

Faculty *focus*

Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint

Recursive Learning through the Catalyst Course Design Program

by Sarah Mitchell

Last fall, Dr. Emily Feuerherm, Assistant Professor of Linguistics, made a pact with a group of eight students—“Everything that ... I make you do, I’m gonna do.” With this principle in place, Feuerherm and the students embarked on the pilot run of the TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Seminar and Practicum. The course marked the final mountain in a range of courses designed to prepare students for teaching English as a second language (ESL). Successful completion resulted in a TESOL certificate that the students—regardless of original discipline—could use to explore employment as an English instructor abroad.

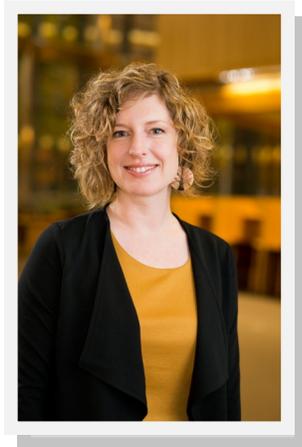
The TESOL Seminar and Practicum class itself was (and will be again when it runs in Fall 2018) an interactive, collaborative endeavor for the students, Dr. Feuerherm, and their instructor partners in UM-Flint’s English Language Program. Students were instructed both by Feuerherm in the seminar portion and mentored by ELP instructors as they practiced teaching in the Center. This melding of intellectual and practical engagement provided students with valuable life experience. When they left the course, the students had had the experience of teaching ESL students within a reputable establishment—an asset in the job market, but they also carried with them the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline. They could implement teaching techniques with confidence, but also understand exactly why certain methods are used in specific circumstances.

True to her word, Feuerherm subjected herself to the same level of work and scrutiny as her students. The class had to extensively prepare for lessons, down to penning detailed, “full-on” lesson plans, and so did

she—despite her ten years of prior teaching experience that had simplified her planning. Students had to be evaluated and given feedback, and Feuerherm made similar arrangements for herself. Not least of all, students were asked again and again to reflect on themselves as people, as well as the methods from their readings—the same methods they were experiencing as students in the seminar (a fact which Feuerherm purposely brought to their attention) and that they also used as student instructors in the practicum. Feuerherm herself practiced this intentional reflection in both the development stage and as she looked back on the course after its completion.

All of this seemingly extra work paid off. As Feuerherm stated, the practice “made me more thoughtful,” but “also impacted the students in the way that they couldn’t escape the rationale of why we were doing things,” meaning students “bought into it [the process] much better and more fully.”

The genesis of this course model can be traced back to what Feuerherm referred to as the “key to making this whole project work”—her participation in the Catalyst Course Design Program (CCDP). Her time in the CCDP, much like the environment she would



Emily Feuerherm
Assistant Professor
Linguistics

develop for her students, hinged on collaboration, intentionality, and, above all, the learning outcomes. The program aids instructors in designing finely tuned courses. The backwards design organization of the program calls for teachers to develop clear-cut learning outcomes at the start and subsequently develop projects and lessons that have a fully fleshed-out set of reasons behind them. This results in “making sure that the type of learning environment that you create is the best kind of learning environment,” one that “will allow students ... to feel safe, to feel comfortable, to fail” and “get the opportunity to explore and try and feel like they can do that effectively.”

Dr. Feuerherm felt that the Catalyst Course Design, in conjunction with the application of similar principles and methods within the TESOL Seminar and Practicum itself, led her back to some beneficial ideas and processes that had gone by the wayside over time. This “reuse, revise, reject” reflective model that both the CCDP and the resultant course fostered has transcended the TESOL Seminar and Practicum course, and has shown up in her revised preparation for her other courses.

Students themselves also directly benefitted from Feuerherm’s participation in the course design program, not only due to the recursive nature of the TESOL course’s design, but also because Feuerherm used the stipend she received to purchase her students’ entrance into the Michigan TESOL Conference, where they not only met professionals in the field, but also presented as panelists thanks to Feuerherm’s forward-thinking proposal, an activity which earned them compliments from the conference’s keynote speaker— an internationally acknowledged TESOL professional who mistook the engaged, polished group of undergraduates for graduate students. In the end, students walked away from the course with intellectual and practical experience in the field, polished professional documents (i.e., a teaching statement and résumé), a teaching portfolio, and a résumé that included presenting at a regional professional conference— not to mention their newly formed connections to professionals in the field. (The first student to complete the program landed a job before she

graduated.)

Though Feuerherm has identified areas to amend the next time around, such as having students write and submit their own proposal to the Michigan TESOL Conference, the class received overwhelmingly positive reviews from students and involved instructors alike. One student, Anthony Taylor, called his experience “most enjoyable,” and went on to praise the dual theoretical/practical nature of the course when he said, “Teacher led class discussion was always productive, and the guest speakers provided valuable insight into the practical portion of the theory covered in class. The practicum portion of the class was productive, and invaluable. Teaching with the English Language Program throughout the course of the term allowed for direct application of theory covered in class.”

Dr. Feuerherm enjoyed benefits beyond the satisfaction of knowing that her students had grown as teachers and as people in their time together. She ended the semester in possession of an extensive course portfolio that she can include in her materials for promotion and tenure, a few revitalized teaching practices, and the satisfaction of a successful endeavor. Though she was “nervous” and “concerned” about the prospect of teaching future ESL teachers— something she’d never done despite her intimate knowledge of the ESL world— Feuerherm said that she felt “like the support that I got [in the Catalyst Course Design Program] was exactly what I needed to be able to make it work— I think— really well.”

Written by ***Sarah Mitchell***

Sarah serves as the Graduate Research Assistant for the TCLT. She can also be found tutoring at the Marian E. Wright Writing Center and discussing English—her chosen major—in class a couple of nights a week.