Teaching Tips

*More Highlights from the State Assessment Conference: Some Practical Classroom Applications*

The keynote speaker for the conference, Dylan Williams, was engaging and shared thought provoking and interesting statistics and ideas. As a research director for Educational Testing Service, he possesses substantial statistical information about student success and student learning. Some of what he shared was quite surprising. For instance, he shared statistics that show that students perform more successfully when they are only given comments on their work and no marks. He also talked about the importance of teachers focusing on the classroom context; while general or theoretical principles for good teaching are helpful, context, he said, always “trumps” general principles. He said that as teachers we should focus on “moments of contingency” whereby we are constantly monitoring student learning and changing our teaching to promote or assure that students are succeeding. When we do this, we are “engineering learning environments”.

He gave a few practical suggestions I hope to implement beginning this quarter to promote student learning. One suggestion he had to prod students to go more deeply into material is allowing, “wait time” after a student has contributed in class instead of jumping in right away to comment. He also suggested a “no hands up” policy by which the instructor calls on students to contribute (randomly) rather than letting them volunteer. He recommended leading class discussions in which comments go around the class (the “basketball” discussion method) instead of between students and instructor (the “table tennis” method of discussion). Finally, he recommended taking regular class polls to gather information about where students are at on some issue under discussion or some concept the class is learning. Doing these polls gives the instructor a sense of where to go with the next step.

Williams’ remarks generally recommend making students more responsible for their own learning and also giving them the skills and instructions to help them be successful. To that end, I am going to develop study questions on my class readings that will be homework for students to complete before the class at which we will discuss that reading. These assignments will enable me to call on students to share what they wrote in response to the questions. I hope these notes have given you ideas for how to apply Dylan's research to your own classes. (Sandy Johanson, Philosophy)