



October 2007



From the PETAL Blog...

As some of you already know, my personal research agenda involves the application of literary theory to the field of teaching and learning, and while most of my writing focuses on the online environment, virtually all of my work is equally applicable to the traditional classroom as well.

Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response Theory is a perfect example of how nicely literary theory can apply to educational issues. For Iser, the meaning of a text is determined solely by the individual reader's interaction with it. It is important to point out, then, that meaning cannot be located purely in the "author's techniques or the reader's psychology," but rather in the interaction between the two during the "reading process itself" (*Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, p. 31).

I firmly believe that this concept, while obviously oversimplified here, can lend a tremendous amount of depth and insight into our understanding of issues regarding teaching and learning. Indeed, it is this kind of interaction, between the author's writing and the reader's reading, between the instructor's teaching and the students' learning, that needs to be explored more fully in all areas of education research, both online and in the classroom.

For Iser, a text is simply a collection of marks on a page that only comes alive in the experience of a reader, so when we begin to think of teaching in the same way that Iser thinks of texts, we come to realize that teaching is like the proverbial tree in the woods: it is only "heard" if there is someone there to "hear" it.

Rob Gray, PETAL Director

Visit the web site of the

Program for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (PETAL)

for the full schedule of Fall 2007 events, teaching tips and links to web resources

www.southalabama.edu/petal

Advance Registration by phone or email is encouraged

Phone: 461-1563

Email: PETAL@usouthal.edu

October 2007 Events

Seminars - New Faculty Development - Library 181

Wed 10	3 pm - 5 pm	Class Management & Plagiarism	Gray
Thurs 11	1 pm - 3 pm	Class Management & Plagiarism	Gray
Wed 24	3 pm - 5 pm	Problem Solving & Crit. Thinking	Litchfield
Thurs 25	1 pm - 3 pm	Problem Solving & Crit. Thinking	Litchfield

Workshops - Library 123

Tu 2	10am - 12pm	Extending the Classroom w/Web	Gray
Wed 3	3pm - 5pm	Extending the Classroom w/Web	Gray
Tu 16	10am - 12pm	The Clicker	Gray
Wed 17	3pm - 5pm	The Clicker	Gray
Tu 30	10am - 12pm	Better Teaching with Power Point	Gray
Wed 31	3pm - 5pm	Better Teaching with Power Point	Gray

Roundtable Discussion Teaching with Simulators

Dr. Aaron Gilligan

October 8, 2007 2 pm - 3 pm
Room 181 University Library

Ms. Gilligan will demonstrate how the use of simulators can be a very valuable tool to stimulate the "tech" generation of students, as well as how faculty can become more comfortable using them.

Brown Bag Lunch

Writing as an Assessment Strategy

Dr. William Young & Dr. William Owen

October 19, 2007 12 to 1 pm
Room 181 University Library

Dr. Young and Dr. Owen will discuss a collaborative project they have designed to make student writing a more central part of their course assessment plan.

Reflecting on Teaching Practice

Some of you may have seen James M. Lang's column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on September 21st, where he introduces a self-published book on college teaching by Joe Ben Hoyle, who is an Associate Professor of Accounting at the University of Richmond. The book is entitled *Tips and Thoughts on Improving the Teaching Process in College: A Personal Diary*, and Laing praises it for its "folksy and pleasant" style, but mostly for the sound advice it offers.

After reading Laing's tidbits from the book, we thought we would devote this month's main newsletter article to one of Hoyle's recommendations. We will also reserve the right to use other tips for future articles in this place. If you would like to see the book in its entirety, however, without waiting for future issues of this newsletter, you can download it for free at <http://oncampus.richmond.edu/~jhoyle/>.

Hoyle's first tip concerns one of the most important steps in process of becoming a better teacher: reflecting on our own teaching practice.

(1) – Think back on your entire educational experience, from kindergarten through graduate school. Who was your best teacher? Select that one person who should be placed at the absolute pinnacle. In my experience, almost everyone arrives at a single name rather quickly without much guidance. People seem to know automatically the identity of that one individual they believe qualifies as their all-time best teacher.

(2) – Spend a few moments thinking about this educator. Recall the reasons that he or she meant so much to you. Do not get sidetracked by trivial memories. Why was this teacher outstanding? What did this person do that so many others did not? Now, come up with three terms to describe your best teacher. What are three terms that best exemplify the characteristics that made this individual so special?

(3) – One at a time, apply the three descriptive terms generated in (2) to your own teaching. Score yourself on each. As an example, if one of the descriptive terms was "highly organized" or "enthusiastic" or "genuinely caring," what grade is appropriate for your teaching? For each of these, as a teacher, are you outstanding, good, average, poor, or failing? Most people have a general understanding as to how well they teach. That is not the purpose of this exercise. I want a separate and personal evaluation for the three descriptive terms that you identified as being significant.

(4) – Do not consider the grades in (3) as permanent. They are not tattoos. For each of these three terms, come up with one action that you can attempt to raise the score. How can your grades be improved? Think about the kinds of activities that your own best teacher utilized. Let your imagination run wild; people talk a lot about thinking outside of the box but rarely do so. If this outstanding educator was now standing in your shoes, how would he or she go about achieving improvement?

These four questions are not designed to guide readers toward some universal descriptor of good teachers because there probably is none. I simply want you to consider the traits that you associate with high-quality education. Many individuals have taught for decades without thinking seriously about the fundamental question of what specific attributes cause a teacher to be judged outstanding--not just good but truly exceptional. Improvement is always difficult if a person does not understand the essence of the quest. In the simplest terms: As an educator, what does it take to be good and what can you possibly do to get better?

This exercise has one other purpose: The reader is placed in the student position. It is difficult to comprehend fully the essential importance of education and the key role played by effective teachers without vividly recalling the timorous days of being a student. Remembering how significant such individuals have been to our development is a good way to start contemplating actions that might spark a personal teaching evolution. (Hoyle, p. 5)



[Re]Introducing the PETAL Collection at the Library

The new and improved "PETAL Collection" of books devoted to issues of teaching and learning in higher education has been moved into the PETAL Office. The Collection, which used to take up three rows of the stacks outside the Instructional Media Center in the University Library, was underutilized. Therefore, we have decided to select what we thought were the most important books in the Collection and move them onto one standard bookcase in the PETAL office. All of the other books are being reintegrated into the library's main collection.

We hope you will come and check out the new PETAL Collection soon!

