



DLSI NEWSLETTER



Supporting teaching and learning at La Salle

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Issue 8

WHERE SHOULD WE BEGIN?

I spent an invigorating morning with our most recently hired faculty a couple of weeks ago, where I asked them to solve the problem of lighting a lightbulb with [a battery and a wire](#). We enjoyed refreshing our memories about electricity, as I led them to my larger point. **Just because a concept was taught, does not mean that it was learned.** We all possess a significant amount of [fragile knowledge](#).

The battery and wire activity perfectly illustrates an important point. If one does not “own” a foundational concept, any teaching that builds upon that concept will be useless for the learner.

For many of us, this requires a bit of a shift in our thinking. Often, we consider the curriculum as the starting point for instruction. We are charged with teaching a specific body of knowledge to a group of students, who are in a particular place in a program.

This shift requires, instead, that we **begin with our students**. We generally make the assumption that our students arrive to us with certain pieces of foundational knowledge. That they are, more or

less, “ready” for our class. However, the only way to know for sure, or to determine where the gaps in their understanding might be, is to probe or assess their current understanding; that is, the state of their fragile knowledge.

There are several low-stakes and engaging ways to do this early in the semester. I often create “jump” assignments (due on the first day of class, to get a jump start on the course), which are designed to be interesting and engaging, and provide some insight into what my students know.

For example, because I begin my work with student teachers examining cognition and its relationship to learning, I ask them to consider a time when they learned something very well, and on their own (not in a classroom). Their task is to create a picture, chart, collage, or any sort of graphic representation that could be used to illustrate and help explain their understanding of *how learning happens*. Also, some place on their work, they have to define learning. With this artifact, students arrive on the first day of class already thinking about our initial topic, and ready to share their current understanding, which I use as an opportunity to assess fragile knowledge.

Other suggestions for an early assessment of student thinking include presenting them with problems to solve, employing low or no-stakes quizzes, creating homework assignments that ask foundational questions, engaging students in interactive group classroom activities where they can create questions about content, and/or using polling, either in person or on Canvas. The idea is to gain access to common misconceptions or missing knowledge, and learn about the thinking of individual students.

Now, with an understanding of the fragile knowledge that our students’ possess, we can build instruction that corrects misunderstandings, provides missing foundational information, or creates additional practice. We are creating a secure foundation for new learning.

When planning instruction, we need to begin **where our students are right now**. This means that we probably have to adjust our teaching plans from day one. However, if we make assumptions about our starting point, or remove our students’ current knowledge from the equation, we will have been educating for nothing.



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ENGAGING PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

Matt DeCarlo, Assistant Professor of Social Work shares:

Recently, with some colleagues, I wrote a research methods textbook (and ancillary materials) for social workers, which we published using Pressbooks, an open textbook platform, creating an **open education resource (OER)**. This allowed me to legally put a copy on Canvas for my class, where my students could read and download it for free, providing them with first-day access to my course materials, regardless of their ability to pay.

The students and I combined the text with a shared PDF document on the Perusall platform, where they captured their insights, questions, and connections for each week's readings. My passion for student-engaged research and advocacy led to a project where we collected and analyzed survey data on textbook costs. Students entered survey data into Google Sheets, and used PivotTables to analyze descriptive statistics. I explained the use of JASP (an open source alternative to SPSS), and we performed bivariate analyses on the data.

After we identified meaningful bivariate correlations in class, we created an advocacy infographic, which highlighted that to afford expensive textbooks, 16% of students skipped a meal, 20% took out more loans, 50% took on more work, and 10% failed or withdrew from a class. We

distributed our work in collaboration with the Connelly Library, and further collaborated in advocacy leading to La Salle creating and funding an OER working group.

Students responded positively to the experience and recommended that it continue as an annual project. It helped them connect research methods to issues they experience as students, and demonstrated how using research data can help to secure students' rights and basic needs.

10 WAYS TO HELP STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES (...or any of your students)

1. **Connect with students:** Relationships matter for learning. Privately ask students to explain how disability impacts their learning. This communicates respect, that their needs matter to you, and that they are a valued member of the class.
2. **Ice breakers:** Students with disabilities are often anxious and on high alert. Class activities that release tension, facilitate interaction, and reduce anxiety are helpful.
3. **Chunk content:** Cognitive overload is a problem for everyone, but is particularly challenging for students with learning disabilities, who often need more time to access memories or make connections between concepts. Break concepts into more manageable sections that are accompanied by explanations and focus questions.

4. **Retrieval practice:** Use low or no stakes quizzes, ask student to recall concepts from earlier, and have students work together to recall concepts. Connect the dots with and for them. Be specific about what they need to know.

5. **Specific feedback:** Whether it is retrieval practice, elaboration, or brand new material, learning is enhanced by receiving specific feedback that corrects errors and refocuses attention.

6. **Dual-coding and scaffolding:** Combine text with visuals that are clear and connected. Use graphic organizers, concepts maps, and pictures with labels. Provide support to challenge just short of frustration.

7. **Concrete examples:** Make explicit connections between concrete examples, larger concepts, and abstract ideas, explaining their relationship.

8. **Focus attention:** Use cues to focus attention on important points, and questions that ask why they are important and connected to previous learning.

9. **Multiple forms of participation:** Students may be reluctant to volunteer during class. Talk to them privately to gauge comfort. Schedule and invite participation in student hours outside of class.

10. **Elaboration:** Ask how and why questions about topics that have been learned. Support students as they persist to answer. Use activities that identify similarities and differences between concepts. Look for multiple ways to add detail to learning.

Please join us to learn more:
Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities
Sept. 20th - 12:30 -1:30
Music Room - 2nd floor - Union

So what?... [a good question to ask yourself](#) as you prepare each lesson. Why is the information that you are about to share with your students important? How will you be sure they realize this importance?



TELL ME A STORY

In one of my favorite, [long out of print books](#), which I always read to my student teachers on the first day of class, Albert Cullum writes, “You’re a good storyteller, teacher, honest! And that’s when I never have to be excused.” Storytelling, of course, was probably the earliest way that humans shared information. The best of them capture and hold our attention, draw us in, take us on a journey, and leave us wanting more.

Cognitive psychologist, Daniel Willingham, has written about the [special impact of stories](#) and how teachers might capitalize on their power. Decades of research demonstrates that they are more interesting to us, and easier to comprehend and remember, than other forms of communication.

Given that power, why not plan our courses and lessons like stories? [Teaching a course as a narrative arc](#) can be a valuable way to focus student interest and attention. In the linked article, Oswald highlights several additional advantages: stronger connections between students, instructors, and coursework, the creation of structure and meaning for students, and improved retention of knowledge.

Willingham suggests we take a cue from professional storytellers, and their use of “the Four Cs”: causality, conflict, complications, and character. He suggests teachers capitalize on the power of stories in two ways: telling more stories in class, and having students read more stories outside of class - but there is some detail to harnessing their power, so be sure to take a look at his article linked above to see how he suggests incorporating “the Four Cs” into your lessons.

Several years ago, Pres Feden and I ran the summer practicum for our graduate students in secondary

education. The students were generally inexperienced, preservice teachers. The courses placed them in the position of designing a two-week summer enrichment program for middle school children, who we then invited to the camp, where the graduate students delivered their programs.

Because of the power of story and a narrative arc, we borrowed from the world of film and began by having the graduate students [storyboard](#) their curricular ideas, providing them with a tool to see how their developing two-week enrichment program could be held together by an engaging storyline, built on the overall theme of the camp, and supported by interconnected, enjoyable activities that addressed curricular goals.

One year, the overall theme of the summer program was “Beneath the Surface.” The challenge presented to the graduate students was to create a two week “story”, within their content area that was based on that program theme. One team created a narrative arc about exploring marine life, casting the students in the role of marine biologists, and leading them through a two-week journey that enriched their understanding of middle school science concepts gleaned from state and school district standards.

Stories have also been used as a way to help individuals [adopt new practices or ideas](#), not only making it an interesting tool for teaching, but also for professional development. Stories appear to be effective in helping people overcome the problem of *uptake*, which is often slowed by both emotional and rational barriers to adopting new practices.

The power of stories is clear, simply based on our lived experience, but we also have decades of research that codifies that power. A power that we can capitalize on in our teaching to increase attention, build interest, solidify relationships, elaborate on content, and support student learning.

The DLSI Newsletter is written, edited, and curated by

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