Summaries of Innovative Teaching Award Winners’ Courses

Rick Mathews
General Physics I and II

Dr. Matthews redesigned an existing Physics course that was mostly lecture interspersed with oral questions and Peer Instruction ConcepTests, and created a course where nearly all content is delivered outside of class by video or textbook. An online lecture quiz prior to class assures students have studied the video and textbook and class time is for interactive engagement. What happened as a result of these changes?

- He was at first disappointed to find fewer office visits by my students. Then he noticed that the nature of office visits had changed radically. Before, most office visits began, “I read the chapter, I understand all the concepts and equations, but I cannot work any of the problems.” Now students visit his office with much more specific questions; they understand the big concepts.
- Students are more engaged in class than before. Evidence: the laptop/smart phone distraction problem is gone. He permits students to use their devices to take notes and look up information, but students rarely use either.
- Additionally, students enjoy class more, as indicated by student comments and evaluations.

Lisa Blee
History 365: Public History

The goal of Dr. Blee’s Public History course is to introduce students to unique research methodologies (oral histories, local archives), theoretical issues of interpretation (balancing the views of competing constituencies), and applied activities (collaboration, exhibit design and construction). In the 2014 redesign, she decided to collaborate with a single community partner, Project Re-entry, to create a cohesive course project that would take the form of an educational and interpretive public exhibit. Project Re-entry is a program that offers a life skills curriculum to prisoners and support services to participants after their release. She decided to partner with them to provide students with real-world experience with responsible community collaboration. She also wanted to explore a debate within the field: what is the relationship between public history and social change? Can or should public historians support social justice in their communities? Rather than design the project ahead of time for the students to complete, Dr. Blee decided to include the students in the collaborative project development process and to allow them ultimate ownership over the interpretation and design of the exhibit.

The students experienced the often fraught relationship between the academy and the public. They had to contend with the realities of collaborative work across bureaucratic, institutional, and socio-economic lines. Students also developed a sense of responsibility to the people with whom they worked, the organization with whom they partnered, and
the larger public audience before whom they would present their exhibit. They not only learned about the major issues in public history work and about the topic of mass incarceration; they had a transformative experiential learning opportunity. When an audience member asked the students how they had been changed by their involvement in the project, they explained to the crowd that they now saw former offenders as regular people who had been unjustly defined and limited by their pasts, and that they had learned to communicate with people from different backgrounds with whom they initially thought they had nothing in common. The process built humility while it instilled confidence in their abilities to collaborate across barriers.

Ted Gellar-Goad
Beware the Ides, Beware the Hemlock: Roleplaying Crisis in Ancient Greece and Rome
This course was brand-new for Dr. Gellar-Goad, his first time teaching a first-year seminar. There are three primary innovations in this course:

[1] the use of Reacting to the Past, a methodology that uses elaborate role-immersion games set during historical crises to teach writing, speaking, and critical thinking about great moments in the history of ideas,
[2] the living-learning community design of the course, and

His course is not the first at Wake Forest to use Reacting to the Past, nor the first in the nation to use it exclusively, but it is the first to devote a whole course to Reacting to the Past scenarios set in the ancient world, and it is unusual also in the living-learning setup, and it is one of the first Wake Forest courses to use specifications grading. He conceived of this course as an immersive introduction to Greek and Roman civilization, college-level work, and public speaking. The way he used Reacting to the Past (RTTP)—supplementing it with additional activities to get students reading, thinking about and playing with Graeco-Roman culture and literature as well as history—fosters learning along all the dimensions of Bloom’s Taxonomy. RTPP is centered around formal, unscripted speeches and debate, “in character” as key historical figures or types; and so his students had to recall basic information about Athens and Rome, explain key concepts and events, apply their knowledge of Athenian and Roman values to new situations, analyze and evaluate texts and incidents in order to form opinions, make decisions, create arguments, persuasive appeals, and even new personas for their characters. He considers his innovations successful because of the deep learning, intellectual enthusiasm, and skill development he witnessed. By the end of the course, his students all are conversant in and enthusiastic about Graeco-Roman antiquity. There is also skill development in speaking, writing, and critical reading. He sees considerable improvement in students’ speaking skills from their first, heavily scaffolded and nervous speeches to their final speeches, done purely from memory and extemporaneously based on their now-considerable body of knowledge of antiquity,
along with remarkable clarity, fluency, pacing, and volume. In parallel to this, reading-response assignments show growth in ability to distill the key arguments and literary features of a complicated text (Plato’s Republic) and integrate it not only into their preexisting knowledge but also into their game and learning goals.

Elizabeth Clendinning  
Introduction to the Music of World Cultures

This course was completely redesigned by Dr. Clendinning in two ways: first, she partnered with the WFU Museum of Anthropology on a project in which students researched museum objects and used outside sources to develop a multimedia exhibit for the museum; and second, the students undertook extended musical study and performed Balinese music and dance in concert with guest artists, the WFU gamelan ensemble, and the WFU concert choir. Though brief music-making is common in world music courses, an extended study/performance opportunity allows the primarily non-musician students to gain artistic cultural competency through experiential, public engagement. The performance itself is listed as an objective on the syllabus and it also represents an important theoretical concept in ethnomusicology, bimusicality—that representing another culture through embodied performance teaches music theoretical, performative, listening, and cultural sensitivity skills in ways that cannot be grasped otherwise. By coupling performance with reflections and test-based assessment, students were encouraged to link theory and experience. More broadly, within the pedagogical goals of the university, these assignments fit both within the ideals of Pro Humanitate and within the launch of the new Wake Forest University Global Campus Community Initiatives. Though not strictly service learning, both projects asked students to contribute in thoughtful ways to the local artistic communities beyond the scope of the university—the museum project was visited by dozens of local school children in the spring, and the concert was attended by individuals from as far away as West Virginia. Through creating international experiences on campus, students worked together in groups to develop cultural competency to learn about areas of the world that none of them had ever experienced, using hands-on work with real musical instruments and repertoires to achieve this goal. Finally, though the popularity of an assignment is not necessarily a reliable barometer of its pedagogical successful, I view the end-of-course comments by the students about both projects (but the gamelan performance in particular) as an important measure of the impact of the assignment. Many students indicated that they would remember this event for years to come after graduation.
Dr. Erhardt started implementing the redesign in Fall 2013, and continued through Spring 2015. The major innovation was to transform the course into a second, project-based course with broad appeal to social science and natural science students. The goal is to move students from being consumers of statistics information to being producers of statistics information. Many students discover the connection between statistics and their chosen discipline only after they learn to model larger, more interesting datasets with multiple variables. He wanted to demonstrate to social and natural science majors that statistics courses could help them study their chosen discipline, and make them better psychologists, sociologists, economists, chemists, and so forth. To emphasize the project-oriented nature of the new course, he added a final project in lieu of a final exam, in which the student can select any dataset that interests them. This is where they can demonstrate that they have learned to produce statistics content. They fully analyze the data and write a full statistical report. Most students choose data from their major of field of interest – business, medicine, sports analytics, Greek life, etc. Allowing students to choose their own data reinforces the notion that statistics truly can be applied to any and all fields of study. Statistics is a tool to produce knowledge, and is thus a liberal art. The course emphasizes data analysis and computing much more than the “old” MTH 256 did. HW questions included: “What would your testimony be in court regarding the chances that hiring decisions produced the observed racial balance purely by chance?” and “Would you recommend that a hypothetical university adopt new admissions policies to support first generation students based on your analysis of graduation rates?” His major teaching goal was to convey to all students that statistics is a tool used to produce knowledge in fields of study that interest them, and that they too can be producers of statistical information. But statistics must also be communicated well. Being able to compute statistical quantities is of no value if you cannot describe what you’ve done, and make concrete suggestions. Dr. Erhardt wanted students to be able to explain their models and results, and pay particular attention to their writing and communication skills. Prior to Fall 2013, MTH 256 was an accelerated introductory course in statistics, with no pre-requisite, and his department offered two sections per year, but they now teach 6 sections of MTH 256 per year to over 200 students, and the number of declared statistics minors has moved from 0-1 per year to around 35 per year. About 15% of students who take MTH 256 then choose to declare a minor in statistics. This increase represents students “voting with their registration choices”, thus providing further evidence of student learning.