My Philosophy of Teaching

I have spent the last 20 years assessing alternative technologies for delivering course content. I was among the first in the country to teach a course entirely online. I was the first to experiment with hybrid formats. I was the first to pilot online and virtual labs. I was the first to pioneer electronic texts, the first to integrate multiple course content (soc 364 and 497), the first (after 25 years) to reactivate our advanced quantitative course (soc 680), the first to create and offer a career guidance course in lieu of the work-based capstone course (soc 496) and the first to experimentally evaluate the adequacy of each of these.

I have also explored alternative scheduling. I piloted the first TTh 6:30 am class, the first Saturday class, the first Sunday class and successfully lobbied for the new MW-TTH and FR-SA format. Moreover, I have also experimented with alternative physical structures for the classroom. I designed and financed the construction of the first ever combined CATI Lab / Classroom. As well, I pioneered use of the first Sympodium, the first push-pull computer projector technology, the first wireless classroom routers, the first class based LAN structure and about to introduce the first wireless mobile computer-aided telephone interviewing system.

Finally, I have experimented with student interaction in the classroom. I pioneered the first "in class" virtual discussion groups, the first simulation class format, the first virtual polling technique, the first group testing format, the first policy based field survey format, the first in class CATI / survey research format, the first peer group tutoring techniques and the first satisfaction by examination format.

Sadly, it has taken all of this time and experimentation to finally come to an understanding of the essential elements that produce successful pedagogy here at CSUN. Despite or because of this experimentation, however, I am happy to say that I now take these four elements, of a successful class, to be self-evident. To achieve success in the classroom, one must: 1) simplify and integrate concepts; 2) maximize alternative exposure to the material; 3) minimize the role of the instructor; 4) facilitate and incorporate the role of peers.

Too often faculty use specialized language and concepts to rationalize the difficulty of their discipline. I find, rather, that simplifying concepts and integrating them into the metaphors of a student's everyday life, greatly increases retention. For example, I don't teach moment generating functions or derive the central limit theorem in my statistics course. Rather, I ask them to visualize and work with the image of Colossus, at Magic Mountain, to understand the normal curve.

As well, faculty tend to restrict their class to lectures, textbooks and testing. I have found that students who learn most efficiency and do better in retaining information are those that are exposed to or seek out multiple sources of information to resolve questions. Technology and the Web have introduced a multitude of alternatives: from multi-media to full search journals to virtual textbooks to other online courses, to Census data on demand. For example utilizing the World Wide Lecture Hall to cause students to confirm my explanation of a concept, with that of others around the country teaching the same topic, reinforces my explanation or creates enough of a distinction that students seek resolution.

Moreover, collectively getting students involved in course-based projects that are relevant to them, improves understanding and retention of material. For example, the class conducts a student survey on alternative class scheduling and sees the result cause changes in university policy and implementation. It is observing connections between their work and policy change that enable their long term memory of key concepts. This is more than merely learning by doing. It is seeing real world results from the fruits of their labor.

However, because of this information rich environment, faculty must drop their role of Sage and knowledge expert. Information diffuses too fast and too easily for faculty to compete with that process. Students recognize the limitation. As a result, I have transformed into the role of a resource guide, interpreting, synthesizing and summarizing the process, as much as the content. It is no longer the case that students struggle with finding information on a topic, but rather must be able to cull it properly. My role is to facilitate that process not be the source.

Finally, in a classroom, whether face-to-face or virtual, in real time or any-time, faculty must recognize the role of peers. A discussion group or collaboration in general, will only work if the student has a vested interest in the process. Ego involvement comes from self-disclosure. Self-disclosure facilitates trust. Therefore, early in class, I ask each student to disclose something they have not told to others before and then assign a "sociometric" partner, often first mask as a "tutor", eventually dicing and slicing these dyads until the process evolves into a tight-knit cohesive group in which "no student is left behind". This sense of community, fostered by trust and commitment to one's peers, increases responsibility and accountability for the material. This, I am told, is what students remember the most from my classes.

Of course, all of these elements portend a change in the role of the student from a passive to active learner. Part of our charge must be to help in that transformation. Two thousand years of the lecture-textbook-test format does not easily give way to the new on-demand, life-long, collaborative learning format. However, adopting these elements has made all the difference in my life in the classroom. Not only has there been tangible indicators (e.g. my student evaluations have gone from the low 4.0's to nearly 5.0 on a 1-5 rating scale and student grades

have gone from an average 2.0 to nearly 2.5), but the very nature of the learning experience has transformed. Student-Student and Student-Professor relationships have become life-long commitments to communication and learning.

Moreover, and most important to me, those who come into class with passive personalities, low self-esteem, sorted backgrounds, and serious learning disabilities, leave with a sense of having been empowered by experiencing these elements. I wish I would have kept a file of all the gang members, adults abused as children, and first generation goal less students, who are now practicing doctors, lawyers, professors, social workers and others in the helping professions. Witnessing those transformations has both inspired me and created the motivation to return the favor.

Finally, I do not mean any of these statements to be a pejorative review of other formats or practices. Rather I offer these thoughts as an explanation for why I have allowed my name to be placed in nomination for the CSUN Distinguished Teaching Award for 2012. Accordingly, I do so not for the award, nor for the status or prestige (the money will be donated in any event), but in the hope of offering career capstone comments serving to facilitate younger faculty in circumnavigating the hurdles with which I have had to contend during my 40 years of tenure at CSUN. Thank you for your patience in hearing me out.

J. Schutte - February 2012