

## Editorial

### The First Year of the JPD

David Mathew & Andrea Raiker, Editors

The very first issue of the *JPD* was launched in July 2011 (in print and online) and was simultaneously handed out to delegates at the University of Bedfordshire's annual conference in the same month. The issue that you are reading now represents our first anniversary, and how quickly that year has flown by!

We are happy and pleased that the *JPD* has been successful. From the very beginning we found that we could attract submissions from all over the world, and we were able to combine excellent work from overseas with quality contributions from within the University. It did not take long for us to realise that we would be able to produce three issues per year, instead of the two issues that we had originally planned.

We would like to thank you for your support and for your submissions. Please keep sending us your work! We hope to improve and expand and we cannot do this without your ongoing support.

Please also consider applying for the Writing Retreat for 2013. See the final article in this issue for details.

## Editorial

### The First Year

Mark Atlay, Director of Teaching and Learning

The first year of life is often a challenge in the endless struggle for survival. There's the continuous need for food to aid growth, a requirement for play and stimulation to develop strength and skills, and so much to learn and put into practice from observing the world around you. I won't extend the analogy by talking about the birthing pains (yes, there were a few) but congratulations *JPD* on reaching your first birthday and to all who have contributed to its success – and in some cases may have had a few sleepless nights along the way. The *JPD* provides an excellent vehicle for reflecting on and sharing our pedagogic practices, and with a continued supply of nourishing articles it will continue to develop and evolve.

## Guest Editorial

### A Harmonics of Teaching and Learning: An Editorial in Three Voices

Lolly Ockerstrom, Ph.D. (Park University), Emily Donnelly-Sallee, Ph.D. (Park University), and Jean Mandernach, Ph.D. (Grand Canyon University)

#### I. The Text, not the book: Studying abroad and seeing

*...And bring no book: for this one day  
We'll give to idleness...*

William Wordsworth, 'Lines written at a small distance from my house,' 1798

While teaching a study abroad course on Wordsworth I took two of the students up to the Troutbeck Churchyard. It was raining (of course), and cold: And we were on a mission to find the

gravestone of Myles Atkinson, the ancestor of a colleague. For the students, it was, as was everything for them in Cumbria, a haunting and compelling adventure. We did not, as Wordsworth writes in his poem, bring along a book. Instead, we gave ourselves that day to 'idleness'—we walked in the rain down from Town End to the church, which was open—and empty of parishioners or other tourists. We admired the Burne-Jones/William Morris window, we sat in the pews, we studied the architecture. And we warmed

ourselves. And then braced for the rain again and the search for the grave.

It was Dustin who found it. We had all walked right past it, coming out of the church. We had split up, examined the gravestones, re-read the directions for the gravesite, came back together, and kept looking. Then, suddenly, Dustin gave out one of his wonderfully silly laughs, and said, 'I found it!' And so he had. We paid homage in the rain to Myles, and talked about the eighteenth century.

It was a tidy, self-contained little adventure. And it was significant that Dustin had been the one to find it. It made him special. He now had a story to take home with him, about the day he found the grave—in the shape of a bench, a thick slab resting horizontally upon two stone supports. Set apart from the other graves, it had been hidden in plain sight. Like Dustin himself, an intriguing student. Finding the gravestone was, for Dustin, a success story. And he reveled in it.

It was a day of idleness, a day of giving ourselves to the elements and to chance. And isn't that, really, what education is about? Finding things. Learning that each of us have something special to share, like Dustin did by finding the gravestone in a foreign land, where history surrounds you, and poetry beckons. The text of the land, of history, of a rainy afternoon in Cumbria: that was the only book we needed that day, the only lesson. The only poem.

## II. The stories that numbers can't tell: Expanding definitions of effective teaching

Asked to write a reflective essay about an experience of effective teaching, I eagerly agreed. Not only do I have a range of success stories teaching psychology, but I've also spent my academic career researching effective instructional practices. Write one experience-based story to highlight effective teaching? No problem.

So, I began to write... and delete. Re-write... and delete.

The seemingly simple task of telling my story as an instructor quickly evolved into something much

more challenging. As a researcher of the teaching process, I can quickly break down an instructional sequence into a series of independent and dependent variables. I can identify the desired outcome, dissect it into the relevant operational definitions, and transform it into something measurable. I can efficiently analyze this numerical data to determine correlations, covariates and causal indicators. I can neatly package this information in a standard research report to give clear and concise recommendations to promote effective teaching. But, with my perception of teaching effectiveness deeply rooted in empirical research methods, I seemingly cannot get past my reliance on data to tell a *story* of effective teaching.

Perhaps, as a colleague pointed out to me, *this* is my story. Underlying my story is the fact that my views on effective teaching are so aligned to one methodological approach that I struggle to fully appreciate methods of inquiry not amenable to numbers. This is not to say that I don't value others' tales of teaching effectiveness; but, perhaps until now, I haven't embraced them.

To fully embrace personalized reflections on teaching, we must expand our understanding of research to encompass non-generalizable findings, context-based conclusions and non-replicable outcomes. Moments of teaching greatness are not always captured in a neat data set. In fact, sometimes we don't even recognize an important interaction as it is happening. Rather, the importance of a teaching moment may evolve through reflective contemplation of an event. The lack of *a priori* research design, hypotheses or data does not diminish the value of conclusions drawn through reflective storytelling.

## III. Number and story: From either/or to both/and

Participating in a project to advance learning outcomes assessment at my university has meant that some of my most recent realizations about teaching and learning have (quite uncharacteristically) involved numbers. Writing measurable learning outcomes and norming

assignment criteria may be part and parcel of the work of faculty in many disciplines, but objectifying instruction in this way has not always felt helpful (or even appropriate) to those of us in the humanities.

Though painfully wrought, this assessment initiative has been well received by students in my writing courses. No longer quite as suspicious that my mantra 'good writers are made, not born' is mere spin, students can see how my courses facilitate their development as writers, and what indicators we will use to identify success. My grading feedback has become more specific and consistent; and, with the help of reports provided by our office of assessment, I can now make more intentional curricular enhancements based on the analysis of student scores across course sections and over time.

But for all of the benefits accrued by this quantifying of student performance, it was an experience outside of my classroom, and its carefully crafted rubrics, that reminded me why we need both number and story to assess teaching and learning.

Cue the story.

Rushing to find a seat at Micah's paper presentation at the university's annual undergraduate research symposium, I reflected on his many accomplishments. A student whose first experience in college had led to a disappointing and lengthy sabbatical, Micah had returned to his academic studies – this time not only surviving, but thriving. In addition to his success in my history of rhetoric course, Micah's decision to continue working on his paper after the class ended signaled to me that he had discovered motivations beyond grades, and that perhaps he was beginning to see that his scholarly endeavors need not end with a course.

Sitting on the front row for Micah's presentation, poised proudly with camera in hand, I saw another of my students, Kristin, and immediately wondered about the connection. I had never seen the two within the same social circles and never

had them together in class. Or so I thought. I remembered that the semester prior, I had experimented with cross-course peer writing groups. Each student in my history of rhetoric course had been assigned a writing partner from my composition theory course; the pairs met throughout the semester to provide and receive feedback on their respective writing projects. Micah and Kristin had been one such pair, and it was clear that long after the semester had ended, their investment in each other's work had not.

Reflecting on the assessment data from each course that semester, I had lots of numbers to help me understand which pedagogical components affected student performance on which course outcomes. But the most significant learning outcomes of the peer writing group assignment came into focus only when those numbers were complemented by story – the story that emerged that day at the symposium as Micah and Kristin warmly greeted one another after the presentation, and congratulations quickly turned into scheduling the best time and place to meet for conversations about their next writing projects. What started as an assignment between two *students* had clearly become a relationship between two *writers*.

#### **IV. Teaching and Learning: Reflections on Harmony**

Assessment measures are needed; they are necessary, and, as faculty, we work hard to set them up and to follow them. We also work hard at watching: every student, every classroom interaction, every assignment. Sometimes professors are surprised: The quiet one in the corner who seldom speaks, suddenly one day volunteers an insight, and leaves the class astounded at the connections she has made. Sometimes we are dismayed: The assignment we worked so hard to craft confuses the students – and we thought they would be delighted with an unusual approach, an opportunity for something more creative, something more directly from them, their experiences, their insights, rather than something traditional that 'proved' they 'got it' – and which provided them with their much-coveted

'A' grade. So—what are we to do? How do we motivate the students, while also working toward clear assessment of learning outcomes? How do we encourage the stories within all of us—professors and students alike—to emerge? How do we learn from one another across disciplines? For those of us for whom stories are central, how do we find ourselves in the numbers and the charts? For those of us for whom the norm is that which is measurable and quantifiable, how do we nurture elements of surprise and celebrate in our classrooms that which is human and at times quirky?

As our stories above intended to illustrate, it all comes back to the art of reflection. When we

engage in deep reflection about our teaching, when we self-consciously and deliberately study our classrooms as much as we study our disciplines, our abilities to see improve. And so does our teaching. As important as the books are, as important as the measurements are, what really counts ultimately is the experience of each individual student. Sometimes—just sometimes—we need to set aside the course books, the carefully planned lessons, the statistics, so that the larger, more significant text of teaching and learning remains front and center. Ultimately, what really counts is the experience of the class—even in the rain.

## **VLE segregation or integration? How should distance learning and taught modes be treated?**

Chris Papadopoulos & Susan Sapsed, Health and Social Sciences, University of Bedfordshire

### **Introduction**

In 2007, the MSc Public Health course at the University of Bedfordshire developed and launched a distance learning mode as an alternative to its existing 'taught' (classroom-based) mode of learning. Part of the rationale for its conception was the growing number of international students registering for the course. Also, a number of overseas governments and employers had been keen to support their staff to undertake the MSc Public Health but were unable to meet the travel and living costs in the UK. Initially, 10 distance learning students registered. Today, the course has 30 distance learning students.

With the number of distance learning students likely to continue to grow, and distance learning becoming more prominent within the education sector (Allen and Seaman, 2008), a key issue to address is whether to segregate distance learning students into one, distance-learning exclusive Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)-based

community, or to combine both sets of students into one, integrative VLE-based community. In order to explore this issue, this paper will introduce some of the key concepts and then describe how distance learners and taught students currently access and interact with their learning material on the course. It will then critically appraise some of the key pedagogical and practical considerations associated with VLE segregation/integration.

### **Disentangling VLEs, e-learning and distance learning**

VLEs are defined as an online environment where a range of interactions take place between tutors and students, and, as such, are a key form of e-learning technology (JISC, 2002). Fry (2000) defines e-learning as the 'delivery of training and education via networked interactivity and a range of other knowledge collection and distribution technologies'. Wild et al's (2002) definition states that e-learning is both self-learning and collaborative-learning through technology. Thus,