BETTER TEACHING MATTERS (A LOT!)

These are challenging times in higher education. Options for obtaining a degree have multiplied. The pool of potential students is shrinking and the cost of education is rising. Competition for new students, especially in our region, is fierce. It means that we have to think carefully about what we do at La Salle to provide a meaningful education that is attractive, valuable, and keeps students here for at least 4 years.

A recent survey found that **ineffective teaching was the greatest barrier to student success**. That means more D, F, and W grades, more dropped classes, and students who don't return the following semester. As is true with most small, liberal arts universities today, improving student success and retaining students is not only important for them, but **it is critical for us**.

Steven Mintz, in this opinion piece, emphasizes the importance of improving our teaching, reminding us that **most faculty have little preparation for teaching**, **and little knowledge of the science behind teaching and learning that leads to better outcomes for students.** Many of us here at La Salle are deeply interested in teaching, and the work of the DLSI is centered on helping us become more effective educators. Past issues of the DLSI Newsletter contain numerous evidence-based strategies and tips that can be worked into one's teaching. Here are some additional ideas (some from the Mintz piece) that will help your students right now:

Clarity about what is to be learned **during every class** is critical. This might be captured in an essential question or an explicit learning objective in the syllabus, on assignments, or on the board for students to see when they enter, **but it must be voiced. Students need to explicitly know what they are to learn from each class.** So make some space to clearly and plainly tell them what they should be taking away from each lesson.

Retrieval practice simply refers to brining information to mind. Used intentionally, it is *one of the most impactful learning strategies we know.* The more we can help our students engage in retrieval practice, the more they will learn. **Retrieval practice should be part of every class (as well as homework)**, and can look like a question at the beginning of class, problem solving activities, or low/no-stakes quizzes. (As an aside, increased low-stakes testing is both a practical response to AI and *an evidence-based practice that boosts learning*). Retrieval practice can take place in pairs, groups, or individually. Remember, the **key is cognitive effort**. Put students in the position of having to really work at retrieval. So, they should be instructed to begin *without* notes. **Encourage thinking!** After a short time, suggest collaboration. Only after these initial steps should they verify or clarify with notes or texts.

Active learning trumps passive listening. The occasional lecture is necessary. Story-telling can be impactful. However, the most **comprehensive learning happens when we are engaged with content**, problem-solving, and interacting with others. Engaging activities that allow us to manipulate the content in a variety of ways provide us with a means to elaborate on new information and make connections in long-term memory.

Students need *flexibility and accountability*. One way to add this is with *second-chance opportunities for assignments.* As Jagaiah (2023) points out in the linked article, redoing assignments with accountability builds personal responsibility and a commitment to academic success. It promotes learning, increases engagement, develops

critical thinking skills, and helps students reach their full potential.

I encourage you to take to heart that the namesake of our institution is the Patron Saint of Teachers. **At La Salle, our calling card must be excellence and innovation in the classroom.** That excellence requires a commitment to continuously improve our teaching. The DLSI has numerous resources to support you in that effort. Please let us know how we can help. **Better teaching matters!**

Help support our students by promoting the Center for Academic Achievement's [seminars on academic success!](#)

CULTIVATING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic integrity violations often occur **when students don't understand expectations, are disorganized, pressed for time, or lack support** to persist through challenges. You can help by:

- Getting to know students and building community in your classes.
- Continuously clarifying expectations, checking for understanding, and asking for feedback.
- Challenging students, then supporting their persistence.
- Creating a climate that accepts mistakes as opportunities for learning.
- Providing enough time for students to complete assignments, offering specific

feedback to promote improvement, and allowing opportunities for revision.
- Sharing tips for staying organized.
- Focusing more on progress and process, and less on grades.
- Clarifying rules for citation of sources and acknowledgment of support.
- Knowing how to get support for students who are experiencing mental health, organizational, or academic issues.

Above all, continually discus academic integrity and do not assume that it is understood from a syllabus statement. Perhaps especially in this new era of AI, promoting academic integrity will **require our sustained effort to clarify and exemplify our commitment to honesty, trust, fairness, and responsibility.**

AI PROMPTING IDEAS

One of the opportunities presented by large language models (LLMs) is their ability to help us to improve our instructional practice. Be sure to review [How to Use AI - For Faculty,](#) then try the prompts below. We are currently recommending Bing Chat in "creative" mode (purple). This system gives you free access to ChatGPT-4, as well as connectivity to the internet.

Prompt: *You are my classroom consultant. I am teaching [insert class and topic] to [insert student level]. Help me create an assignment that is challenging for students who have a strong understanding of [concept], but*

also provides support and scaffolding for students who are struggling with this concept.

Prompt: *You are a student support expert. Generate a list of specific steps my students can take to improve their performance in [subject/task (as specific as possible)].*

Prompt: *I am preparing to teach [identify the concept], help me develop and interesting and engaging opening activity that captures student attention and sets them up for learning.*

Prompt: *As my teaching consultant, I would like you to help me think about how I might teach my students more effectively. I will tell you what I intend to teach, you will create a list of 5 strategies that work with the topic and can be used to effectively support my student learning. These strategies should build on clarity of objectives, retrieval practice, and active learning. (See what I did there? 😄)*

These are just a few examples of how you might make use of AI. Remember though, **rarely does one prompt result in the best output. You should think of interacting with AI like having a conversation with an intern or consultant.** A few interactions will be necessary to guide the AI. It also takes a bit of time to become more comfortable with prompting.

Please [share prompts that work for you!](#) We are curating a collection, which we will soon share.

EMBRACE THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN

A former colleague of mine was fond of reminding us that **"education is preeminently a field of social inter-relationships."** For me, the message resonated because I had come to realize the importance of relationships from my earliest teaching experiences, working with students with emotional and behavioral disorders and their families. I'd come to understand that **the person was far more important than any course content that I was preparing to help them learn.**

Relationships were clearly the cornerstone of the educational philosophy of St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle, and we hear over and over from former and current students about the value of their relationships with faculty and staff here at the university. **It is time for us to double down on considering the affective domain in our classrooms.**

The pandemic had a role to play, as do the numerous opportunities for students to receive an education at a distance, but we are at a place now where more students feel disconnected…*and actually are disconnected*…from us and our community. **Reconnecting and fostering relationships signifies that we value the presence of students, demonstrates caring, allows for support and increased opportunities for success, and improves learning outcomes.** The obvious starting point is to focus on the affective domain.

I was recently impressed by [Bauer's "Why the Emotional Aspects of Learning Matter"](#). In it, she shares several easy, yet powerful ways to positively impact relationships in educational spaces.

Learning your students' names is a critical first step. This seemingly simple act signifies your value of our students and leads them to be more invested. I begin each new course by having students create a name plaque using a large index card. One one side is contact information, and the responses to a few introductory questions, on the reverse is the name they would like us to use. This is folded and placed in front of them. I collect the cards and pass them out as students arrive to each subsequent class until I've learned their names.

Providing opportunities for connection and informal conversation. A couple of years ago I stopped offering participation points. They were too difficult to objectively monitor and assess. I replaced them with a small number of points to simply stop by my office and have an informal conversation. Whether it is programmed into your course, or you find other ways to do it, informal connection with our students can go a long way. Greet them as they arrive in class. Have lunch with a couple at a time. Grab a cup of coffee. Explain "student hours" (office hours) and invite students to show up.

Working to minimize performance anxiety. Allowing space for students to voice anxieties demonstrates caring. Flexibility of due dates and opportunities to revise assignments supports a commitment to learning and a growth mindset. Multiple no (or very low) stakes quizzes allows for both retrieval practice and test-taking practice. Your emphasis on what students *can do* or *how they have improved* (as opposed to what they got wrong), supports learning and reduces anxiety.   Valuing effort over perceived talent or ability goes a long way.

Promoting a growth mindset. Teach students effective learning and study strategies, provide tips for success, and give the constant message that with these tools **and with effort**, they *can do it*. Emphasize cognitive effort and time spent working at learning. Allow students to revise their work to make it better. Create a climate in your classroom where incorrect responses are embraced as learning opportunities and students don't fear taking a chance on being wrong.

As James Comer penned, "no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship." **Your authentic relationships** with students will not only improve their persistence and learning in the classroom, but **will go a long way toward keeping them here for all fours years, and spreading the word about how much La Salle University professors value their students.**