# Learning New Teaching Skills- Discussant

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**Conference Session:** 

Learning New Teaching Skills -- This session focuses on new teaching skills and methods. The four papers were:

What's So Funny About Teaching 'Dismal' Science Classes?, Ron Deiter, Iowa State University

*Teaching the Algebraic and Geometric Institution of Economics*, Brent Gloy and Paul Preckel, Purdue University.

Area of Expertise Teams: The Michigan Approach to Applied Research and Extension, Arlen Leholm, Larry Hamm, Murari Suvedi, Ian Gray, and Fred Poston, Michigan State University

An Application of Learning Style Theory to Undergraduate Institution in Accounting: A Minnesota Example, Ward Nefstead, University of Minnesota

Discussant: James C. Hanson University of Maryland.

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# Learning New Teaching Skills

Discussant: James C. Hanson

The four papers presented provide important information to improve our educational efforts at our respective universities, whether in the classroom or in the community with our outreach and Extension efforts. As an organizational technique, I have arranged the papers to represent the range of concerns associated with good teaching. They are: 1) understanding your audience, 2) improving your teaching effectiveness, 3) providing valuable information, and 4) creating a connection with your students -- assigning one paper to each category. The range of papers is significant, varying from David Letterman to symbolic mathematical programs, and from learning style inventories to improving Extension programs for dairy farmers. What the papers have in common, however, is the uniqueness and value of their ideas and each author's commitment to improving the learning process whether in a formal or non-formal setting.

The challenge to us reading or listening to these presentations is to act on the ideas provided here. Good intentions are not enough. Excellence in education requires time, the following innovations require a significant investment so that our students benefit. The difficulty is in preparing during the "off-season" so that when our classes begin the innovations have been incorporated and we are prepared. The challenge to the presenters (Nefstead, Gloy and Preckel) is to verify through an evaluation process that their ideas improved students' learning. Common sense and experience tell me that their ideas are sound, but in these days of outcomebased programming, they need to establish improvements in student learning. Leholm et al. surveyed the users of Extension programs and found approval for the area of expertise teams.

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His challenge is to survey faculty to determine their response to this new organizational structure, so that these teams can be efficiently created at other institutions.

## **Understand your audience**

In Ward Nefstead's article, *An Application of Learning Style Theory to Undergraduate Instruction in Accounting: A Minnesota Example*, he describes his use of a learning style instrument developed by Fleming and Mills to better understand his students. With the results of the survey, he redesigned the accounting course to improve his teaching effectiveness. The strength of this approach is that the education methodology is based on the students' learning needs, not the teacher's.

Too often as instructors, whether in the classroom or in an Extension setting, we approach our task from our own experiences, i.e., we learned this material in a certain fashion, and assume others should learn this material the same way. Or, more typically, we ignore differences in our various audiences and give the same presentation to all. For example, how does an audience of older farmers, who may listen intently but selectively to what they judge important (and take few written notes), learn? And, how does this differ from young adults in our undergraduate courses, who may write everything done but not really understand the major point? Whatever the answer, it is our responsibility to understand our students, whether through surveys such as suggested by Nefstead, or by listening and observation. We should banish from our minds the out-of-date arrogance that our students should adjust their selves to us, and not vice-versa. For those who are uncertain how to accurately measure their students' learning style, Nefstead's article encourages us to at least diversify our efforts so that we include various classroom exercises beyond the standard lecture format.

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#### Improve your teaching effectiveness

In the article, *Teaching the Algebraic and Geometric Intuition of Economics*, Gloy and Preckel describe the use of a symbolic mathematics program, entitled Maple, to improve students' intuitive understanding of the econometric issue of multicollinearity. To paraphrase an old saying, they show that "a three-dimensional graphical representation is worth a thousand equations". Or, according to Gloy and Preckel, "The problem is relatively simple, but the intuition behind it is often difficult to convey to students." (page 6). People with gifts in mathematics, visual what the equation means; the rest of us simply read and memorize. By using these symbolic mathematics programs, we help level the playing field for those students who struggle with mathematics. With our profession increasingly self-selecting for mathematically gifted students, these programs help ensure that we are not limiting the broad range of students who are interested in becoming economists.

The easiest, quickest way to impart information to students is through lecture. Whether that information is retained to any significant degree by our students is less likely. This is not new information to us. However, we all face the same constraint -- time. Teaching takes time and lots of it; there is no way to avoid it. But good teachers invest the time to improve their educational effectiveness. In fact, Gloy and Preckel, while strongly advocating the use of Maple, caution that a significant effort is required in learning how to use it -- but the investment is worth the effort.

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#### **Provide valuable information**

In Arlen Leholm et al.'s paper, *Area of Expertise Teams: The Michigan Approach to Applied Research and Extension*, they describe the use of Area of Expertise teams with research and Extension faculty. These teams, which number approximately 18, have both research and Extension faculty as members. Specifically the authors state "a seamless interface between Extension and research is the key to meeting the future needs of an information-based society." (page 1)

The strength of these teams is that they connect research to Extension, campus to field faculty, improve collaboration among disciplines, and facilitate better coordination across state lines. Land grant institutions have too long allowed research faculty and Extension faculty to go their own ways. Research can lack focus or value to the citizens of that state and Extension programs can languish through the presentation of old material. Where these teams work, solid educational programs are provided to clientele. In fact, a survey of clientele shows that one-half of Michigan farmers had heard of these teams and most were satisfied.

The challenge to this innovation and other similar ones is achieving faculty support. Many faculty may be suspicious of new ways of doing things and expect when the current administrators move on, all programs will revert to the traditional organization. Institutions need to clearly communicate that these improvements, for example, area of expertise teams, are permanent. An ongoing issue with all team efforts is recognizing individual contributions through an equitable process. Finally, universities need to promote the freedom to let faculty be productive in their own ways. Area of expertise teams do not necessarily limit individual faculty freedom, but we have to guard against them being too all-encompassing so as to prevent creative approaches generated by individuals.

## Create a connection with your students

In Ron Deiter's *What's So Funny About Teaching 'Dismal' Science Classes?*, he notes that "humor in the classroom can help to create a more positive learning environment by breaking down barriers to communication". A survey of his students indicates that they agreed with the premise that humor can increase learning. Keeping things in perspective, however, humor ranked near the bottom of 10 characteristics of good teachers. In this paper, Deiter demonstrates examples of what humor is and how to incorporate it in the classroom.

Our mission to educate future generations is important, but we should not take ourselves too seriously. We can be pleasant and personalize our class by relating our experiences; and share funny things that happen to us. From my experience, however, a cautionary note is in order. Most of us can share humorous stories or insights, however, very few people can tell jokes well. The essence of this paper is that we need to improve the classroom climate so that there are no barriers to learning. Humor is definitely one way to accomplish that goal.