Keeping it Fresh - Maintaining the Jazz in Teaching: A Panel Discussion with Stanford Faculty

Start as an instructor is an exciting and, at times, overwhelming experience. We all have vivid memories of the very first classes we taught and can recall meaningful encounters with students, or the moments when we felt pushed to the edge. After a few years of teaching the same course or the same topics, however, a new challenge might present itself: How do we keep it fresh? How do we keep the jazz in our teaching?

How we can keep our teaching invigorated was the topic of CTL’s third annual Celebration of Teaching event in June 2007. We offered Professors Estelle Freedman, Andrea Lunsford, Brad Osgood, and John Rickford the following questions as a way to help jump start the discussion: How do you find renewal after having taught the same course many times? How has your experience with your students changed your teaching over time? How do you maintain the connection with your students and the ability to perceive the course from their perspective? What resources do you seek out that help you introduce new ways of teaching in your courses?

This newsletter highlights some of the panel’s comments in the hope that their rich range of strategies will inspire all of us to try out new approaches and ideas.

Panel Highlights

Estelle Freedman, the Edgar E. Robinson Professor in United States History

How do you find renewal? “I got a curriculum grant to internationalize the course. Graduate students working with me, feeding me articles to read from around the world for every subject I did. It changed my teaching, it changed my scholarship. Pedagogy: In some classes, I say one change a year only. There was the year I learned PowerPoint. This is the year I am doing iTunes. I am bringing music into my lectures. It kept me fresh, listening to music and trying to relate it to themes of my class . . . . Or this could be the year I am breaking open lecture into discussion at least one day a week. Lying fallow: You taught [a course] enough times, give it a sabbatical, teach it every other year . . . . After the end of a lecture class, I have a file I open called ‘thoughts.’ I just debrief from the quarter, a stream of consciousness, the good, the bad, the ugly, and I read these thoughts when I start planning the next time.”

How has the experience with your students changed your teaching? “I take course evaluations very seriously. I pore over them. . . . I hand out my own [questionnaire] and have students check off on the readings. I ask specific questions to help me rethink the class next time. . . . On the last day of class, I do

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it the next time.”

_How do you stay in touch with students?_ “I want to plug the VPUE lunch money. You can, once a quarter, take your students to lunch. I have used this to have an informal out-of-classroom experience, not at the Faculty Club, but in the lounge [with food from] a caterer. It’s a free for all. This year it was ‘Everything you wanted to ask about the body and were afraid to bring up in class.’ Sometimes they want to know about me. Basically, I sit and listen to them talk about their lives and their concerns, and I learn a lot about where they are coming from.”

**What resources do you seek out?**

“A short one is Rebekka Nathan’s mind-blowing book _My Freshman Year_. An anthropologist, who goes native under a pseudonym, passes as a returning student and lives in a dorm as a freshman of the public university where she teaches. What I learned is how irrelevant we are to our students.

“Another resource has been the biggest renewal piece of my career. I hope others can learn from it as a model. When I started teaching US women’s history over thirty years ago, it was the beginning of a new field. A colleague at UCLA got a grant from the NEH to have a curriculum conference for those of us teaching this new field. In 1978, 15 of us went to UCLA for a one-time, one-day teaching workshop—and we have been meeting for thirty years ever since. . . . We created a network and perpetuated this group that has now a cohort of 25 people. Every year, we volunteer to facilitate part of the day on a topic that we picked the year before and spend a whole day talking about how to revise our teaching. It was out of that workshop that my freshmen seminar emerged one day. I keep up with the readings and with colleagues. I urge Stanford and CTL to think about this as a model that can go outside of Stanford.”

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**Andrea Lunsford, the Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor of English and Director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric**

“I want to take Estelle’s point about keeping ourselves engaged by working with those around us. There is no substi-

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**There is something about keeping it fresh in teaching that has to do with your own connection to other people, especially to young people and the students. . . . I look out to my students, and I think, what am I going to learn from you today? Professor Lunsford**

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much about yourself, but about the students, and what they know, and what they are doing. For me, every class is different because it is full of students who have different abilities and levels of interests and passions. As I connect with them and try to help further their interests and their goals, [and] help them come to fruition in what they want to write and read about, it keeps changing all the time and, hence, keeps my interest.

“I am also a scholar of rhetoric and teach everything from the history of rhetoric to a sophomore seminar on the graphic novel. So, I have a huge range of things that I teach, and go every other year or every other two or three years with a repertoire of classes.” Mentioning her book _Everything is an Argument_, she continued: “I believe everything can be looked at from a rhetorical point of view. That is part of the way that I keep changing what it is that I do in order to keep myself engaged.

“My discipline also changes. It is almost unrecognizable from the time I was an undergraduate. The only woman author I read was Emily Dickinson. In graduate school, I did read a few more women, but I never had a woman professor in my entire college career. The whole face of the profession has changed. In English Studies, every time I turn around, there is a whole new body of work to be discovered. . . . My discipline changes, my students change, and my subjects change.

“What doesn’t change is my commitment to being in the classroom. . . . One of the things I say to myself before every
class starts, [is what] the educational philosopher Maxine Green wrote in one of her books. ‘When you stand up before every class, look out to those faces there and remember that at least one person in that room is infinitely your superior in both heart and head.’ In forty odd years of teaching, that rings true for me every year. I look out to my students, and I think, what am I going to learn from you today?”

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Brad Osgood, Senior Associate Dean for Student Affairs in the School of Engineering and Professor of Electrical Engineering

How do you keep it fresh? “I think it takes three times to teach a course before you feel you have control over it. The first time you teach a course, you are trying to figure out what you want to say. The second time, you figure out what not to say. The third time, you hope to have it under control. Then after that, what happens? I want to make two points, a lofty one and a more down-to-earth point. There is a performance aspect to teaching. The live presentation in front of the class offers a certain amount of stimulation. Think about an actor in a long-running play who has to say the same lines every night with conviction with a different crowd. We have it much better than that. For us, the audience stays the same, but the material changes. You can develop quite an intimate relationship with your class over a period of time. Each day, you are saying something new to the same crowd.

“Every time, when I teach a course, I sit down and write down my lecture notes in long hand and in complete sentences. I don’t use my lecture notes from the previous years. I look at my notes of the previous year [only] as a way of writing my new lecture notes. My [new] lecture notes might look like my old lecture notes, but I need that rehearsal. I have learned from bitter experience, if I don’t do that, I will not be sharp, I will not be fresh, and I will not give a good performance.”

How has the experience with your students changed your teaching? “When I think about my experience with students, and how it has changed my teaching, I usually think of specific instances. When I try out something new in my class, a new problem, a new example, etc., there are times when I am surprised by my students’ reactions to it. When they don’t understand it the way I thought they would, I usually . . . brought it back into class as an example [and talked it through with them]. It becomes a very powerful instrument for student learning.”

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“How do you stay in touch with students? “I don’t think there is so much of a problem. I want to make another analogy—medicine. People get sick in pretty much the same way. . . . If we didn’t get sick in the same way, medicine would be impossible. . . . I think students don’t know things in pretty much the same way. They get confused in pretty much the same way. If students did not present to us their ‘non-knowledge’ in pretty much the same way, education would be impossible. The teacher asks, where does it hurt, the good teacher should know where it hurts, because the good teacher has seen those symptoms before, and the good teacher will act accordingly.”

What resources do you seek out? “I have introduced new things rather than new ways of teaching in my courses. I am making a distinction between new ideas of the curriculum and new ways of teaching. I tend to think of new curriculum as new ways to do things. For example, if you bring in new computational tools or new demonstrations into your class, you’d better think very carefully about how you are going to teach it and present it, because if you don’t do that, you are headed for a bad performance.”

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John Rickford, Professor of Linguistics and, by courtesy, of Education

“I have two courses that I have been teaching for a while, one was a graduate level course on sociolinguistic field methods and another was a course on African American Vernacular English. The main challenge and joy in terms of keeping things fresh has been getting a hold of new technology, mastering new technical things, and secondly, staying in close contact with students. Those two are very closely related. For a couple of quarters, I have a session with a student every week who is technically a lot more proficient than me in the newest technologies. This person answers all the little questions I have but am afraid to ask.

“Part of learning is also learning a certain measure of humility. Because in every course experience, we have the sense that ‘I’ve done this before, I am the professor, I have been in this game for a long time.’ If you suppress that long enough to really look around and listen and see, you realize that people are in fact doing different things, and that there are different kinds of materials out there than what you have. To give you an example from my field methods course, for many years, I have been using these big, bulky,
but rather expensive stereo machines for recording that had the advantage of making stereo recordings on two tracks. In my classes, I would push this kind of machinery instead of cassette recorders. This year, one of my undergraduates used a little Sony digital recorder. I pooh-poohed it at first, but then he came back with a recording that was fantastic and cost a fraction of the other recorders. Then I realized this is something I had to change.

“Another source of renewal was working with TAs on a course I have taught a long time—a course I have done the most work for. When I first started teaching at Stanford, I benefited from the book *Improving Teaching in Higher Education* (London, 1976). It has wonderful things about setting up objectives, lectures, small group discussions, etc. I had worked on all my course objectives. . . . I was carefully prepared. I also have done a lot of things the first time I taught it. My wife, who is also a scholar and academic, and sometimes a colleague, would come to my classes. After every class, we would talk about the good points and bad points.

“I thought I had it down pretty much pat. Then I started learning from the TAs. In each course that I have TAs, I usually invite them to teach one lecture. One of them did a lecture looking at attitudes toward African American English as represented through the media (e.g., the language of the crows in *Dumbo* or the hyenas in *Lion King*, etc.). It was amazing to me, the new materials, the fresh perspectives she was able to bring into a subject that I thought that I had prerogative to speak on from years of research. . . . The kids related to [her new examples] immediately in a way that my older examples did not have the same punch. I am learning constantly from the students in my classes and the students who TA about new resources to use. For me, the biggest thing that I have been learning this year is how to get control over new resources. . . . Staying in touch by relating to students and learning the new technology has been the key to keeping my teaching fresh.”

Staying in touch with students and learning new technology has been the key to keeping my teaching fresh. Professor Rickford

What Has Worked for the Panelists

• Attend or organize teaching lunches or retreats with your colleagues to exchange syllabi and teaching ideas.
• Take advantage of curriculum or teaching grants.
• Take notes about the course and student evaluations right after the course as a way to generate ideas for change. Then read your notes again before you redesign or reteach the course.
• Commit to one pedagogical change a year, e.g., use i-Tunes, break up lecture into discussion, etc.
• Look at your notes from previous courses, but then rewrite your lecture with a fresh eye.
• When you introduce a new example, model, case, etc., in your course, think carefully how you will teach it.
• Expect to learn from your students. E.g., let them be the expert on new technology in your course.
• Meet your students outside of the classroom, take them to lunch, or offer a free-for-all lunch.
• Let TAs play an active role in your course. They are an invaluable resource for materials, ideas, and the latest technology. They will also appreciate your sharing with them some ownership of...