Out-of-the-Box Teaching Helps Students Excel

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As the education sector evolves, new strategies and teaching tools are making their way into classrooms at every level, from preschool to postgraduate. However, while some approaches to teaching may be shifting, the heart of the profession remains the same. At DePaul, professors continue to create edifying, engaging and relevant courses that use creative teaching methods to inspire students to greater levels of educational attainment.
Mobile technology

Typically, professors ask their students to put away their cellphones during class, but that’s not the case in Douglas Bruce’s classroom. Bruce, an assistant professor in the College of Science and Health, is one of several DePaul professors who have embraced mobile technology as an effective educational tool.

According to Kate Daniels, senior instructional technology consultant for Faculty Instructional Technology Services (FITS) at DePaul, nearly 99 percent of DePaul students own a cellphone. “Faculty get frustrated when students use their phones to text or go on Facebook during class,” she notes. “Rather than fight that battle, mobile technology is a way to meet the students where they are. It’s a way of saying, if you’re going to have your phone out, I’d rather you use it to complete coursework.”

Bruce recently incorporated mobile technology into Fundamentals of Epidemiology, a course he has taught before. “Previously, I experienced a lot of reluctance from students when I posed questions in class,” he says. With the help of FITS, however, Bruce developed a strategy to overcome that challenge. Now Bruce asks the same questions as before, but his students send in their responses via a polling application on their phone. The answers are then presented on a graph that shows the distribution of results.

Many of the problems posed by Bruce, such as determining the incidence rate of diabetes during a specified year, require complicated calculations drawn from multiple sources, and students reach their conclusions at different times. The polling app accounts for that time variability.

For students like senior Abigail Wood, the app’s appeal is straightforward. “The polling app has allowed me to understand the information better, because I have enough time to solve the problem and submit my answer,” she explains. Fellow senior Sonia Shah-Gonzalez also appreciates this aspect of the software. “The polling method gives everyone a chance to do the problem without being influenced by what others are saying,” she says. “I’m a kinesthetic learner, so typing my answers is the best way for me to retain information.”

The polling app affected Bruce’s teaching style in ways he wasn’t expecting. “It made me more patient in eliciting answers to my questions,” he states. “Students are more comfortable doing the work, and it gives me a better idea as to how much they are actually comprehending instead of relying solely on active verbal participation as an indicator of their learning.”

Daniels predicts that mobile technology in the classroom will only continue to grow. “Students have been really excited about using their phones,” she says. “The phone can be a powerful tool for creating more engagement, and DePaul is definitely ahead of the game in terms of integrating mobile technology in higher education.”

Flipped classrooms

When Amy Rhodes decided to get a master’s degree in community counseling after six years in the working world, she assumed she knew the drill. “I was used to the traditional classroom model of lecture and discussion,” she says. “So I was initially hesitant toward the flipped classroom approach where the lecture is online.” In particular, Rhodes feared that this format might eliminate opportunities to ask questions or obtain clarification on confusing points.

But when Rhodes enrolled in Erin Mason’s class, she found that the opposite was true. Mason, an assistant professor of counseling in the College of Education, uses the flipped model to enhance student engagement. “In flipped learning, what used to be homework is now classwork, and classwork—like lectures—is now part of the homework,” she explains. Mason uses a web-based tool called VoiceThread to create video lectures, and her students watch the videos, which emphasize key points in that week’s reading assignment, on their own time and at their own pace. Some students add comments in the form of text bubbles, audio recordings or even their own video clips.

While the transition from in-class to online lectures is critical to the format’s success, the structural change is intended to put the focus on classroom activities and collaboration. “My favorite part was the freedom for discussion during class time,” Rhodes notes. Indeed, Mason argues that this approach creates more opportunities for students to learn from each other. “I’m a big fan of group projects,” she says. “When you’re a counselor in the real world, you never work in isolation. You’re always working with other professionals, educators and parents. I want to mimic that as much as possible in my assignments.”

In courses with traditional lectures, students are often required to meet outside of class time to work on group projects, which can be a scheduling nightmare. Many students work full time or live far from campus, and all are juggling various responsibilities in addition to school. Bringing the group project into class time is more efficient for students, and it works for instructors as well. “Rather than getting 15 emails from students all asking the same question, I can answer that question when it comes up in class. I can also sit down with each group, knowing each project is different, to give tailored, interactive feedback,” Mason explains.

After three courses with Mason, graduate student Brian Coleman is sold on the effectiveness of flipped teaching. “When conducted in an intentional way, I believe that the flipped classroom has the potential to transform students’ thinking and behaviors in ways that support deeper connections to the learning process and more consistent knowledge acquisition,” he says. In particular, Coleman engaged more readily with the reading materials and lectures knowing that class time would focus on group projects and discussions. “It forced me to analyze content for key talking points and diverse perspectives that would help inspire fulfilling discourse once we were back in the classroom,” he explains. “I feel as though I retained information better in these courses.”

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- Kate Daniels, FITS consultant
Creating community

Community outreach and service learning are nothing new at DePaul. The university was founded on a mission of serving the underserved, and this philosophy informs recruitment, programs and teaching to this day. Nonetheless, DePaul professors consistently find new ways to incorporate and improve upon this core tenet.

For many years, aspiring music teachers have undergone a practicum during their junior year. In addition to the cohort’s classroom sessions, which are a time to discuss lessons and practice teaching, each student leads a weekly music class at a local elementary school. While the practicum was effective in teaching pedagogical practice, such as writing lesson plans, other areas were being overlooked. “We were teaching at the elementary school students and not with them,” says Jacki Kelly-McHale, associate professor and music education coordinator at in the School of Music. “I realized there was something more that I needed to be doing for our future teachers.”

Kelly-McHale specializes in culturally responsive music education, and she revamped the practicum with those ideas in mind. “It’s about looking at the grade-school students as partners in the teaching process,” she says. “We need to understand where the students come from and who they are, and then teach in a way so they not only understand, but also make connections.”

In an effort to expose her music students to pressing issues in education, Kelly-McHale assigned readings from leading scholars in cultural responsiveness pedagogy and critical race theory, and created activities that prompted students to think about their assumptions. Then she sent students on several neighborhood excursions to better understand the children in their classrooms. “We teach at Jahn World Language School in Roscoe Village, but the students are predominantly bused in from a housing project near Elston [Avenue] and Diversey [Parkway],” Kelly-McHale explains. “The demographics of the school don’t match those of the neighborhood.”

These projects and others yielded insights for the School of Music students. “This class opened my mind to a larger view of culture in the classroom,” shares senior Ian Stillmunks, who taught a fourth-grade classroom of Hispanic, African-American and Polish students when he was a junior. When his class showed little interest in the “melodic, European” songs he was teaching, Stillmunks realized that he needed to introduce something that was more relatable. So he asked his students to list their favorite music and explain why they liked it. “I also started discussing lyrics with them,” Stillmunks recalls. “If students don’t know what they are singing and don’t feel connected to the piece in some way, many will question why the activity is being presented.”

Stillmunks believes this strategy worked because it created community in the classroom, which is a primary goal of culturally responsive pedagogy. This year, junior Amanda Deligiannis has been using similar techniques in her second-grade classroom, which is composed primarily of students whose first language isn’t English. “I take time at the end of every music lesson for the students to share their thoughts or ask me anything they would like,” she says. “This gives me a better understanding of their lives outside the classroom, and it gives my students an opportunity to learn more about me if they would like to.”

Deligiannis reiterates Stillmunks’ observation: “It’s important to create a sense of community in every classroom.”

Armed with the tools to teach holistically, Kelly-McHale’s former students are now finding success as full-time student teachers. “The practicum not only prepared me for teaching in a diverse environment, it actually altered my teaching style over the course of the year,” Stillmunks asserts. “As we learned about culturally responsive teaching, I started shaping my entire understanding of teaching around that idea.”