

Notes from Bill Timpson Workshop, 10/19/09
“Getting Honest, Useful Midterm Feedback from Your Students”

Note: The comments here are meant to capture key points of discussion and presentation plus the general tenor of the exchange.

Bill Timpson, Professor of Education at Colorado State University, presented a workshop on getting honest midterm feedback from students.

Earlier in the day, he attended two classes: one taught by Charlene D’Avanzo, and one by Jennifer Hamilton. In each class, he observed the dynamics of the class, using as a reference his concept of “metateaching and the instructional map.” He shared the results of these two class performances with the faculty present at the workshop, and also spoke about the midterm feedback process and its value to faculty and students.

Beginning with a discussion of his observations in Charlene’s class (Environmental History of New England), Timpson had taken notes which he could organize along the axis between “process” and “product” and also “teacher directed” vs. “student directed.” One of the other key factors he noted was the size of the group vs. the individual student.

The topic - which was thrown out to students to consider in Charlene’s class - was “what makes for a good discussion.” Students organized into small groups to discuss the topic. This way, there would be no power reference and continued dependency on the teacher. Students know why they are doing the exercise – to listen to one another and gather the input from individuals in the group. This exercise yielded mixed results. Each table wandered a bit, and it was challenging for the teacher to stay entirely out of overseeing the assignment. It might have gone better if the teacher asked at the start for the consensus of the groups. Timpson sometimes forces students by asking individuals to speak for the group. There are different levels of attention and participation by students, and this results in different levels of involvement. In the process, some students are more comfortable in groups, but some prefer to have the professor direct the exercise.

Considering the movement between Process (thinking, creating, communicating, cooperating) and Product (knowledge, skills), Timpson spoke of making choices and having deliberate interplay between those two concepts. In science, there is emphasis on product, on learning terms and having a foundation a grasp of basic facts. Students working on a dissertation sometimes have trouble making the leap from their solid knowledge to the creative, original work which they must do (process). Students can practice original thinking all through the school years, beginning at a very young age, and should be encouraged to do so. On the other hand, some students need to learn more terms and have more building blocks of instruction before they can participate in the process of creating original work.

So the challenge is how to integrate these two focuses (process and product) to keep the class lively. Using a case based approach is helpful as the case is grounded in the real world and can then move to process.

Timpson spoke about a microbiology course at his college. Midway through the course, students were asked to create posters. They did the research in groups, but then each student created his own individual poster, utilizing the information from the research. In this way, they were forced to understand the material at another level. It was an extremely successful project.

Even in writing courses, students can write from the “product” of their own lives – and use the writing to take real issues and form cases from them.

There are always choices about which way to go regarding size of the group in class, particularly as some less-assertive students will hold back their contributions if they are allowed to do so. Doing a “free write,” where students take time in class to pour out their thoughts, can often move the class from a point of stagnation to a more lively place. The benefits from exploring new ideas can bring new energy into the class.

There are various aspects of the class which Timpson uses to comment upon during his observation such as: instructor knowledge, degree of student engagement, appropriateness of assessment and practice. On this “Comments/Notes/Plans page” of the Instructional Map exercise, he scribbles notes about some particular positive or negative aspects of some of the criteria, using a plus or minus and then elaborating. He recommends having a colleague visit one’s own class and doing such an analysis.

Timpson also observed in Jennifer Hamilton’s class on “Food, Health, and Law” to analyze the dynamics. Jennifer noted at the workshop that some students dominate the class and she would like to change that. The class had done readings on “fat rights” and stereotypes about obesity, and some made references in the discussion to those readings. The students who have not contributed should be asked specifically to contribute something. They can also be asked to take one side of an issue (especially the opposite one) to add variety and depth. A “wait time” can be imposed so that the students who raise hands and want to speak frequently will be held off so that others may speak. The ground rules should always be revisited at the end of class – how did they work? Do we need to adjust them?

Timpson then moved on to discuss the benefit of using a “mid-semester student feedback” form, which students complete listing “appreciations” and “concerns and recommendations.” Students must be assured that their comments will not result in retribution, and should not sign if they feel their grade will be affected. However, if they do sign, this increases the level of responsibility and involvement. When they are asked “what could make this class better?” their feedback is extremely useful to

faculty. If the feedback is uniform about some aspect of class, it is a good time to negotiate towards a new position. Faculty can list the common topics that crop up on the feedback form, and rate them as High or Medium or Low. Warning signs may turn up and point towards an adjustment. Faculty can make good use of honest midterm feedback, but the end of course evaluation they will never see. If faculty are called upon to write a peer review letter, they can include the data and comments from the midterm feedback form to give the review some additional weight.

At the end of class time, Timpson suggests taking five minutes for debriefing, asking “how did that go?” “Was there enough time” or “were we focused enough?” Or students can be asked to write down what the “murkiest” thing was, and remain anonymous. Some professors ask for a one minute feedback remark – these are assembled and published so students can share in reading the results.