Faculty *focus*

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Exercising Minds:
Active Learning in a "Real World" Seminar

by Jennifer Ross

Who of us doesn't want our students to feel "more connected" and "more invested" in their classes and coursework? Yet, as many of us know, the methods of achieving this sort of engagement can be rather hard to pin down.

Active learning has been the topic of many of the Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching's programs over the past few years. Greg Laurence, an assistant professor of management, took those strategies to heart while redesigning a 400-level business course in the TCLT's Catalyst Course Design program. Through carefully implemented active learning Laurence not only achieved a high level of student engagement, but produced a "real-world" seminar full of practical experience.

Laurence joined the CCD program during its inaugural year, bringing with him real-world ideas for Business 445 Human Resource Development, a course he would be teaching for the first time in Winter 2011. While working as an English-as-a-second-language teacher in Japan, Laurence discovered that "business was everywhere." He returned to the United States and earned his MBA at Syracuse University. He then relocated to Japan, where he worked as a business development manager to PADECO Company and in the American Chamber of Commerce. After several years in these capacities, Laurence returned once again to the United States and earned his PhD in Management in 2010.

When asked to describe his experience in the Catalyst program Laurence replied, "It's a bit like

Greg Laurence, Assistant Professor
Management

having a friend to go to the gym with." Laurence explains, "I had never taught this class before, and here was a chance to develop the course in a structured program, rather than rushing over winter break." Discussion and inclusion of active learning in course material is an integral part of the Catalyst program and as Laurence sat in on these conversations he recalls, "bells were going off in my head." To Laurence, the active learning strategies the Catalyst faculty discussed "were not only a natural part of the course; they *were* the course."

When the Human Resource Development class started that winter semester, active learning composed approximately 50% of in-class work time. Much of this time focused on a semester-long group project in which teams of four students conducted needs assessment on their classmates, developed training programs to address deficiencies, and devised evaluation to gauge the effectiveness of their programs. For Laurence, this active learning approach was valuable and fitting for "the last

human resource management class that most of the students in it will take." The class not only drew on all of the knowledge and experience gained over the course of undergraduate study, but offered students a mediated practicum of typical real-world management scenarios including data analysis, program development, evaluation, and collaboration.

When asked about student resistance to the semester-long group assignment, and by extension, active learning in general, Laurence chuckled. "Initially, there's a – you'd almost call it a paralysis. You lay out the program and it's just so daunting, especially when I step back and it's like okay, go." Laurence qualified much of the resistance he encountered as "background resistance" brought on by previous poor group experiences and opposition to "social loafing," in which the rest of the group must compensate for one or more members who fail to adequately carry out their responsibilities.

To combat some of that resistance and empower his students, Laurence incorporated a "sophisticated peer assessment component," which he had developed over a series of semesters. This component takes two forms. In the first, the team can "fire" a nonresponsive member through a majority vote. This person must then either complete the project by him- or herself or form a new team with individuals fired from other groups. The second form utilizes peer- assessment scoring at the end of the project. If a person falls below a 33% approval rating, he or she fails the project regardless. Laurence also relies on chunking to reduce student resistance. In this method, "microgoals" separate one big project into "discrete deliverables due at particular times during the semester," which then creates momentum and reduces the possibility that the team will disintegrate.

Laurence reports that the "active learning component works even better than I expected. Overwhelmingly the comments are that [the students have] never had anything so realistic." Not only did the students feel "more connected to the material," but they also realized the value of a simulated real-world project. Laurence explains, students "felt this was one of the first opportunities they had experienced in their undergraduate program to really put into practice various aspects of their major programs of study . . . [and] to actively implement some project focused on their chosen fields."

For Laurence, the best part of teaching is that "I'm never bored, and I mean that in the most positive way . . . I really do like interacting with students, watching students progress." This passion for student-centeredness led Laurence to develop a highly interactive class in which students utilized all of the knowledge gained across their undergraduate study, engaged in rigorous active learning, and left this real-world seminar armed with the skills necessary to succeed. In reflecting on his experiences, Laurence states, "Perhaps the greatest lesson out of all of this is that I (we) can and should restrain ourselves from time to time...and allow students to find their ways."

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