WEEK 11

Re-Energizing the Classroom

You are skidding along the downward slope at this point, as you head into the last third of the semester, and that's the really excellent news. By now you might be starting to envision how the semester will wind up, and how you will organize those final five weeks in order to accomplish all the goals you have set for the semester. You may be heading to your disciplinary conference over the winter break, and you have been making those plans, and thinking about taking long naps and reading for pleasure during the break (both are activities I would recommend highly). It's all good.

All except for one thing. By this point in the semester, most of us begin to feel as if we are going through the motions in the classroom, trotting out the same old teaching techniques every day. Our students are overwhelmed with the approaching end of the semester—when they will have a major assignment or exam in every one of their five courses—and may appear listless and exhausted in class, their eyes glazing over a few minutes after you open your mouth. I always get the feeling, about this time in the semester, that whenever I announce the plan for the day, the students are regarding me with cool skepticism, and thinking to themselves: "Is this all you got, dude?" And my response would usually have to be: "Yeah, it's all I got."

If you have been following the recommendations of this book, you have been varying your teaching techniques all through the semester, and so the students have seen you lecture, and hold discussions, and work with groups, and maybe use some other interesting classroom format that you dreamed up before the semester started and tried out a few times. But by this point in the semester, you have trotted out everything you can think of pedagogically, and you don't have enough gas in the tank to keep on top of your other obligations and spend hours dreaming up brilliant and inspirational new teaching strategies. Frankly, you're not even sure the stuff you have been doing thus far has been working. Duffy and Jones describe this point in the semester, which they call the doldrums, like this: "As the initial high energies [of the semester] are taxed, a vague feeling of discontent surfaces in the classroom environment. Professors can begin to doubt the effectiveness of their teaching, and students can become overwhelmed, questioning the applicability of the course" (36). Everyone goes through this dull period in the semester; the chatter at the copy machine will be as listless as the students' responses in your classroom, or will consist primarily of complaints about students, the teaching load, the department chair, or life in general.

I'm not sure it's possible to prevent these doldrums from making their appearance during a semester—a college course is like a marathon, and every marathon runner will hit periods of exhaustion during the race. But you can prepare yourself in advance for their arrival, both psychologically and pedagogically; the latter will be the focus of this chapter. Psychologically, the only preparation I can offer is the knowledge that this period will come, that it's normal, and that it comes to an end eventually. As the close of the semester looms, you'll find that your energies revive, not unlike the way students' attention revives as you approach the end of a lecture. But don't let the fallow periods make you

doubt your calling as a teacher, or the efficacy of what you have been doing; if you have those feelings, keep them at bay with the promise that you'll revisit them at the end of the semester, when you can catch your breath—and then you'll probably find that they have dissipated.

Pedagogically, the best method for busting out of the doldrums is to experiment a little in the classroom. Try something completely different, something that you're not sure will work, but that will surprise the students, and get them to think about the course and its subject matter in a new way. Experimentation doesn't have to entail a ton of advance planning; it might be one-off or maybe two-off classroom sessions, as opposed to thinking about how to restructure the course entirely. I have two or three experiments that I like to use every semester, ones to which students always seem to respond well, and which I am usually excited to introduce into the classroom each year. But I hold them off for as long as possible, knowing that I'll need them at about this time in the semester to revitalize flagging classroom energy.

Of course, dreaming up experimental teaching techniques is much easier said than done. The whole point about this period of the semester is that you're drained, so you won't be inclined to innovative thinking. You have to lay the groundwork for the implementation of experimental teaching strategies before and all through the semester, by keeping yourself informed and fresh as both a teacher and a learner. I've thus divided this chapter into two parts: the first section consists of five simple experimental strategies that faculty in most disciplines could try out at this point in the semester; the second describes a few activities to help you remain fresh as a teacher, and to stay informed and prepared to develop new teaching strategies when you need them most.

You may look at some of the experimental teaching strategies

described below and see them as less serious or content-focused than you would like, and that might be true. But we have seen already that while a discussion or small-group activity might introduce students to less new content than a lecture, it can still provide an essential opportunity for students to think and write and talk their way through their ideas about that content. Similarly, although these experiments might not offer course content or develop thinking skills in conventional ways, they can perform the invaluable function of revitalizing students' interest and attention in whatever content or thinking skills you have left to teach in the remainder of the semester. One or two such experimental classes, followed by three or four traditional classes taught to revitalized students, may accomplish far more than six classes of mechanical and listless teaching—and little learning—during the low period of the semester.

Five Experiments

POSTERS

I'll start with the experiment that I reserve for my mid-semester doldrums: asking students to work in small groups to map out a text or set of ideas on a posterboard. The precise nature of the strategy depends upon the course I am teaching, but in a literature course I usually will try it when we are reading a novel, hopefully one that is long and complicated and could stand some clarifying. I might ask students to create a visual representation of the major plot points of the novel; or, in a novel whose plot doesn't need this kind of scrutiny, I might ask them to create a graph or list or chart that compares and contrasts the novel's major characters; at other times I have asked them to draw connections between images and image-systems in a novel or poem, or to do the same thing with a work's major and minor themes. I

have kept all the posters that my students have constructed over the years, and the range of visual representations they have developed is astonishing. Many of them add an extra dash of creativity to their posters, adorning them with graphics and cartoons and crude drawings of scenes and characters. As much as anything, those drawings convince me of the value of the technique as a doldrums-buster; the students were enjoying themselves while they worked on the challenge I had presented to them. They were also thinking, however; the innovative approaches to novels which I have seen students develop in subsequent paper assignments, and which they have told me stemmed from the poster session, have fully convinced me of that.

Practically, the only real advance planning you need here is to get to the bookstore before class and pick up enough posterboards and markers for the class (I usually have them work in groups of three or four), or ask your department secretary if such supplies are available in the office somewhere. You'll need to think about what you want the students to represent on the posters, of course, which really could be anything. The idea is not so much that they have to draw things as that they have to construct a visual representation of relationships among things—people, books, ideas, places, time periods, arguments, theories, problems, strategies for completing an assignment or paper, and so on. Even a posterboard with a line drawn down the center, dividing the space into two columns for a comparison list, will do the trick. The posters force the students to see the material in a new way, and often can prove revealing to the instructor, as they have for me. Most of the students will find the instructions for this project disconcerting at first, since the assignment will be an unfamiliar one. It helps, therefore, to think about one or two ways in which they might organize their posterboard, and to put an example up on the board while you are giving the instructions. But don't limit them, or give them too much help; they are usually slow to start, but eventually—the light bulb moment—they catch on and throw themselves into the project. When that happens, the energy level in the classroom is as high as it is all semester.

My formal lesson plan always allows time for the students to show off their posterboards and explain them at the end of the hour, but it turns out that we almost never have time for this show and tell. This used to bother me, but I've realized now that what matters in this exercise is the process, not the product. Sometimes I will let them work to the end and then ask them to bring the posterboards in to the next class session and set them around the room for everyone to view for a few minutes before class starts. The more I do this exercise, the more I downplay the final result. The strongest insights or ideas that they gain will come from the creation of their diagram; anything they get from viewing the work of others is a nice bonus.

FIELD TRIPS

The best part about teaching students over eighteen is that you won't need thirty bag lunches, juice boxes, and permission slips from Mom and Dad for this one. Getting everyone out of the classroom and to some site or event that relates to the course material usually takes two class periods—one for the trip (or as missed-class compensation for a trip that takes place outside of the regular classroom hours), and one for a discussion of the trip afterwards. But such trips are usually worth the effort, as they can help students see how the content and thinking skills you are teaching in the course operate in the world outside the classroom. Visible reminders of the relevance of the course to that world are a sure means to (re)capture student interest.

Of course, field trips at this educational level usually go be-

yond the scope of trips to the local museum—unless you are an art teacher or a historian, in which case expeditions to see the local art or history museum, and to talk (for instance) about how historical societies and museums help determine what counts as the past, might do nicely. But you have to plan creatively here—which you can do by thinking about how and where your disciplinary theories and subject matter operate in the world. A political scientist might attend a city council meeting with her students; a Spanish teacher might visit the local Hispanic Heritage center; a chemist could arrange for a tour of a local manufacturing plant. You might not see such opportunities until you have spent a year or two in the community, and learned about the existence of such visitable places, so keep an eye out in your first semester or two, or ask around your department. Of course, you may not even need to leave campus for field trips. An environmental biologist at my college takes students into the wooded places on campus; I have taken students in my creative nonfiction writing class outside to write about various locales on campus; a theologian might lead a visit to the campus chapel or religious center; a civil engineer could lead a walking campus tour with a focus on the layout of the roads and walkways. In addition, you will find your college's general program schedule jampacked with lectures, readings, performances, and exhibitions by visiting and local and even student talent; find a way to incorporate one of these into your course schedule, and build content around it.

In terms of logistics, you do have to be careful about transporting students off campus. The institution may have vans you can borrow for such events, but I have always found it safer and easier to require students to find their own transportation, with some encouragement from me to carpool whenever possible. Still, check with your department chair, or your campus counsel (every college or university has an in-house lawyer), to see whether you should have the students sign a release form for an off-campus event. You will also inevitably find that one or two students cannot attend anything you schedule outside of the normal classroom hour. In this case, try to offer an alternative for them—visiting a site on their own, or attending a comparable lecture or event—in order to ensure that the entire class has this shared experience of getting out of the classroom to see your discipline in action.

INKSHEDDING

The third technique, inkshedding, is one that a *Chronicle of Higher Education* reader e-mailed me about in the fall of 2006, and I wrote about it in the October column of that year, which addressed the subject matter of this chapter—shaking things up during the mid-semester doldrums. This technique provides a method for generating ideas in a discussion class where the discussions may have begun to flag, or where one or two students have been dominating the discussion, letting everyone else sit back and relax. Inkshedding was first developed by writing teachers Russ Hunt and Jim Reither in the 1980s. You can find all kinds of information about it at Hunt's website, listed in the Resources below. Of course, as with any popular teaching technique, many different practices now fall under the name of inkshedding, as instructors have personalized it and made it their own.

The version suggested to me by my reader, Dan Cleary, who teaches English at Lorain County Community College, works like this. Dan begins that day's class by asking students to spend 5 minutes writing down their thoughts on the main discussion question or issue for the day. That writing should be what composition teachers call "freewriting"—that is, the student writes

whatever comes to mind, without anyone making judgments about it or corrections to it. Freewriting's function is to help generate thoughts and ideas, so it's an excellent starting place for discussions of any kind. When the students have finished their 5 minutes of freewriting, they pass their notebooks to another student. Everyone reads the new notebook in front of them and then spends 5 minutes freewriting in response to the first student's thoughts. That process continues through several iterations, until—after 20 or 25 minutes—the students have engaged in an extended dialogue with one another, all on paper, and are ready to start talking about their ideas out loud.

As Dan points out, that technique "encourages everyone, even the shy students, to participate in the class 'discussion.'" Moreover, the written process helps to spark the verbal discussion: "I've never had a dead-end discussion after an exercise like this," Dan told me. "In fact, students often laugh or jeer or cringe or applaud while reading and listening to the texts produced from inkshedding. That'll keep them interested and engaged!" I like best about this technique the fact that everyone takes part in the exercise, even if they do so only on paper. However, you can ensure everyone's participation in the oral conversation simply by asking the shyer students to read aloud one of the statements in a notebook, not even necessarily one of their own. This technique could work equally well in small or large classes; how you process it afterwards might vary according to course size, but the writing and exchanging of notebooks will work in any course.

TRIALS

In the classroom, as in real life, you can always get people's attention by putting somebody famous on trial. Conducting mock trials in the classroom is the fourth experiment I have both read about and tried, one that can be adopted—with some creative thinking—in just about any discipline. When I conducted a trial

in my classroom, I put the main character of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* on trial, and simply divided up the classroom into prosecutors and defendants; I played the judge. The students were lawyers for his appeal, and were expected to argue either to overturn his conviction or to uphold it. A novel featuring a character's tangle with the legal system presents an obvious opportunity for this experiment, but I have mostly heard about historians putting famous figures on trial in the classroom; I first learned of this technique from a history professor at Northwestern, Edward Muir, who had used trials in his undergraduate classes.

Putting famous historical figures on trial doesn't require much planning—you just have to dream up the charges, and then determine the roles that you will have students play in the classroom. My trial did not give a voice to the defendant, but that can be an easy role for the faculty member to assume, since your familiarity with the material means that you can respond to students' questions more knowledgeably than anyone else. You obviously want to have prosecutors, lawyers for the defense, and a judge or jury; you can have teams for each of these roles, or a combination of teams and some individuals working on their own. All of this requires some logistical thinking, and might take up two or three classes; if you play the defendant, and have two small-group teams to prosecute and defend, and then leave everyone else to the jury, you are committing the students to roles that require different levels of activity at different times. The prosecutors and defense might need a class or two in advance to prepare their work, while the jury might need a second class to debate their verdict. But you can organize the trial in many different ways, depending upon the size of the class; you can also draw a written assignment from it, in which students might deliver their verdict and offer an appropriate sentence if they have found the defendant guilty.

You don't have to teach history or literature to adopt this tech-

nique in your classroom, though. Philosophers have plenty of famous figures to put on trial, or to retry—Socrates is the most obvious example, but trying Eichmann through the lens of Hannah Arendt might prove equally interesting. A trial of any seminal or influential thinker or figure in a discipline could help students understand how that discipline has evolved over time, and how standards of evidence and inquiry change. Theologians might try God on various charges; economists could try Karl Marx; psychologists Sigmund Freud, and so on. You don't even have to limit yourself to trying individuals; you might put a theory or idea on trial, one that has a controversial place in your field, that practitioners of your discipline are debating in academic journals, and that you can make accessible to students. In any of these cases, the trial can be used to reinforce the importance of using evidence in arguments, of framing and answering good questions, or of exploring how we make judgments in cases in which reasonable claims compete; in general, the trial will impel students to see the figure or issue through a new lens, and will involve everyone in the classroom in some way.

CASE STUDIES

This technique will seem like nothing new to my colleagues in business and law departments and a few other select fields, but you can always shake things up with a case study. Case studies present to students a real-life problem scenario—one that may or may not have actually happened—which they learn about, explore, and recommend actions to resolve. Ideally, students use the knowledge and thinking skills developed in the course to resolve or make recommendations about the case. Harvard Business School is famous for its use of case studies, which have been used there as a teaching method since the early part of the twentieth century. The initial impetus for their development was the

simple fact that there were no textbooks at that time to teach business studies, so the faculty wrote up descriptions of real business scenarios for students to study. In addition to the many other business programs and courses that now rely on case study teaching, the disciplines of law and education also frequently rely on case studies these days. The simplest method for working with a case is to write up the scenario (no more than a couple of pages of text), hand it out at the beginning of the class period, and then lead a discussion or arrange students in small groups to discuss the case and present their recommendations. The work listed below in the Resources provides plenty of excellent suggestions and information about how to write cases and conduct discussions of them.

As with trials, the fact that case studies are popular and fit well in one discipline does not mean they won't fit in other disciplines as well. Duffy and Jones provide a nice set of examples of how case studies might work well in other disciplines:

> For a Spanish class mired in the doldrums, a case depicting a bumbling traveler in Madrid confronting new customs and trying to settle into a hotel would certainly highlight the need to learn the ways of the country as well as its language. For a calculus class that is tearing its collective hair out trying to understand integration over a surface, a case that portrays a hypothetical but typical student working out a similar problem might enable the whole class to learn the correct method. For an ethics class, a case that describes three reactions to a cry for help might initiate a heated discussion on responsibility. (191)

I especially like the idea of introducing a case that involves developing a lesson plan for teaching other students about the sub-

ject matter—you could always put students in the position of a teacher trying to come up with creative methods to teach students in high school or elementary school about the issue on the table. You will doubtless discover this semester that teaching helps you learn and see your own discipline in new and deeper ways, so this technique transfers some of that experience to your students. You can also use it to talk frankly with them about the doldrums, and to ask their help in figuring out how to pull another class out of the doldrums—pulling yourself out of them in the meantime.

Three Strategies for Staying Fresh

BECOME A LEARNER AGAIN

You won't have time for this in your first semester or two of teaching, but once you have survived that first year, think about taking a course or lessons of some kind. You won't find any better way to gain fresh insights into teaching than to put yourself in the position of a student again, and to look with a more practiced and knowledgeable eye at what your instructor is doing. I first saw a faculty member do this when Ken Bain took an acting class with one of the outstanding teachers he wrote about in his study, during the time I was working with him at the Center for Teaching Excellence. I remember him preparing for his final speech, which was a monologue from a Tennessee Williams play, delivered frequently around the office in the days leading up to the end of the course. Duffy and Jones, as preparation for writing their book, sat in on each other's classes, and they write about the wealth of insights they gained from the experience (124–140).

In my first six years of college teaching, I took a drawing class at the local art museum, a scuba diving class, and piano lessons.

All three courses showed me something new about teaching, or reminded me about the importance of a teaching strategy or habit that I had been neglecting. Scuba diving, for example, reinforced for me the importance of devoting classroom time to practicing the skills I wanted the students to develop, rather than just spending class time doling out information. It was one thing for my scuba instructor to explain to me how to clear my diving mask when we were sitting in the classroom, where his instructions made sense; it was another thing entirely to get in the water and do it myself—I discovered that things were more complicated than I had envisioned, and that I needed some additional pointers. Ever since that course, I have devoted classroom time in my writing courses to letting students write in class, under my direction, rather than just talking to them about writing and then sending them home to complete writing assignments on their own.

Find something you have always wanted to learn about or do, preferably in an area completely different from the one you teach, and take a course during your first or second summer after teaching. Keep an eye on how the instructor runs the course, and note what works well and what doesn't. This experience not only provided me with concrete ideas for classroom strategies, but I think it also helped expand my brain and learn how to translate good teaching ideas from one discipline to another—how to take an interesting strategy for teaching drawing, in other words, and transform it for a class in which I was teaching the contemporary British novel. It flexed my creative pedagogical muscles in ways that nothing else I have experienced has done.

STAY CURRENT

You will always have far more to do than you can accomplish, and you never will catch up on the reading you should be doing

for your own discipline. So asking you to stay current in the research on educational theory may sound like a bit much. But it doesn't require a ton of time and effort to keep yourself informed about new ideas and trends in education, or in the teaching of your discipline in particular. For starters, try these three simple things.

1. Almost every academic discipline has a journal or section of a journal devoted to writing about the teaching of that discipline, and some have multiple journals. You are probably acquainted with the major journals in your field, so you may know of these already; if not, ask others in your discipline, or the librarian for your discipline at your new institution (at most academic libraries, the disciplines are assigned in related groups to specific librarians who maintain the collections in those areas) if he knows the name of the journal in your field. Then either subscribe to it yourself or ask the library to subscribe to it, and catch up on its contents every summer. Most of these disciplinary journals have articles that focus on practical classroom strategies, so they can be a great source of ideas for innovative and experimental teaching methods.
2. For a more general overview of issues in academia, and their relation to teaching and the challenges you'll face as a new academic, consult the Career pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (always available for free at *http://chronicle.com/jobs*) where you'll find regular columnists who weigh in on all aspects of academic life, as well as a constantly rotating list of essayists from all walks of academia who do the same thing. A second great online resource for graduate students and new faculty is the Tomorrow's Professor listserv, which sends out three messages a week during the academic year with excerpts from new publications and research on teaching and academic life. You can see all previous postings, and subscribe, by visiting the website *(http://sll.stanford.edu/projects/tomprof/newtomprof/index.shtml)*.
3. Read one book on teaching per year. That's it—one book a year. Take it to the beach with you, and contemplate the classroom from the distance of the warm sun and the waves. I have provided a list of my own five favorite books about teaching and academic life in the closing chapter, so you're set for the next five years. By 2013, I expect you to be able to find your own teaching resources, so get moving.

BE NOSY

Find out what's going on in the classrooms of your colleagues, who should be one of the best sources for good new ideas about teaching throughout your career. I have a colleague whose ideas about teaching I always trust, and who frequently tries new techniques in her classroom. When I am stuck for a teaching strategy, I know that walking to her office and spending fifteen minutes talking to her about what I could do in my classroom will be more productive than two hours of staring at my computer screen and trying to brainstorm new techniques. Informal discussions about teaching happen in most departments in the hallway and around the copy and coffee machines, so it's not as if you will have to orchestrate such conversations. Just go into them willing to share what you're doing, and interested to hear what others are doing.

You can be nosy a little more formally in a couple of different ways. First, many campuses now have their own centers for teaching excellence, or for teaching and/or learning, or some other variation on those words and names. These centers will have numerous functions, but most of them host discussions

about teaching among faculty, or promote lectures or workshops that faculty can attend. Even on my campus, which does not have such a center, a group of us host a twice-yearly colloquium on teaching for anyone who's interested, and we just pick a topic and discuss it together. Find space in your schedule for one event like this per semester. Even if the declared topic or speaker at such an event doesn't seem of immediate interest to you, give it a try anyway; my experience at these events has been that just sitting with my colleagues and talking about teaching, even if only in the Q&A period or open discussion after the workshop, always proves enlightening and productive for me.

Second, see if you can arrange with a colleague—either a new faculty member like yourself or another junior member in your department—to exchange a few classroom visits. Talking about teaching with your colleagues can be wonderful, but nothing beats sitting in on someone else's classroom and seeing how they conduct class, especially if they have invited you on a day when they are trying something interesting. The reverse will be true as well—you will benefit enormously from the reflections of an observer who has sat and watched you try something interesting in the classroom, especially if you and that observer can pledge brutal honesty to each other. The colleague with whom I consult frequently about teaching did this several times in her first years on the tenure track, sitting in on classes of mine and others in the department, and asking us to observe her classes. I gained as much from the experience as she did, and wished I had done more of it myself in my first year or two. Observing colleagues outside of your discipline can be equally enlightening, so don't limit yourself to searching for observation partners in your own department. Find a like-minded soul wherever you can on campus, someone who cares about teaching and wants to do it well, and propose that you sit in on one or two of each other's classes. One way or another, you'll get some new ideas out of the process.

Staying fresh is difficult, both throughout the semester and as the years of teaching pile up. But it matters.

I have a friend who has a great singing voice, and I have heard him sing the songs of other people many times. The first time I heard him sing a song that he had written himself, and that he clearly cared deeply about, was a real revelation—I felt a power in his voice that I had not heard before. He cared about that song, and it showed in his performance; I was really moved by it.

The same holds true for teaching. It's possible to go through the motions of a lesson plan very well, and for students to learn plenty even while you follow a mechanical script. But the real life and energy in a classroom come when you are excited about what you are doing, and the students know it. It will raise their energy level, which in turn will raise yours—and those will be the days that students will remember thirty years from now, and that will keep you coming back into the classroom every year.

Resources

Barnes, Louis B., et al., eds. *Teaching and the Case Method: Text, Cases, and Methods.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1994.

An excellent introduction to teaching through the case method, with examples from a variety of disciplines.

Duffy, Donna Killian, and Janet Wright Jones. "The Interim Weeks: Beating the Doldrums." In *Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester,* 159–198. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

This section of the book is dedicated to the middle weeks of the semester, and how to keep learning active and ongoing during that time frame.

Hunt, Russ. "What is Inkshedding?" *http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/dialogic/whatshed.htm*, January 24, 2007.

Hunt's overview of the technique, with a clear explanation of its origins and how to employ it in the classroom.

Lang, James. "Becoming a Learner Again." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51.33 (April 22, 2005): C1.

——— "Shaking Things Up." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53.9 (November 11, 2006): C2.

Chronicle essays on some of the strategies discussed in this chapter.

WEEK 12

Common Problems

Q: You make it all sound so easy, Jim. Will I really be able to follow all of your suggestions and have the perfect first semester?

A: No, you won't. Students are human beings, and human beings never do what books tell you they are going to do. So in this chapter I'm offering an FAQ section on the most common problems you will find with your students, followed by advice on a handful of other common problems that occur in teaching for the first time.

Q: How do I handle rude student behavior in my classroom—talking, laughing, getting up and down during class?

A: "No experience of new faculty as teachers," writes Robert Boice, "is so dramatic and traumatizing as facing unruly, uninvolved students—especially in the large, introductory courses traditionally assigned to newcomers" (81). Undoubtedly true; equally troublesome, with the omnipresence of laptops and wireless-enabled classrooms, is the problem of students spending class time shopping for shoes online, rather than taking notes (see the following question).

Two major points here. First, rude student behavior often oc-