

BRADLEY COULTER

TEACHING THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNER CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Report & Reflection | March 24, 2014

Date | Session Attended

September 16, 2013	Teaching the 21 st Century Learner group session one
October 8, 2013	Teaching the 21 st Century Learner group session two
November 12, 2013	Teaching the 21 st Century Learner group session three
January 14, 2014	Teaching the 21 st Century Learner group session four
January 29, 2014	<i>Generation on a Tightrope</i> discussion session
February 4, 2014	Brown Bag: AVID – Cornell Note-Taking session one
February 11, 2014	Brown Bag: AVID – Cornell Note-Taking session two
February 25, 2014	Brown Bag: AVID – Philosophical Chairs

Reflection

The materials covered in "Teaching the 21st Century Learner" were eye-opening on a number of levels. Firstly, it was important to gain the perspective that by-and-large *all* university students in the United States – particularly first generation university students – are experiencing challenges and distractions unknown just a generation before. Chronically under-prepared for the academic language, rigor, and demands of university, these students lack the skills and abilities that university educators were once able to confidently assume were possessed by any incoming freshman class. As they have sought to adapt to and compensate for their own needs and deficiencies, 21st century university students are turning to the Internet more than ever before, and becoming more and more reliant on emerging social media and distributed digital networks for socialization, collaboration, and research. Understanding that this is not simply a challenge for my students – or MNSU students – but students nation-wide, has greatly broadened my view on the resources, strategies, and practices available to guide my students – and adapt my teaching – toward their success.

Secondly, it was heartening, especially when the situation can lead to legitimate despair, to know that I am not alone in confronting these challenges and struggling to help students to succeed. It is always helpful to know that there are resources, literature, and best practices "out there" to follow, but it was even more helpful to come together once a month with other educators who were all sharing a similar struggle and facing common challenges in our shared goal to deliver the best possible education – the best possible future – to our students. Hearing new perspectives from, and exchanging thoughts and strategies with my colleagues from across disciplines and the University gave me not only new ideas to apply practically to my classroom, but also courage and hope.

Beyond identifying the shared, massive structural changes (and failures) in the higher education system in the United States, the program – through our conversations and detailed reading and discussion of the book *Generation on a Tightrope* – identified practical, "on-the-ground" steps to take toward improving the university experience for today's students. Chief among these was the recognition that our incoming students are largely unprepared to learn at a university level. Our students need new approaches and tools simply to be successful as students, before they can begin to excel in their discipline.

To that end, the training and insight provided by the Brown Bag AVID sessions were particularly helpful. The Cornell note-taking system is something I absolutely intend to introduce and use in my courses next fall. Providing students with a clear, navigable way to take notes—As both an aid for study later on and as a tool for retention during lecture—will, I think, vastly improve student performance on objective assessments. Likewise, the Cornell note-taking system incorporates strategies for reading and marking texts, which I am confident will help with both the comprehension and retention of my assigned readings. Introducing students to these techniques at the beginning of the semester, and reinforcing them during the length of the course, will hopefully improve student performance and satisfaction, not only in my class, but in other courses in the department where they might deploy their new skills. If nothing else, clearly explaining the need and value of good note-taking and close reading at the very least equips the students to make informed choices about their level of engagement with the class, which was something I had made the error of assuming was happening organically.

Similarly, the AVID approach to Philosophical Chairs provides a simple, clear, but highly interactive method for enhancing my class discussions. This approach will encourage the students to become invested in the readings, as they must become active participants in the discussion, capable of addressing the topic and speaking to relevance, opinion, and findings of fact. Even for students that complete the readings, discussions presently seem to be regarded as just another form of lecture, where the instructor does most of the talking. A format change, with students moving about the room, changing sides, and needing to respond to one-another should greatly improve both participation and retention. Both of the AVID strategies covered in the Brown Bag sessions seemed focused on finding ways to get students invested in their work and the course, which is certainly something I am always seeking to improve.

I found my participation in the Teaching the 21st Century Learner program to be highly beneficial, and I am looking forward to the start of the next semester when I can have these new strategies and techniques fully embedded in my courses. The open, honest community of educators it provided, as well as the new, practical techniques it has equipped me with are welcome and encouraging additions to my tool kit, especially in my first year at the University. I am eager to apply what I have learned to my classes, and to see what CETL will have on offer in the future.