Addressing Gender in College Courses (Even Yours)
Marcus Weaver-Hightower, Educational Foundations and Research

Like addressing any diversity, addressing gender in classes can be daunting. For some instructors, gender may not seem relevant to their courses, or they may not feel knowledgeable enough to discuss it. Men sometimes see gender as a “women’s issue,” not something they have, too, and they leave it for female faculty to discuss. Some may avoid relevant gender and sexuality issues for fear of having to handle resistance or inappropriate responses. What’s an instructor to do? In this essay I have some advice—based on nearly two decades of teaching and research—for how to plan for and openly address gender in college courses, starting with appraising one’s teaching for common practices that may inadvertently reinforce gender inequality.

First, though, it's helpful to explain what I mean by “gender.” Though the two are often confused, someone's gender and their sex are different. Sex comprises what a person is born with—genitalia, hormones, and so on. Gender is where culture takes over from biology—how masculine or feminine one is according to prevailing social norms. Remembering this distinction helps us see that, even in a classroom of all males or all females, several genders are likely present. The best teaching accounts for and includes multiple genders rather than just suiting some mythical, stereotypical gendered learning style. After all, when it comes to learning, not all men are from Mars nor all women from Venus.

Addressing Inequalities

Addressing gender in a course requires considering both planning and instruction. In planning a class, ask yourself:

• Do the curriculum materials represent various genders? Are all the novelists in a 19th century literature course males? Are all the pictures in the nursing textbook of women? Are there discussions of the gender inequalities students might encounter as future professionals in the field?

• Are classroom activities geared to gendered ways of working? Is individual work or competition used exclusively, privileging a typically “masculine” way of learning? Is group work most common, privileging the better cooperative skills of “feminine” students?

• Can out-of-class assignments be done during times that don’t conflict with family care or that don’t require being out at night alone for library work or extra meetings? Both of these typically impact female students more.
Student Resistance and Instructor Fears

In giving advice to directly address gender inequality, I'm aware readers might have a moment of panic just thinking about raising the subject. What if students resist or get angry? What if they ask questions outside the instructor's expertise? It's inevitable: some students will resist any notion of inequalities. I myself have been surprised by students in my education classes who refuse to discuss sexuality, for instance, except to say that their religion accepts only heterosexual monogamy and condemns homosexuality. Getting such students to thoughtfully consider the impact of homophobia or heterosexism on teachers and students can be difficult.

To be fair, some students will resist discussing anything, but gender, especially, can be a deeply personal, emotional subject. Students' gender convictions can come from religious beliefs, political beliefs, family loyalties, personal experience, fear of change, resentment over threatened privileges, perceptions that gender was solved in the 1970s, and more. Thus, for some students, gender might not seem like a source of inequality so much as “just the way things are or should be.” At the same time, it’s important to remember that, for every student oblivious or hostile to the idea of gender inequality, there is likely another student who feels liberated to openly discuss it. And resistance alone is no reason to avoid relevant subjects. Should one avoid talking about the role of socialism in political science or skip the sex organs in an anatomy class because these make some students uncomfortable?

Part of learning to handle resistance comes from facing one's own fears and blind spots as an instructor. The emotions that make discussing gender inequality fearsome are just the same as for any other topic—like fear of conflict, wanting to be liked, avoiding situations where one's expertise is challenged. Yet one doesn't have to be an expert in every subject that might come up in class. One also doesn't have to be pure and virtuous when it comes to gender in order to address it. I let my own children play with stereotypical toys at home (military men for my son and Minnie Mouse for my daughter), but I stress to them and to my students that there's a blurry line between gender preferences and gender restrictions. Going along with some gender stereotypes doesn't mean I can't challenge others.

Even if an instructor followed all of my advice, he or she could still expect some tense, challenging conversations. Even after years of teaching about gender, I still find some topics difficult to address and some classes more emotionally charged than others. One must come to peace with the difficulty, though. Learning isn't always comfortable, and sometimes to facilitate transformations in students, teachers and students alike have to leave their comfort zones. For the instructor's part, that requires that we really listen to students, regard all opinions as genuinely held, and seek to understand the sources and the good sense of what students believe, even if it offends our own sensibilities. Though it's hard, we have to resist the impulse to ensure consensus. And we must share our missteps, foibles, and challenges so that students know it's OK for them to struggle, too. If we can do those things—whether discussing gender or any other important issue—we can help students have more equitable experiences in college and beyond.
Proposals for Summer Instructional Development Project Clusters are due by 12 noon, February 3, 2014. For full details and proposal guidelines visit the OID webpage at oid.UND.edu.
CLASS VISITS

Did you know you can bring the Writing Center into your class? The Writing Center coordinator and consultants offer both introductory visits and in-class workshops.

A class visit to introduce students to the Writing Center takes just 10-15 minutes. A Writing Center consultant will come to the class, talk to students about Writing Center sessions, and answer their questions. These visits are a great way to encourage your students to use the Writing Center.

The second kind of visit is a mini-workshop, tailored to a particular writing assignment and the instructor’s goals. Planning for the workshop begins with a conversation, either face to face or on the phone, between the instructor and the University Writing Program Coordinator. Recently, some of the workshops developed for specific classes have focused on using effective transitions, fair use and APA style, and writing research article introductions.

If you are interested in a class visit or workshop, call 701.777.6381 or complete an online request form at writingcenter.UND.edu and we will call you.

Introducing Acting University Writing Program Coordinator Kim Stewart

A native Californian, I came to the University of North Dakota to pursue a bachelor’s degree and stayed to complete my master’s degree in English in 2010. During graduate school, I taught composition courses as a GTA and worked in the Writing Center as a writing consultant. I wrote a creative thesis, and my program of study included courses in composition studies, fiction, poetry, and literature.

After graduation, I continued working for two semesters in the Writing Center as a professional writing consultant before leaving the workforce to be an at-home mom to my two sons. This is my second year as a Lecturer in the English Department, where I teach introductory courses in composition and creative writing. Last summer I was accepted into the University of California Berkeley’s Summer Creative Writing Program and spent two months studying writing at the Berkeley campus.

I am incredibly excited to have the opportunity to work in the Writing Center this semester as the Acting University Writing Program Coordinator. For the first few weeks of the semester I will be shadowing Coordinator Kathleen Vacek and learning everything I can to make the transition to my new role as smooth as possible. While Kathleen is on leave, I will be the point of contact for Writing Center class visits as well as questions about the Writing Center in general.

The Writing Center provides an invaluable service to faculty, staff and students at UND, and it is also a very rewarding place to work. One of my favorite parts of this position is the chance to meet with writers in a person-to-person environment, helping writers with their individual writing needs. This format allows writers to see improvement on the projects and skills of immediate concern, and even one visit can help writers feel more confident as they continue work on future projects.

Kim Stewart will serve as Acting Coordinator of the University Writing Program during spring 2014.
Capstones or senior-level “culminating experiences” are usually designed to help students integrate and synthesize learning they’ve gained across a major or the entire curriculum. Many of those capstones feature writing assignments as a convenient means of asking students to both practice and demonstrate high-level intellectual skills they’ll need upon graduation: the ability to reflect, conceptualize, plan, research, problem-solve, integrate, and evaluate. In a new book, Writing in the Senior Capstone: Theory and Practice, Lea Masiello and Tracy Skipper examine writing assignments used in capstone from two key perspectives.

First, the book draws on the literature to examine what’s known about the ways that writing can help students achieve a number of desired outcomes including improved “critical thinking, mastery of disciplinary content, and oral and written communication.” They also describe evidence that writing assignments can promote development of other traits and skills likely to be valuable once students leave college, including collaboration, independence, and innovation.

Second, the book provides ideas for “maximizing the usefulness of writing in the capstone.” It’s easy to add a writing assignment to a course, but it can be considerably more difficult to identify strategies for ensuring that the assignment fulfills its intended purpose. Bringing extensive experience with both capstone courses and writing across the curriculum, Masiello and Skipper draw on their years of experience combined with a rich and deep knowledge of the literature to offer “detailed strategies” and “practical suggestions” for using writing more effectively within the capstone. In the second half of the book, they provide ideas for enhancing the usefulness of various kinds of assignments ranging from the informal and unrevised through portfolios and research projects.

In this Faculty Study Seminar, facilitated by Joan Hawthorne, participants will meet four times (at a time mutually agreed upon) to discuss the book. Books will be provided by OID.

Since the book is short and unintimidating (Masiello and Skipper are very readable writers), group members will also have an opportunity to extend the discussion beyond the text itself in response to topics and issues of shared interest.

If you are interested in participating, contact Joan Hawthorne at joan.hawthorne@UND.edu or 701.777.4684.

Funding Available in Support of Teaching Excellence

A vibrant network of university scholars share their teaching-related innovations and research at regional, national, and international conferences and workshops every year. UND faculty wanting to attend these conferences can apply to the Faculty Instructional Development Committee (FIDC) for up to $1000 per continental trip and $1500 for intercontinental travel. There are multiple options when considering a teaching-related conference. Some focus on teaching within a discipline or a specific pedagogical approach, others on a learning outcome or method of delivery.

In addition to funding travel for professional development in teaching, FIDC also supports travel to make Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research presentations. A number of UND scholars conduct SoTL research, seeking to better understand teaching and learning in the college classroom. Information on current teaching and SoTL conference opportunities is available at oid.UND.edu

In the last fiscal year, the FIDC received 34 teaching-related proposals (including instructional materials as well as travel grants), 24 of which were funded for a total of $25,058.25. Faculty who received funding represent 16 departments and programs in 7 colleges. To submit a proposal, you will find the necessary information on the OID website. The next deadline is February 3 at noon.
FACULTY STUDY SEMINAR

Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty (Harvard University Press, 2013) by James M. Lang

When we discover students cheating in our classrooms, the initial impulse is often to either internalize the blame (“If I had only done something differently”) or attribute the blame to the students’ moral or motivational deficiencies. In the new book, Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty, author James Lang proposes that cheating is the result of both teaching methods and student choices, and he provides clear and specific suggestions for how instructors can essentially eliminate cheating before it starts.

Lang’s book is divided into three sections. The first section provides a history of student cheating in higher education and proposes that cheating is not a new phenomenon; its history is at least as long as the history of the American university system itself. Lang briefly describes who is cheating, but he quickly shifts his focus to try to answer the question of why students cheat in the first place. Lang’s case studies provide concrete examples of the type of classroom environments and teaching methods that, according to Lang, unintentionally foster an environment that encourages student cheating.

The remaining sections provide practical applications of his findings, which help instructors become better teachers. Lang shows teachers that by identifying the types of cheating they encounter in their classes and reevaluating their teaching methods, teachers can ultimately develop a culture of academic honesty extending beyond individual classrooms to the larger university.

In this Faculty Study Seminar, facilitated by Kimberly Stewart, participants will read and discuss Lang’s book, while also sharing their own experiences and interpretations of the text and its suggestions. The book is very clearly and accessibly written while examining controversial issues. As a result, group members will have an opportunity to discuss the applicability of his findings in the context or their own classroom and teaching experiences.

Participants meet four times during the semester at a time that is mutually agreed upon, prepared to read and discuss the book. Books will be provided by the Office of Instructional Development.

If you are interested in participating, contact Kimberly Stewart at kimberly.stewart@UND.edu or 701.777.6381.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Spring 2014
GET MIDTERM FEEDBACK FROM YOUR STUDENTS

Arrangements for SGIDs (small group instructional diagnosis, a process for soliciting student feedback at midterm) can be made now. Anyone teaching a class at UND may request an SGID. This includes faculty, part-time instructors, and GTAs.

SGIDs are conducted by trained faculty who work as facilitators for the process in their colleagues’ classrooms. A facilitator will collect information from your students, summarize it in a report for you, and provide you with high-quality student input regarding their learning.

You’ll have this information at mid-semester, rather than waiting until semester’s end when course evaluations are completed. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the process can motivate students to think more carefully and deeply, so SGID feedback is often more thorough than course evaluations, providing you with a clear understanding of student perceptions.

SGIDs are intended to be formative (i.e., for your own benefit as a teacher) rather than summative (they are not to be used as an evaluation of teaching, for example in promotion and tenure files).

To schedule an SGID, please contact Jana Diemert at 701.777.4998 or jana.diemert@UND.edu
As faculty we strive each semester to improve our teaching. Maryellen Weimar, a noted researcher on effectiveness in the college classroom, would argue that teaching should not be our primary focus—student learning should be.

While the two seem obviously linked, for the most part we function on the assumption that if there is teaching, there is learning. Weimar asks that we test that premise and design our courses in a way that ensures the kind of learning we want for our students really is occurring. Ultimately she reminds us that our courses should be designed to facilitate more and better learning for our students, and that research has established methods that work in accomplishing that goal.

This is a thoroughly updated edition of a classic, well respected text. Weimar offers a comprehensive introduction to learner-centered teaching, including a review of current practice in a variety of disciplines. There is also a good overview of research in support of learner-centered practice and in-depth discussion of the impact of student developmental issues on the effectiveness of this approach.

The book is practical as well, with concrete examples, handouts, and sample assignments dealing with very real concerns such as overcoming student resistance, developing self-motivated learners, and effective evaluation and assessment of learning.

In the words of one reviewer, “If you're discouraged by the task of teaching poorly prepared passive learners who seem to resist deep learning and prefer surface approaches, you will gain much from this book.”

Participants meet four times during the semester at a time that is mutually agreed upon, prepared to read and discuss the book. Books will be provided by the Office of Instructional Development.

If you are interested in joining this Faculty Study Seminar, contact Anne Kelsch at anne.kelsch@UND.edu or 701.777.4233.
JOIN A FACULTY WRITING GROUP

If you’d like to take part in a faculty writing group this spring, or if you’d like to learn more about the groups, contact Kathleen Vacek at 701.777.6381 or kathleen.vacek@UND.edu.

UPCOMING DEADLINES

Feb 3  SIDP Cluster deadline (noon)
Feb 3  FIDC grants deadline (noon)

UPCOMING DEADLINES

Feb 3  Register for Feb. 5 On Teaching seminar
Feb 28  Register for Mar. 4 On Teaching seminar