

# Faculty *focus*

*Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint*

## *What Would You Die For?: Provocative Questions to Improve Learning*

by Jennifer Ross

Would you be willing to die for your beliefs? When former-TCLT director Jan Worth-Nelson asked the 2012-2013 Catalyst Course Design participants to develop what Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Teachers Do* and last year's TCLT guest speaker, calls a "fascinating question," or a question which would capture students' attention and improve learning, to Aderemi Artis it only seemed natural to frame his course redesign around questions themselves. Artis, an assistant professor of philosophy, entered the program planning to redesign PHL 342, Early Modern Philosophy. He admits, "I hated school my whole life until I started college." Yet, once he enrolled at Davidson College in North Carolina, he says, "my own intellectual interest came



Aderemi Artis, Assistant Professor  
Philosophy

about because I was trying to figure out what to ask." Artis believes students experience much the same difficulty and outlined his catalyst redesign work with the question this article poses to you: would you be willing to die for your beliefs? In terms of the class, this

question became "why would someone be willing to die for the ideas discussed by early modern European philosophers?"

Once he had structured the course around this question, Artis then turned questions over to the students through a question-of-the-day strategy. Each day, students were to come to class with questions in mind. They broke into six or seven groups and voted on which questions should take priority. These questions were then written on the board. The entire class would vote on the questions they would like to discuss the most, and the questions were discussed in order of priority. By encouraging students to determine their own questions in this way, Artis gave "more of an opportunity for students to make choices based on their own insight and what's important" to them. From this process, students were able to generate their own core meaning of the material.

Artis' strategy proved valuable. Through it he generated and maintained enthusiasm and energy in the classroom, which resulted in improved student performance. Artis reports that the classroom brightened with "a lot of energy and electricity...People were immediately alive." When asked why this may have been, he speculates that his selected reading materials, in conjunction with the emphasis on questions, played a major part. "Part of the reason why it worked was because the readings had stuff that would be interesting enough to focus on for a large part of the class." Artis felt an obligation

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to “expose students to traditional works so that they can have a conversation,” but he also selected non-canonical works that contained interesting points for discussion. Artis believes that this enthusiasm “translated into better student performance with regard to learning outcomes.” In fact, students responded so well that he has since transposed the technique into other classes.

Not only was the experience positive and beneficial for students, Artis affirms that it was “fun for me too.” He explains that while he might know more facts than his students, he believes that he does not “think better or [is] more capable or more knowledgeable than [his] students” because students have insights that he does not. One instance of this occurred during discussion of John Locke’s ideas toward personal identity. The class was discussing the importance of memory in the formation of personal identity, and one student suggested that, because memory can be unreliable and bent toward our own projections and aims, these projections and aims can “ultimately trump our memory because the strength with which we believe in our goals for who we want to be is different from a strong belief in a memory.” In light of this insight, Artis says he plans on returning to this idea to see if he can develop it more fully.

Perhaps most valuable and rewarding was that the question-of-the-day structure created an open, hospitable space in which Artis and his students discussed provocative topics as equals engaged in a “republic of letters” in which “any of us can produce or criticize knowledge.” For Artis, educational institutions have strayed from this ideal. He explains, “It’s important for educators to be aware that students can experience powerful, dangerous, sometimes destructive forces in academia. It doesn’t always lead to optimal outcomes for the students...and there’s something sad about that.” Many students, he says, will pursue education, but fall short of their best. Teaching

with the concept of the republic of letters in mind allows for “something so magical” to happen because students and instructors enter into discussion “in some sense as equals beyond the basic expectations of skills.” This sense of equality between students and their instructors creates a “healthy classroom space” where both parties can have the “rare opportunity to discuss...what’s extremely important in a positive way.”

By participating in the TCLT’s Catalyst Course Design Project, Aderemi Artis was offered the opportunity to experiment with pedagogy and teaching methods. During the program, Artis embraced the idea of fascinating questions and developed his Early Modern Philosophy course around them. Artis’s technique gave students a great deal of power to determine class discussion and the development of core meaning. Many students in his class “noted that, in effect, they were the ones that decided the topics of discussion for at least the first half of each class session.” This sense of self-determination, coupled with the atmosphere of respect and equality, created a “rich experience” for both Artis and his students, stimulating creative and critical thinking, kindling energy and enthusiasm, and fueling deeper, more meaningful learning in the mutual pursuit of enlightenment.

Written by **Jennifer Ross**

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