

# CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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## Director's column

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response gives us no idea why.

The second reason we don't know what to make of the response is that it consistently deviates from responses to more specific items (e.g., the instructor "...responded constructively and thoughtfully to questions and comments" "...motivated me to learn" "...assigned grades fairly"), and consequently we cannot assume that this question provides an accurate summary of views expressed elsewhere on the evaluation. Clearly, this question captures something the others do not. But what?

Studies on these matters, while far from conclusive, suggest that student responses to non-criteria-specific evaluation questions are correlated with a number of factors. Among the most commonly cited are the instructor's race, gender or attractiveness, the level of the course, class size, the number of rows in the classroom (!), students' first impressions of the instructor, and the nature of the personal student-faculty relationship – factors that, to put it mildly, hardly reveal an uncanny student ability to judge good teaching.

So student responses to the global question are at best indeterminate and at worst irrelevant to pedagogy. What this means is that the question offers faculty members no formative feedback (its primary purpose). A faculty member who does not know why he or she ranks a 4.3 learns nothing from that fact. That the other questions may provide some of the "why" merely confirms that they do have value, value to which the global question adds nothing (or at least nothing of a pedagogically useful nature).

Now, along with instructors, administrators use student evaluations to assess teaching effectiveness. And while there is widespread agreement that the global question should not be given disproportionate weight in this process (and that student evaluations as a whole should never be the sole determinant of an instructor's abilities), administrators often make the claim that a low score is a helpful red flag, one that prompts a

deeper look into a teaching file.

This claim has a certain intuitive appeal, but if we consider its implication – that, absent a red flag, an instructor's portfolio will receive lesser scrutiny – that appeal quickly evaporates.

To see why, consider what may be overlooked with a "lesser scrutiny." First, there's the information contained in the rest of the evaluation form. When an instructor's global score does not send up a red flag, will administrators ever find out if these instructors are, say, holding their office hours or returning materials in a timely manner?

And what of matters requiring expertise – of the subject matter, of university standards, of pedagogical principles – that students do not possess? Does lesser scrutiny involve checking to make sure an instructor's reading lists are appropriate or that students are learning what's on that list? Are the instructor's syllabi checked for conformity with university standards? Are the assignments and methods of assessment reviewed to ensure that they're in line with course objectives? If I am to be assessed, I would hope that these issues, and not simply the perceptions of students, will be taken into account.

Perhaps administrators can honestly claim they do not overlook such items, but if that's truly the case, then the red flag argument collapses altogether; for if these reliable indicators of a professor's pedagogical skills are being scrutinized anyway, aren't they the appropriate red flag?

The faculty handbook currently requires that all Georgia State colleges include the global question on their student evaluation forms. At its upcoming meeting on Oct. 23, the University Senate will vote on a proposal to drop that requirement, thereby allowing faculty members in each college to discuss the issue and decide for themselves what to do. As a critic of the global question, I would welcome such reflection. I trust its supporters would as well.



## The Faculty Luncheon Seminar Series

is a forum for sharing pedagogical insights, experiences, concerns and questions. These seminars are not workshops – no formal presentations are made. The intent is simply to promote an intellectually vibrant conversation in a relaxed, informal setting.

Seminars are held from 12:15-1:30.

A catered lunch is provided by the Center for Teaching and Learning. Seats are limited and must be reserved in advance. To R.S.V.P. call 404/413-2541 or e-mail us at CTL@langate.gsu.edu.

This semester's schedule is as follows:

**Wed. 10/22:** Technology

**Thu. 11/06:** Sexual orientation in the classroom

**Wed. 11/19:** Grading

**Tue. 12/02:** The class from heaven

## INSIDE

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## Thoughts from the Director

Let me begin by answering my title question: no, they shouldn't. Students should certainly fill out evaluations, but those forms should not include an item such as this one.

So why not? What's wrong with asking students to provide a "global" rating of their instructors? The answer is revealed in part simply by asking what students are saying with their response.

The most accurate answer is – we don't know. And therein lies the problem – or at least one of them.

We don't know for two reasons: first, the question, by its very nature, does not ask students to address any specific criteria of teaching effectiveness (or, for that matter, any criteria at all). As a result, we may know if a professor is considered effective, but the

## Powerpoint: The New Karaoke?

By Harry Dangel, Emeritus Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and Special Education

Hello, my name is Harry, and I'm a PowerPoint addict. I've even used PowerPoint to give a presentation called "Death by PowerPoint." There's just something about it that inspires confidence – kind of like the karaoke machine that keeps the amateur singer on cue, never mind that the finer points of vocal performance are missing.

Yes, PowerPoint is a powerful visual aid, but like all visual aids, it can be put to both good and bad use. When it falls into amateur hands, the presenter might read the entire PowerPoint presentation or fill each slide with more information than the audience can take in. (Google "Don McMillan" on YouTube for a vivid look at the more outrageous no-nos.)

But even in good hands, using PowerPoint responsibly goes well beyond the "dos and don'ts." Putting PowerPoint to effective use involves thinking about it on a more general level.

For instance, one thing to ask is – why do you need it? I remember the day in the early '90s when I first demonstrated the use of PowerPoint. After I finished, a respected colleague observed that not only could I have used transparencies and an overhead projector – and more easily advanced or returned to relevant slides – but by doing so I could have written on the transparencies to provide clearer explanations. He was right.

Then there's the issue of how PowerPoint might affect the content of what you teach. Shortly after the aforementioned demonstration, I prepared PowerPoint presentations for each session of a course I had been teaching for several years. I thought that if I used a structured set of PowerPoint slides, I would be sure to cover all the material. My student course evaluations plummeted. In the process of focusing on "coverage," I had neglected to engage the students in learning. When I met with my chair for my annual evaluation,

"Using PowerPoint responsibly goes well beyond the 'dos and don'ts.'"

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## Should students "Rate the Overall Effectiveness of This Instructor"?

Peter Lindsay, Associate Professor of Political Science and Philosophy

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## What is a Teaching Consultation?

Teaching consultations are shaped by the goals of the faculty member. They may involve:

- a brief discussion, e-mail exchange or phone conversation about a particular situation in your class
- an in-depth conversation about ways to get more out of your teaching
- a class observation with feedback
- a review of your teaching evaluations
- a videotaping of your class

Call or e-mail Peter Lindsay at 404/413-2542 or [polpl@langate.gsu.edu](mailto:polpl@langate.gsu.edu)



## Are you doing research on teaching?

If so, would you like

- advice on which journals might be most appropriate for your work?
- feedback on your manuscript?

Call or e-mail Harry Dangel at the CTL – 404/413-2540 or [spehld@langate.gsu.edu](mailto:spehld@langate.gsu.edu)

## Powerpoint: Use As Only Directed

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he asked what had happened. When I told him, he said, “I don’t think you should do that again.” I didn’t.

**Some guidance.** I’ve learned to view PowerPoint (and any technology) from the standpoint of its potential to promote student learning. To do this, I begin with some basic questions.

**What do I want students to be able to do?** Before a lesson, I analyze the content to consider what type of learning is involved and which instructional strategies I should use. Knowing I have a limited amount of class time, I’m not going to have the students do what they can do outside of class (reading course material with learning at the remembering and understanding levels, i.e., the lower levels of learning). I want to spend class time emphasizing the higher levels of learning, which more likely require an instructor’s direction – applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating.

**How can I promote student learning?** Armed with what I want to do, I next ask which of my potential instructional tools provide what I’m looking for: student-faculty contact; cooperation among students; active learning; prompt feedback; increased time on task; high expectations for student learning; and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. (For those in the know, these are Chickering and Gamson’s [1987] classic Seven Principles.) Bottom line? PowerPoint, by its nature, doesn’t support any of these principles in an effective manner, unless the instructor designs the lesson (and PowerPoint) to provide opportunities for engagement, feedback, etc.

PowerPoint is designed to provide a linear presentation of information for students to remember and



understand. That’s its biggest strength and its greatest weakness.

At the lower levels of learning (remembering) a linear, step-by-step approach isn’t much of a problem. But for learning that involves application or analysis, the learning path typically becomes multi-dimensional. Here, PowerPoint will likely just get in the way.

### Some other suggestions:

- Limit PowerPoint use to emphasizing Big Ideas rather than conveying information, analyzing ideas or applying concepts. A handout to guide students in what they can read and master for themselves can often save instructional time.
- PowerPoint is effective in presenting problems, asking questions, and describing conditions. It can be used to survey students’ prior knowledge and opinions when beginning instruction.
- PowerPoint is useful for displaying visual material such as charts, graphs and diagrams and in animating them to show the effect of external factors or change over time.
- PowerPoint is often useful in showing the graphic organization of course content and how the current topics fit, e.g., concept maps.
- Consider adding hyperlinks to other slides within PowerPoint presentations. For example, links to previous slides or examples, which would provide the option of whether or not to use them.

## New Direction in Research

By Ron Henry, Provost



RON HENRY

Over the past 20 years a new subject of intellectual inquiry has emerged on campuses around the country: the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL, as it’s known to practitioners).

What makes this scholarship new is that it is conducted not just by scholars of education, but by scholars of physics, law, literature, accounting, sociology – in other words, it runs the gamut of academic fields. The objective of this research (as put forth by the Research Universities Consortium for the Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) is “the systematic examination of issues about student learning and the instructional conditions that promote the learning.”

SoTL research is subjected to blind review by peers, then disseminated to the professional community. The foundational ideal is that expanding knowledge of how people learn in a given field is integral to expanding the knowledge within that field.

The Center for Teaching and Learning, in an effort to encourage this research, has created an SoTL Fellows Program. The idea is to bring together seven to 10 professors from around the campus to share ideas, methodologies, problems and strategies. Ideally, these meetings will lead to interdisciplinary collaboration.

The 2008-9 group aptly illustrates the diversity of SoTL scholarship as well as the types of questions addressed and the sorts of approaches taken. Here are a few of this year’s projects:

**John Decker** (Art and Design) is gathering data on how assignments, group exercises and classroom technologies affect students’ perceptions regarding the relevance of introductory survey classes to their daily lives, academic careers and future employment hopes. For the purposes of his study, “relevance” denotes pedagogies that emphasize synthesis between intra-class concepts, inter-class concepts, and real-world practicalities. As a pedagogical method, relevance helps students see how the various ideas, theories and materials taught in class impact their academic and non-academic lives. Decker’s working hypothesis is that through relevance we can demonstrate to students that survey classes are not just “hoops” to jump through but valuable tools in their development as people.

**Rich Engstrom** (Political Science) is asking: Do student

“...how people learn in a given field is integral to expanding the knowledge within that field.”



internships create any measurable change in how they think about the field in which they are working? To find out, he’s examining the effect of participation in a political internship program on student attitudes. The examination involves a pre-test and post-test questionnaire, administered to Georgia State students participating in the Georgia Legislative Internship Program as well as to a control group of students taking a standard Junior/Senior-level research methods class. The questions will address student opinions and knowledge about government, their knowledge about political current events and their career intentions. By comparing the results from both groups, Engstrom hopes to determine whether or not the internship program influences students’ understanding of the political system.

**Milind Shrikhande** (Finance) is investigating the marginal impact of teaching styles on student performance over and above the impact of intrinsic student competence (as reflected in their GPAs). Using a large sample of common final exams in the core undergraduate finance course, Shrikhande is analyzing student performance on different categories of exam questions that reflect various levels of learning as well as overall student performance. Instructor teaching-styles are based on a survey completed by each instructor. Findings so far indicate that teaching styles and techniques matter, though they differ at varied levels of learning. Additionally, effective teaching styles and teaching techniques differ for quantitative majors and qualitative majors, and do matter above or below different GPA thresholds for different teaching styles and techniques.

**Carol Springer** (Accountancy) is studying the academic and motivational impact of ultra short (three minute) coaching videos – “Digital Tutors” – on students taking a required course in statistics. This study gathers GPA, age, SAT, hours completed, all MATH 1070 course marks, survey responses and data on future course grades to track the impact of Digital Tutors on current course achievement and graduation success. The study replicates work conducted in spring 2007 in Principles of Accounting II with an improved research design. In the previous study, there were no control sections and no ability to collect co-variables such as GPA, age and prior accounting achievement to parse out factors impacting the course outcomes other than the Digital Tutors.

To find out more about the SoTL Fellows Program, contact Peter Lindsay at 404/413-2542 or at [polpl@langate.gsu.edu](mailto:polpl@langate.gsu.edu).