a “Organizing the Course to Boost Your Confidence”, building on my strengths and taking carefully considered risks. I learned to avoid Huston’s “Four Common Mistakes Instructors Make in the Planning Stages” – poor time estimates, creating excess amounts of work, mismanaging expectations, and forgetting what worked (that is, failing to learn from success).

Leap forward nine years. I joined the Psychology Department of the University of Florida as a 31-year old student in January 1975, one academic quarter later than others of my cohort. Remember the early 1970’s? I was the first active duty military officer to be accepted into the graduate program in psychology at U of F in anyone’s memory. As a Vietnam veteran, I was not exactly a welcome addition to the collective. Unlike today, the military was not held in high regard by many on college campuses, even as America’s direct involvement in Vietnam ended.

In my first interview with the Department Chair, Dr. Marvin Shaw noted my lack of academic background in psychology (I
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If you are not using the latest video technology in your guitar instruction, then you may be missing out on a very powerful way to increase your teaching effectiveness.

The proverbial light bulb came on in my head as I was speaking with my nephew about his physical therapy practice. He told me about using an inexpensive Flip video camera to record his patients doing their exercises properly. Immediately after their session, he uploads the video to the Flip website and emails them a link. It didn’t take much imagination on my part to realize that the exact same process could be put to great use in teaching guitar.

There is another aspect that this technology has going for it: many of today’s smartphones have excellent video capability. As I began incorporating the use of video into my teaching at Belmont University (which graciously approved my application for a “mini-grant” to buy the Guitar Department three Flip video cameras) I realized that at least 25% of the students already had smartphones with video, but it hadn’t occurred to any of them to ask if they could use them in a lesson. Likewise, quite a few students have Flip video cameras, or an equivalent, so they are all set too.

There are two primary ways in which I use the camera: 1) to record myself demonstrating a new piece, often at a reduced speed, while including commentary on fingerings, phrasing, dynamics, etc. 2) to record the student’s playing. Here is an example of how powerful this technology can be: the other day I was discussing with a student his posture, how he was holding the instrument, and his right-hand position. After five minutes of this discussion, I thought to use the video camera. I recorded him playing for thirty seconds, and showed it to him right from the camera’s screen. Within about ten seconds he understood much better what I had been trying to describe with words.

I almost always limit the video to five minutes or less. If a piece is longer than that, I would definitely break it up into multiple videos. The main reason why I keep it short is to allow for a current fact of life: short attention spans. A second reason is that it can take up to fifteen or twenty minutes for a five-minute video to upload, so it is simply more practical to keep things brief. It is not necessary to sit there for the entire time while the video uploads. Once the upload process begins and you type the student’s email address into the software, the rest takes place automatically and requires no more attention on your part.

The results: first of all, the students love it. Today’s students are so oriented to learning things on Youtube, that this is simply second nature to them. Unquestionably, my students have learned pieces faster and more accurately by referencing the instructional videos.

One last tip: While demonstrating a piece, I have the student be the camera person. This engages them in the entire process, plus I can tell them to focus on whichever hand needs attention.

So, if you haven’t done this already, I highly recommend incorporating video recording into your teaching. Hi-tech has given us a wonderful and inexpensive way to help our students improve.

Participants: Francis Perry, Robert Thompson, Jefferson Rogers
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In their recent book, The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal, authors Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc offer a “modest proposal”: “Sit down with at least one or two other people who have stakes in higher education and create the conditions in which you can express authentic feelings, think creative thoughts, and speak your truth to each other’s mind and heart.”

A group of Belmont faculty decided to accept this proposal and gathered together for a Community of Practice in order to transform ourselves and the academy. The focus of our “collegial conversations” was the idea of integrative education, which “engages students in the systemic exploration of the relationship between their studies of the ‘objective’ world and the purpose, meaning, limits, and aspirations of their lives.”

There was a certain irony to trying to answer Palmer and Zajonc’s call to renewal. Simply finding the time to gather was a true challenge for this group of professors from across Belmont’s departments. Despite this challenge, we found ways to create pockets of conversation aimed not at specific practices, but on “first and last things”: How are we working in our classrooms to create fully developed human beings? How can we nurture our own humanity in order to fulfill our mission as educators?

Participant Steve Simpler, a professor in the School of Religion, commented on both the challenge of finding time to have meaningful conversation and the importance of making it a priority. “Everybody has the sense that they’re too busy. Those frustrations sometimes cloud these conversations, but these conversations can also help us find ourselves. If we think about them in that way, there might be less resistance,” Simpler said. “The conversations are about being whole people and taking that wholeness into the classrooms.”

Our Community of Practice has nurtured those conversations, which we hope will continue not only within our group, but reverberate throughout the university.

Participants: Kristine LaLonde, Stephanie Crowder, Jonathan Thorndike, Joyce Crowell, Sally Holt, Judy Skeen, Cynthia Curtis (of the School of Religion), Sarah Bowles, Steve Simpler, Mark McEntire, Merrie King
have a BS in Biology). He asked why I had applied to graduate school. I answered that I needed a Masters Degree in order to teach at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, my next assignment. Dr. Shaw smiled and pointed out, to my surprise, that I had been admitted to a doctoral program, and that I would have to work hard and fast to complete this challenge successfully in the two years before I was to report to West Point.

In words that are echoed in Huston’s Chapter 4, Dr. Shaw pointed out that I would have to quickly establish my credibility with my peers, faculty and undergraduates as he was intending to have me teach at least one undergraduate course every quarter starting later that spring, and to eventually teach a course in each sub-discipline in psychology. His advice for me as a novice teacher was clear and concise. Be yourself. Let the students get to know you. Share your experiences. Be well prepared for class but don’t overdo it. Communicate your expectations and standards. Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.” And never fake it.

Thanks to Marv Shaw, my fellow graduate students and faculty colleagues, I survived this gauntlet of “teaching what I didn’t know” and was better prepared to help reconfigure the curriculum of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at USMA, creating new courses in lifespan human development, marriage and family, and industrial/organizational psychology, none of which I had previously taught. For me, and I sense in many ways for Therese Huston, teaching something new has become a sought-after challenge, one of discovery and interpretation, an adventure into the known and unknown.

So what did I learn from reading and discussing “Teaching What You Don’t Know”? I rediscovered sound truths about teaching and learning that need to be shared over and over again. I was reminded that others have great tools and techniques we can and should borrow and make our own, and that each new generation of students rightfully expects us, as teachers, to stay current technically and interpersonally, and to appreciate them for their uniqueness. Finally, as teachers, that we will never know everything we should and need to know, but that’s OK. In fact, that’s how it should and must be.

**FOUR SQUARE GETS RAVE REVIEWS**

*by Bonnie Riechert, Director, Public Relations Program*

*Communities Of Practice:*

*Part Of The Mutual Mentoring Initiative*

A math professor, a biology professor, a nursing professor, and a public relations professor walk into a trendy lunch spot in Hillsboro Village... no, it’s not a joke — it’s the happy ending of the Teaching Center’s new Four Square voluntary program for teaching development.

In Fall 2010 this program began, offering Belmont faculty members the opportunity to become part of a team of four who would visit each others’ classrooms, observe different teaching styles, and meet later to discuss the whole experience. Two Four Square teams were formed in this initial implementation period.

It was exciting to learn of my assignment to a team with Andy Miller, mathematics and computer science; Darlene Panvini, biology; and Lynn Shores, nursing. It was interesting to sit in on a class taught by each of them over the course of the semester. It was inspiring to see such a repertoire of teaching styles and techniques.

We each completed a brief report on our classroom observations; and the reports were shared with fellow team members and submitted to the Teaching Center. In the final experience of the Four Square program, we met for lunch at Provence and discussed what we had “learned about learning” from all these classroom visits.

Benefits of the program included getting to better know faculty from other departments and other colleges. Stepping outside our small disciplinary universes also was helpful; all of us recognized ways that our own fields connected with others. Seeing different teaching styles was motivating; each of us gained ideas that we could incorporate into our own classroom management.

If you get the chance to join a Four Square team next semester, my advice: run, don’t walk, to do this.

Participants: Darlene Panvini, Andy Miller, Lynne Shores, Bonnie Riechert
BELMONT: AN OVERVIEW

For several of us who have been around Belmont for awhile (31 years for me), the present-day enrollment, scope of offerings, new buildings and national prestige are an answer to prayers and a most wonderful surprise. As with most “stars” who weren’t really discovered overnight, neither was Belmont easily nor quickly the shining light of today. It rests strongly on the shoulders of early decision makers and students who took a chance that a fledging institution could become stronger. It’s much easier and quite prestigious to hitch one’s wagon to today’s Belmont star than in previous days. One should reflect upon the fact that Belmont College/University has been hit hard by fires, low budget support, and even controversy on several occasions, but has survived and even thrived. Some times and events worth noting if one would know Belmont better are the following:

1945—The trustees of the Presbyterian’s Cumberland University, having run the school since its 1842 founding, asked the Tennessee Baptist Convention to take over their school, and the Baptists actually ran the nearby Lebanon college from 1946 to 1951. Note: This should not be confused with today’s present non-sectarian Cumberland University in Lebanon.

1951—A special meeting in February of the Tennessee Baptist Convention’s Executive Board explored the possibility of giving up Cumberland University and taking over the defunct operation of Ward-Belmont Junior College on the former Adelicia Acklen estate, and this is what happened. Friends and supporters of Cumberland felt that TBC had turned their back on them by “dumping” their school, and strong negative feelings against Belmont and the TBC lasted for decades.

1952—Fire destroyed Hillsboro High School in nearby Green Hills, and its 768 students began taking all their classes on the Belmont College campus. The dilapidated condition of the college’s buildings probably did little to entice these visiting students to attend Belmont College, according to Dr. Gabhart’s account.

1953—In May, R. Kelly White was inaugurated as Belmont College’s first president. Dr. White was the pastor at First Baptist Church of West Palm Beach, Florida, and a former pastor of Belmont Heights Baptist Church, near Belmont College. Belmont College’s first-year enrollment was 186, and the total College budget was $270,000.

1959—Perhaps the young college began its climb to respectability with the accreditation approval by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, College Commission.

1960—A lightning strike to Hail Hall caused a fire with $150,000 damage. Fortunately, none of the residents were injured.

1960—Herbert Gabhart was inaugurated in October as Belmont’s second president. A pastor from Memphis via Kentucky, Dr. Gabhart’s leadership covered the years 1959 to 1982. His fiscally conservative policies and his total “sellout” to his beloved institution laid much of the foundation for today’s institution.

1972—In December, during Christmas break, the largest and most important building on Belmont’s campus, Blanton Hall, burned to the ground. No cause of the fire was ever proven. For complete discussion, see article “The Great Fire” in The Art of Teaching, (October 2009, Volume 16, No. 3), published by Belmont’s Teaching Center.

1982—William E. Troutt was inaugurated as the third president of Belmont College. At age 33, he was the youngest president of a four-year college in the country. For his inauguration, “Jesus is the Christ” was written and set to music by Belmont faculty members F. Janet Wilson (Literature and Language) and John Arnn (Music). This hymn is sung at Belmont’s formal ceremonies, such as graduations and convocations.

2000—In April, Robert Fisher is inaugurated as Belmont’s fourth president. He began immediately expanding Belmont’s scope in many ways, including finding new donors to continue Belmont’s building progress. Under his leadership, Belmont became a national player with NCAA basketball appearances, the hosting of a U. S. Presidential debate, and the addition of several significant academic offerings.

2006—Belmont and its historic relationship with the Tennessee Baptist Convention ends, in the midst of controversy and considerable publicity.

What does the future hold for our beloved Belmont University? It’s an exciting time to be here and find out. To quote one of Dr. Gabhart’s favorite comments, Belmont’s best is still ahead!

Sources:
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