

# CTE NOTEBOOK

**Volume 7  
Issue 2  
Fall 2004**

"Dealing with Sensitive  
Issues in the Classroom"

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### **Reinert CTE Mission Statement**

The mission of the Paul C. Reinert, S.J. Center for Teaching Excellence is to support Saint Louis University faculty and graduate students so that they can better serve the intellectual, spiritual, and social needs of all learners.

### **The Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence**

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## **Civility, Freedom, and Tolerance: Effectively Approaching Race and Identity in the Classroom**

*Dr. Jonathan Smith, American Studies*

I typically encounter little difficulty engendering conversations about race and racism because it has been the central and obvious topic of most courses I teach. Since few of those classes are required courses, each student, through the act of registering for the course, has self-selected herself as a willing participant in a semester long discussion of a sensitive topic—race. Still, within those classes, the difficulty of honest and open conversations increases as the subjects of race and racism encroach upon contemporary and local issues. These difficulties increase yet again as race discussions intersect with gender and sexuality. Here, in my experience, the makeup of the class matters little, as most students will enter the classroom already feeling the pressures and implications of their own identity position on the course. That is to say, the racial demographics of the class may immediately work to silence one group of students and empower the other. For better or worse, my visible black presence may also serve either as an authorizing sign for black (and other non-white) students or as a cautionary and silencing one for white (and other non-black) students. I must be sensitive to the possibility that the very identities and identifications—how we are seen and identified by others—we bring to the classroom has shaped our dialogic space long before the topic of race itself is broached. Because I can never quite predetermine how my students will read these signs, it becomes my responsibility early in the semester to establish not only the general ground rules and context for class discussion, but to do so in a manner that allows

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each student to believe in my teacherly commitment to these three pillars of classroom discussion: civility, tolerance, and freedom.

Successful establishment of these pillars begins with my ability to persuade students, in word and deed, of my personal commitment to them. I cannot leave to chance the achievement of an ideal balance between freedom, civility and tolerance. This requires, perhaps more than any other pedagogic quality or condition, simple honesty about and willingness to reveal my own views and positions about racial identities and identifications. Here, teaching by example means revealing my own racial defenses and vulnerabilities.

Because nearly every class I teach requires that I tread the waters of race, gender, religion, and sexuality, I typically begin the semester by having each student introduce herself and self-identify according to the most important identity construct of the semester. If I am teaching about the Middle Passage, I have each student self-identify (with neither judgment nor comment from me) his race; In “Religion and American Culture,” everyone identifies according to place of origin, race, and religion. I include myself among the respondents. So far, without fail, each one of these exercises produces enough self-identifying terms to demonstrate, a need for further clarifying discussion of topics they might have thought settled. This exercise continually opens me up to the possibility of an early and spectacular failure because I have never successfully anticipated the full range of responses to questions of self-identification. I expose myself to failure because this activity comprises my first introduction to many of the students taking my courses and not only can I not begin to predict their answer, I cannot predict how they will respond to the simple request of being asked to

identify themselves. After all, a student’s willingness to discuss race and literature or race and culture does not necessarily lead to a willingness to discuss his specific racial identity.

The importance of this exercise begins with the fact that there are no wrong answers and leads students to think about the distinction between how they see themselves (identity) and how others see them (identifications). This becomes readily apparent in the various terms I hear from people who belong to the “same” racial group—e.g., black, Black, African American, human; white, Caucasian, Italian American, American, human. Each particular set of answers provides me pedagogical and ideological cues about the classroom community I am about to teach. These terms provide material for the first class discussion, which involves parsing the differences and similarities between the terms that name “racial” identity. In this first discussion, I make every effort to pay attention not only to academic level, but also to the level of comfort this community exhibits when talking about race. Ideally, this conversation helps me to anticipate obstacles and opportunities to either confront or pursue throughout the semester, because each individual class is not only a thing my syllabus allows me to plough indiscriminately through, but a learning community—in most cases (simply because of my black presence in the room) a diverse, multi-racial community.

Within the classroom, I believe freedom of expression is indispensable. Yet, when the course requires discussion of such sensitive topics as race, gender, sexuality, and religion, civility must shore it up on one side, and simple tolerance on the other. In those classroom communities where civility, freedom and tolerance hold sway, there exists the real chance for

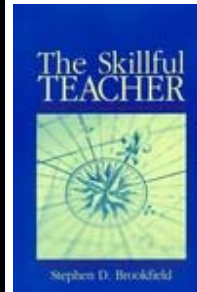
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silences, fall away from unarticulated assumptions, and for fear to relinquish its defensive hold on stereotypes. A civil, free, and tolerant classroom community goes a long way towards providing students with a safe space wherein they are allowed to articulate and advance questions they might otherwise silence for fear.

Although I freely admit my intention to foster antiracist dialogue within the classroom, I find no pedagogical reason to have discussions in which some important segment, however small, of the class feels itself closed out of the conversation. Does this mean, then, that an anything goes atmosphere exists within the classroom? Of course not. The focus on civility, when articulated, adjudicated, and enforced by the teacher, works to encourage care on the part of the inquisitive speaker. The emphasis on tolerance, on the other hand, works to forestall rash and unproductive responses from an offended listener. This does not mean that I seek total agreement, harmony, or conversion. Instead, in a civil, free and tolerant classroom environment I do not shy away from the difficult spaces or from conflict. In my teaching experience, I have had individual classroom sessions fraught with difficulty—emotional, political, and intellectual. Such moments have regularly led to long discussions with individual students in office hours, and once to an influx of black students into my office hours after class. At other times, the difficult spaces have occasioned formal rebuttals and presentations on the part of students who may have been offended by course material or discussion comments. Yet, because those students remained convinced of the importance of civility, freedom, and tolerance, we could almost always arrive at some way of addressing the issue within the scope of the classroom while maintaining a steady focus on the academic goals and objectives of the course.

## New Additions to the CTE Booshef



*The Skillful Teacher* by Stephen D. Brookfield

Featured in CTE's bookclub, Brookfield offers insight, inspiration, and down-to-earth advice to new and seasoned teachers, showing how to thrive on the unpredictability and diversity of classroom life. Readers will find practical advice on lecturing, discussions, role-playing, simulation and other instructional techniques.



*What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain

Ken Bain had conducted years of careful research on a variety of campuses, and the result is an inspirational summary of what teachers do that truly makes a difference in students lives, and what any teacher can do to improve. Richard Light

### Pre-Tenured Faculty Portfolio Development Retreat April 8-9, 2005

The Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence hosts an annual two-day retreat for pre-tenured faculty to come together to analyze, reflect and document evidence of good teaching. Participants leave with a draft of their teaching portfolio that illustrates their professional expertise and efforts to improve their teaching.

# Tips From Faculty

“I thought the discussion was going quite well. I know the issue was a sensitive topic, but the class was engaged in a polite and thoughtful manner. Suddenly, someone made a comment that many found offensive. In the course of a few seconds, the discussion went from cordial to down right hostile as the emotion in the room began to rise.”

Many faculty members have found themselves in a similar situation. In the following sections, three of Saint Louis University’s faculty offer their suggestions on handling sensitive issues in the classroom.

## **ADRIAN BLOW, PH.D.**

### Department of Counseling and Family Therapy

In the field of therapy – which includes counseling individuals, couples, and families – there are many sensitive issues, and students regularly bring these up in the classroom. Many of these issues have to do with the values that students bring into the profession, and their beliefs about change. Unfortunately, there is not always one right way of looking at these issues, and all of viewpoints are tainted by social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religious beliefs, political affiliation, and the like.

A basic assumption that I bring into the classroom is that real differences in belief systems exist, and that it is important for students to be able to talk about these differences in order to grow (or that others can grow by what they have to say). The very process of discussion, in a safe environment, allows for the personal exploration of ideas in a group, as well for alternative views or feedback about these ideas. This, in my mind, is an ideal context for learning and personal growth.

In a nutshell, I believe that sensitive issues in the

classroom are best dealt with at the front end of a course, at which time the instructor establishes a context of safety that sets the tone for the entire course. In this environment, students ideally feel comfortable to discuss any issue, or raise any question.

Establishing a context of safety begins by acknowledging that real differences can and do exist; that in a diverse world these differences are normal and valued; and that these differences are not resolved through avoidance. Rather, they are best addressed through open dialogue in a context of safety and respect.

As a result, I welcome the discussion of sensitive subjects in my classes, but with some basic guidelines.

These include the following:

- All viewpoints are welcome.
- We can all challenge others with our viewpoints, but only if we are open to be challenged by others.
- Sharing of our viewpoints need to be respectful and without malicious intent to any person in the classroom.
- Our ideas are best if we are able to support them from the scholarly literature, and if they fall within accepted ethical principles, both of our profession, and of society in general.

In my experience, doing things right at the outset of a course by establishing an atmosphere of safety is critical to dealing with sensitive issues and for establishing a context of critical thinking. The context of safety is facilitated by clear guidelines, and by not avoiding issues that are present in the lives of our students. This classroom atmosphere leads to an environment where students learn from each other, the instructor, and even from themselves.

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**ELLEN M. BURKEMPER, PH.D.**  
School of Social Service

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There are a couple of ways to think about this situation. One is to deal with the situation once it arises. The other is to set in motion, in the first day of the class, the courtesy expectations for the discussion of ideas. The later might include forewarning students that class material and discussion may touch on one's values and well-entrenched attitudes. The important point is HOW one goes about discussing this material. Students should voice ideas and at the same time avoid the use of the word "you", instead begin their discussions with "I". The point is that one must own one's voice in the discussion, and not attack others for their ideas.

Instructors can also prepare students for sensitive topics and discussion by modeling appropriate behavior. As we all know, the lens through which we view the world reflects itself in our discussions. The instructor has to take the high road by thoughtfully introducing material, reflecting multiple views. Students may hear their subjective understandings and at the same time hear other viewpoints. This can set the stage for a reduction of personal attacks.

Announcing courtesy expectations and modeling appropriate behavior may not always prevent a tense atmosphere. It may seem obvious that, if emotion overtakes a classroom, the emotion will then be driving the behavior of students. The instructor may wish to summarize the views of students in a manner that reflects on the material presented, thus taking charge of the discussion. This is not accomplished in a manner that dismisses the emotion, but summarizes what has been heard and felt as well as incorporating the ideas that precipitated the emotion. The instructor's overt action then acknowledges the thoughts and feelings of the students and can bring the discussion back to the class material.

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### Spring 2005 Effective Teaching Seminar Schedule All Times 1:30—3:30 pm

January 18	"Critical Thinking in the Classroom"
January 21	Richard Harvey, Psychology
February 4	"Beyond the Syllabus"
	Ellen Harshman, Business
February 15	"Teaching Portfolio Workshop"
February 18	Jim Korn, Psychology
March 1	TBA
March 4	
March 15	"Classroom Assessment"
March 18	Dana Sayre Stanhope, Physician Asst Ed.
March 29	"Handling Difficult Situations in the Classroom"
April 1	Jonathan Smith, American Studies
April 12	TBA
April 29	
April 16	"Service Learning and Classroom Reflection"
April 29	Christy Finsel, Service Learning Coordinator

### The 2004 National Education Association Art of Teaching Prize

\$2,500 award for an article that contributes to the expansion of the welcoming and democratic culture of higher learning and the ideals of tolerance, justice, and the unfettered pursuit of truth traditional to the academy. The winning entries will be published in Thought & Action, the NEA Higher Education Journal.

For submission guidelines or further information visit the National Education Association Web site at:  
[www.nea.org/he](http://www.nea.org/he)

### The Gwenna Moss Teaching & Learning Centre

On-line class for graduate students, sessional lecturers, and new faculty members:

#### **Introduction to Teaching in Higher Education: Transforming Teaching Learning, and Self**

For information visit: [www.teachinghighered.ca](http://www.teachinghighered.ca)

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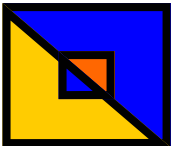
**WAYNE HELLMANN, DR. OF THEOLOGY**  
Department of Theological Studies

In order to lead students to new concepts or ideas that may provide occasion for discomfort, confusion or even strong disagreement, I have found it important first to facilitate a safe environment in the classroom in which students will not become unduly threatened when conflicting ideas become passionate. How is this safe environment facilitated? First of all, students in a classroom should at least know each other's names. From the very first class until the job is accomplished, the instructor with the students should spend some time each class learning names. It can be done in the manner of some imaginative type of game that can be fun and humorous. This makes a world of difference in the classroom environment and it helps foster a community spirit within the class. The time taken for this exercise can reap much benefit.

One benefit is that if students already know each other and feel some degree of comfort within the group, the tension that arises from disagreements is more

manageable for both instructor and students. To call upon each other by name already puts the disagreement in the context of an established relationship. Then, when a strong disagreement erupts within the class discussion, it is easier to involve other students to help mediate the dispute.

How is this done? I have often asked other students not so immediately involved in the dispute to re-articulate the diverse positions, each articulating just one of the positions. After the differing positions become clear and the reasons for the positions, I would ask other students then to see if they can mediate the situation. In other words, involve the whole class in a hostile situation that arises and call some students not so immediately involved into articulation and mediation of the situation. Almost any situation that arises in a classroom can be transformed into a learning experience. However, the necessary foundation for such must first be there, namely, a shared community of persons who can be named and a co-operative learning spirit within the classroom.



**2nd Annual Integrating Teaching & Research Conference**  
Sponsored by the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence and  
the Office of Research Services

**Making the Link:**

A Faculty Forum on Undergraduate Teaching and Research

Friday, January 7, 2005  
8:30 a.m.—12:30 p.m.  
Anheuser-Busch Auditorium, Cook Hall

- Learn about SLU Resources to support faculty and undergraduate research
- Participate in discipline-specific break-out sessions and hear from faculty who integrate teaching and research in their work with undergraduates.
- View SLU faculty and undergraduate research posters, find additional resources from academic publishers and software vendors .

For more information, please contact CTE at 977-3944 or ORS at 977-2241. Check our site for additional conference information and for online registration: <http://itr.slu.edu>.



## The Technology Corner: Handling Difficult Issues in Online Discussion

*Sandy Gambill, Assistant Director  
Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence*

It should come to no surprise to anyone who has seen an online discussion board or listserv fall apart because of participant disagreement or off topic discussion that handling difficult issues is as much a part of online courses as face-to-face courses. There is something about the seemingly anonymous online environment that makes students feel free to say things they would never dream of saying in class. It's also easy to misinterpret someone's discussion posting or e-mail without visual cues. Misinterpretation cuts both ways; many teachers have had issue with students not understanding an e-mail comment on an assignment or grade. Here are some resources to help you avoid communication issues in your courses.

**Netiquette Guidelines:** Although "netiquette" seems like one of those ancient Internet terms that we've moved past, it's still important to establish some baseline rules around electronic communication in a course. You might raise the topic with students by having them explore website such as

[www.fau.edu/netiquette/net/](http://www.fau.edu/netiquette/net/) or

[www.onlinenetiquette.com/](http://www.onlinenetiquette.com/) and then ask them to help develop guidelines for the course.

**Facilitating Online Discussions:** Facilitating online discussion is an acquired skill. You can teach students things like hitting the reply button, so the message stays threaded into the conversation, but deciding when you as the teacher should jump into a discussion, how to diffuse a hot topic, or how to get a topic back on track can be challenging. These sites have some great ideas for meeting these sorts of challenges.

Spokane Falls Community College: Managing Online Discussions:

<http://faculty.spokanefalls.edu/discussions/manage.htm>

From "Online Teaching: Have you got what it takes?" Strategies to Promote Online Discussion:

<http://members.shaw.ca/mdde615/howcommunicate.htm>

and

Sample Activities to Promote Online Discussion:

<http://members.shaw.ca/mdde615/cmnctesmpl.htm>

### Grant Opportunities?

[www.slu.edu/research/ors.html](http://www.slu.edu/research/ors.html)

or

Contact the  
Office of Resource Services  
at 977-2241

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## "From the Director"

*Dr. Mary Stephen*  
*Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence*

This semester members of the faculty book club are reading Stephen Brookfield's *The Skillful Teacher*. Brookfield mentions that the need for faculty to challenge students who may be in "educational cul-de-sacs" to venture out and try new skills, look at new perspectives and broaden their frames of reference. The author continues "often the most important thing you can do for your students is to challenge them with alternative perspectives, new activities, and critical reflection."

There is a danger inherent in challenging students to consider different perspectives, especially if students display an emotionally charged reaction to another student's point of view. Many faculty members face this challenge on a regular basis because their course content includes sensitive issues; however, all faculty members

face the possibility that a class discussion might become unexpectedly emotionally charged. Several years ago, I was surprised when what I thought would be a routine discussion in an instructional technology class about uses of the Internet unexpectedly became a very heated discussion among students on various ways to address the issue of unequal access to the Internet.

For this issue of *The Notebook*, we invited several faculty members who regularly teach sensitive topics to share some of their strategies for creating environments in which students feel safe to discuss alternative perspectives and for handling classroom situations which become unexpectedly emotionally charged. If you have other strategies you would like to share please email them to [cte@slu.edu](mailto:cte@slu.edu) for posting on our website.

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