Happenings at the
Faculty Development Center

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Universal Design for Learning

Session 1 of 4: Universal Design for Learning: What Is It? Why Does It Matter at EMU?
*Friday, February 4, 2-3:15pm|Facilitated by Dr. Jennifer Desiderio*

Pandemic teaching has highlighted the idea that students have different needs when it comes to learning; it can sometimes feel impossible to conduct a class that takes all of these needs into account successfully. It is clear that a "one-size fits all" approach to teaching and learning does not consider the unique learning styles of our diverse EMU student body. The principles of Universal Design for Learning aim to equip educators with the tools necessary to remove barriers and create successful learning experiences by considering these diverse needs and cultivating an approach suitable for the breadth of learning styles our students bring. This four-part series offers an overview to the approach in the first session, talks about how it can be applied to learning in an online setting and in the physical classroom in the second and third sessions, and concludes by exploring how UDL can contribute diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within an institution of higher education.

Register Today!

Click or scan the QR code for more information and to register for sessions.

book spotlight
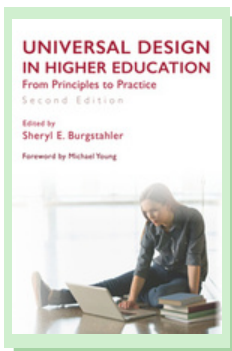
This week we feature *Universal Design in Higher Education,* edited by Sheryl E. Burgstahler.

This book is a comprehensive guide on creating fully accessible college and university programs. Available for borrowing from our library, it's the perfect read to get ready for the Universal Design for Learning series kicking off at the FDC next week.

click here to read the full spotlight

teaching spotlight

Professor Julie Kuether

University Supervisor
Student Teaching
College of Education

click here to read about a dedicated educator helping to train the next generation of teachers

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January 24, 2022

Teaching Blog #3 | Social Presence and Teacher Transparency in the (Pandemic) Classroom

Sarah M. Ginsberg

Sarah M. Ginsberg
Professor of Special Education and Communication Sciences and Disorders

At the heart of any good classroom dynamic, whether in person or online, during a pandemic or so-called normal circumstances, lies a willingness for students to talk, ask questions, and share their perspective. As an instructor, these interactions contribute to my sense of the students' engagement with the material. Social presence, which became popular in the mid-1990's, was described as the sense of personal connection students have with other learners, or a feeling of community, in an online learning environment. Research about social presence demonstrated that learners need to have a sense of who they are learning with (peers) and who they are learning from (instructor) in order to experience satisfaction with learning in an online course. I suspect that students who have a clear sense of who they are learning with and from in face-to-face learning contexts experience similar satisfaction and increased comfort in being willing to actively engage in the classroom through asking questions and sharing their thoughts.

I first came across this literature in the early 2000's as I was conducting research about the influence of faculty classroom communication on students' perspectives about the instructor. In my grounded theory research, I developed the idea of teacher transparency. Transparent teachers communicate to their students who they are as people as well as their views of teaching and learning. In this study students were able to articulate insights into the transparent teachers' caring and reflective nature and accurately describe their instructors' perspectives on teaching and learning. The students of transparent teachers also reported being motivated to work hard in their courses. Related to social presence, teacher transparency resulted in increased student engagement by giving students a sense of who they are learning from.

So how do we give the students the information that they need to feel safe and willing to engage in learning during online or in person classes? There are any number of approaches that you might use to increase both social presence and teacher transparency. I will share three steps that I implement, many from the beginning of the semester. On the first day of class (in person or online) I have the students get into small groups to meet each other and exchange contact information for the purpose of supporting each other throughout the semester. Then I give the group the task of creating a list of questions for me as the instructor. My directions are "you can ask me anything that you think would make you more comfortable learning in this class." Creating the list of questions is often their first interaction and allows them to begin working together. It also gives them a chance to ask a question as a group so that asking the question doesn't make them feel vulnerable. I have never had to decline to answer a question because it was inappropriate or too personal, but I will say that many of their questions are thought provoking and create opportunities for me to share small innocuous details about myself that allow them to develop a sense of who I am (such as my area of research or that

chocolate is the way to my heart). Anecdotally, this exercise often gives me a strong sense of how lively the class discussions will be over the coming semester, and how hard I will have to work at drawing them into discussions.

The second step I take is sharing a statement of my teaching philosophy in my syllabus. I share several points, including "anxiety is the antithesis of learning." I explain each briefly in the syllabus, and I spend time talking about their implications for our learning space. I reinforce my philosophy throughout the semester by referring back to what I have written and shared. I will say to them, "Are you feeling anxious about this project? If you are, let's talk about it so that you can focus on learning." Over the course of the semester I will show "how do you feel today?" memes at the beginning of class and check in with them about how they are doing. This gives them a moment to share with me and with each other thoughts they might be having, or stress they are sharing. It creates the space for them to connect and tells them that I care about how they are doing.

The third item takes some time from teaching, but I find that it is worth every minute. At the beginning of the term, particularly when I have a new cohort of students, I ask them to introduce themselves by sharing something about themselves. My favorite ice-breaker questions are "something people are surprised to learn about me is…" or "something that I am really proud of …" Their responses give all of us a sense of who is in the class and how they see themselves. It is often impressive how many students have shared interests. The realization that they have common interests helps them become comfortable with each other as learners. Throughout the semester, particularly when we have been fully online, and the students don't have the opportunity to interact informally, I create small group activities during class through breakout rooms. For each application-based activity I specify for them the goal of the task, the steps they will need to take to complete the task, and the time frame to complete it. As I pop in and out of breakout rooms checking on their progress, I give them just an extra minute or two beyond what the task actually requires so that they can interact informally. These extra few minutes allow them to forge connections with each other and furthers their sense of who they are learning alongside.

One of the takeaway lessons from both the concepts of teacher transparency and social presence is that students will be more engaged in classroom learning when they have a sense of who is in the learning community with them. There are a wide variety of methods that you might use; you may be doing some of them already. The tips shared here are ones that I have learned along the way, mostly from outstanding teaching colleagues. I can't take credit for inventing them, just for adapting them to make them my own. I would encourage you to consider what you would want to know about people in a learning community in order to feel comfortable actively engaging in discussions. Find ways to improve the sense of connection that everyone feels with each other that are consistent with who you are as an instructor. Communication approaches consistent with your most authentic self as an instructor will be most successful and will hopefully yield a more engaged group of students in your courses.

What's Coming Up

Click or scan the QR codes for more info

Research Writers Collaborative
Mondays, 1:30pm-3:30pm|Tuesdays, 10:00am-12:00pm|Thursdays, 1:00pm-3:00pm
- An opportunity for EMU faculty to support each other while achieving realistic writing goals. Sessions focus on developing healthy writing habits, creating realistic writing goals and boosting writing productivity. Choose one of these times for your writing group.

Focus Groups and Listening Sessions
January 26, 3:30pm-4:30pm
- Join Dr. Gregory Plagens (Political Science) for a session designed to enhance participants' understanding and implementation of focus groups in the academic setting. The discussion will cover the purpose and proper execution of focus groups.

Addressing Misinformation, Bias, and News Literacy
February 2, 2:00pm-3:30pm|February 22, 2:00pm-3:30pm|March 17, 2:00pm-3:30pm
- This three-part virtual series will enable instructors to integrate news literacy concepts and strategies into their teaching. The first session will cover the tools and skills needed to verify the authenticity of information and create engaging fact-checking investigations.

Faculty Scholarly and Creative Activity Showcase
March 17, 4:00pm-6:30pm
- We invite all instructors - tenured, tenure-track, emeritus, and lecturers - to display scholarly and creative activities disseminated/completed during 2019, 2020, and 2021. **Submit your information using the form on our website by February 17, 2022.**

CONNECT Teaching Conference

Keynote address by Dr. Mays Imad: Thursday 2/10|7:30pm|300 Halle
Conference continues Friday 2/11

The best teaching can take place after we've given ourselves opportunities to learn from the literature, from our experience, and perhaps most importantly, from our colleagues. Robert John Meehan reminds us that "the most valuable resource teachers have is each other."

The CONNECT Teaching Conference, hosted by the Bruce K. Nelson Faculty Development Center, seeks to provide this opportunity for EMU's distinguished educators to learn from each other and further refine our teaching. On the evening of February 10, the conference begins with a keynote address by Dr. Mays Imad, a nationally-recognized expert on trauma-informed teaching and learning. The conference follows with a day of presentations, workshops, and discussions on the 11th, with opportunities to learn from your colleagues and about FDC programs in which you can partake.

Join us for all or part of the conference; the conversations you share and connections you make will enhance the work you do with our students.

REGISTER TODAY!

Check out the event page on our website for continually-updated information about CONNECT conference sessions and times.

Click or scan the QR code to register or learn more. Questions? Contact us at faculty_development @emich.edu