

Faculty *focus*

Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint

Teaching and Learning: *The Yin and Yang of Lifelong Learning*

by Jennifer Ross

Songwriter and performer Phil Collins gets at the heart of teaching and learning when he sings, “In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn” in Disney’s *Tarzan*. In the song, Collins reminds us that much of teaching is, in fact, mutual and continued learning. Not only do students learn from their professors, but professors learn both from preparing for the course and from their students through class discussion and student essays.

Hisyar Ozsoy exemplifies this commitment to both learning and teaching. Originally from the Kurdish region of Turkey, Ozsoy earned his PhD at the University of Texas at Austin and joined the University of Michigan – Flint in Fall 2011 as an assistant professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice. Not long after, the Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching selected Ozsoy as one of the Winter 2012 Catalyst Course Design fellows and provided him with

funding to revamp his ANT 290 Language and Culture course.

Ozsoy describes the class as an “experiment.” This was his first time teaching the course and it “was not in [his] immediate field.” “For every class,” he says, “I had to study hard. I had to learn first and do a lot of research.” But, he admits, “I like those classes that I really learn . . . If you yourself don’t learn it, it becomes mechanical.” To prepare both himself and the material for the course, Ozsoy used TCLT funds to purchase new books for this and future classes and presented research originating from a class lecture in a panel on Kurdish Politics and the Middle East at New York University.

In preparing for the course, Ozsoy reframed weekly themes, course readings, objectives and outcomes, and assessment strategies in order to give students a better understanding of the course’s purpose and goals. Ozsoy started the semester by explaining his rationale behind every measurement strategy, answering questions on every student’s mind: Why quizzes? Why exams? Why a final research project? Ozsoy hoped that by openly addressing these questions he could give his students “a good sense of what I was trying to do” and explain the intentions of his assessment methods in such a way that students could understand and perhaps become more receptive to them. He explains, “If at the end of the semester the students truly understand the meaning and significance of the initial goals/outcomes, I believe the course is already a success.” Ozsoy revisited the course goals both at the midterm and the end of the semester and discovered that students were indeed gaining an understanding of what those goals meant and why. By the end of the semester the students understood



Hisyar Ozsoy, Assistant Professor
Anthropology

The Yin and Yang of Lifelong Learning (continued)

the purposes of the course objectives, had developed an idea of why they were in the class, and were able to take something away from their experience.

A major portion of Ozsoy's course design involved engaging students in active learning. Ozsoy included documentaries and other visual material to stimulate students' interest and used "concrete examples and questions to foster class discussions." These visual images and the modern-day applications considered during discussion helped students conceptualize the abstract topics of two already nebulous subjects, language and culture. "The best part of the course," Ozsoy states, "was that we learned so many new things with fun, and we could establish a friendly and enjoyable environment for communication and dialogue."

To give further shape to class material, Ozsoy developed a collaborative research project and presentation that was to function as a practical application of the theoretical base the students had learned throughout the semester. Ozsoy directed his students to write papers describing how people talk about a specific place in and around Flint by integrating class discussion with primary source interviews and concepts from *Wisdom Sits in Places*, a book in which four members of the Western Apache Tribe discuss the significance ancestral places hold in their culture. While students at first expressed a little anxiety about the project, Ozsoy reports that it "went particularly well." The groups chose topics such as downtown, the Farmer's Market, the Michigan School for the Deaf, and St. Michael's Parish, and interviewed native residents of Flint in order to "listen to, describe, and interpret" how they spoke about these places. From the project, students learned that when people talk about places, they talk about memories and bring the collective cultural memory of those places into the present.

After reflecting on his experience, Ozsoy says he intends to change several aspects of the course. First, he wants to find a new textbook. *Language, Culture and Communication: The Meaning of Messages* by Nancy Bonvillian is supposed to be the best in the field, but Ozsoy

says it "was not very interesting" for students in this introductory level class and "included long chapters with too much factual information" that stifled "imaginative thinking." In the next year or so, Ozsoy hopes to hand-select a compilation of more valuable readings that would replace the textbook. Ozsoy also plans to modify reading assessment. Instead of giving five random quizzes, he will assign weekly reading notes and two reading-based questions students should answer briefly in paragraph form. This shift should encourage students to not only complete the reading assignments, but also gain more from them. Finally, Ozsoy reports that the active learning strategies "proved to be the right matches for the course," but he hopes to engage students even more by asking them to bring their own concrete examples to class discussions.

With assistance from the TCLT's Catalyst Course Design program, Hisyar Ozsoy transformed ANT 290 Language and Culture into a relatable and engaging course by taking the time to thoroughly explain the course's assessment methods, goals, and purposes, and by including numerous opportunities for students to correlate theoretical knowledge with concrete examples and modern day applications, especially through the culminating research project and presentation. Ozsoy explains, "The course was a gradual process of learning in which things became clearer as we studied, discussed, researched, and tested our knowledge in a collaborative manner." Not only did the students acquire knowledge from the class, but Ozsoy himself learned much as he prepared for the lectures and discussed topics with students. Looking back, Ozsoy can say definitively, "This was the most enjoyable course I have ever taught."

Written by **Jennifer Ross**

Jen is the Graduate Student Research Assistant for the TCLT. Currently she is pursuing a Master of Arts degree in English as well as an additional bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in dance.