

# Journal for Academic Excellence

## Welcome Back!

Fall Semester 2015 has arrived. To returning faculty, welcome back after (we hope) a vacation full of rest, and to new faculty, welcome to the unique institution found on College Drive in Dalton, a place designed from its inception in 1967 to provide quality educational opportunities and resources to our region and, now, beyond.

If you are a new faculty member at Dalton State, the *Journal for Academic Excellence* is both newsletter and academic journal. The first few pages typically have “news and notes” type of information, and the remaining pages contain original, peer-reviewed articles

on college teaching by our faculty and those at other institutions.

The journal is always posted to the Center for Academic Excellence website and available through search engines. Back issues are archived, and we have had some wonderful articles over the past three years. The back page provides the Submission Guidelines. We invite your input.

The Center for Academic Excellence, under the direction of Dr. Smitherman, has a rich and varied program planned for 2015-2016. Best wishes for a year of teaching, learning, leading, and service.

### Center for Academic Excellence Dalton State College

A Division of the Office of  
Academic Affairs

The mission of the CAE is to facilitate, support, and enhance the teaching and learning process at Dalton State College. The Center serves to ultimately improve student success and achievement of learning outcomes by promoting the creation of effective learning environments through the provision of resources and faculty development opportunities.

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## Faculty and Staff Recognition



Dr. Baogang Guo, Professor of Political Science, made presentations at three international academic conferences this summer in addition to directing USG Asia Council's summer study abroad program in China.

Between June 5 and 7, he attended the International Symposium on "China and the Changing World Order" held in Peking University in Beijing, China. Between June 12 and 13, he attended the International Symposium on "Local Innovation in China and the United States" held at Southwestern Jiaotong University in Chengdu, China. At both conferences, he presented his paper titled "County Governance in China and the U.S."

On July 13, Dr. Guo was invited as a speaker at an international conference on "Retrospective of and Prospects for Cross-Strait Relations" held at Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. His presentation topic was "Opportunities and Challenges in Cross-Strait Relations in 2016."



Dr. Ronda Ford, a new adjunct in the A.A. pathway in music, taught a week-long flute camp at Girls Preparatory School in Chattanooga. Dr. Ford holds a Doctorate in Musical Arts from the University of Southern Mississippi.



Dr. Kris Barton, Chair of the Department of Communication and Associate Professor, recently published a scholarly article on pop culture. The citation is

Barton, K. M. (2015). Roamers versus biters: A rhetorical examination of the differences between Woodbury and The Prison Group in *The Walking Dead* Graphic Novels. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 6(3), 260-268.



Dr. David Williams, Assistant Professor of Marketing in the School of Business, will have an article published in the *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. It is entitled, "Exploring the Relationship between Student Engagement, Twitter, and a Learning Management System: A Study of Undergraduate Marketing Students." Dr. Anita Whiting, Marketing Professor at Clayton State University, was co-author on the article.

Dr. Williams also participated in undergraduate research, a high impact practice, in guiding student Ellen Kolbas in publication of "Is Social Media Marketing Right For Your Business?" in the Spring 2015 issue of *Business Analytics*.



Coach Tony Ingle is co-author of a book entitled *I Don't Mind Hitting Bottom; I Just Hate Dragging*. He also produced a recent CD (audio) called *A Dream was Born*.

These accomplishments add to Coach Ingle's achievements as a coach this year. Along with leading our Roadrunner men's basketball team to the 2015 NAIA Division One National Championship, which was broadcast live on ESPN 3 TV, Coach Ingle won The Rawlings NAIA Division I National Coach of the Year award as well.

These awards brought exposure to Dalton State College in many newspapers, media outlets, and magazines throughout the nation, including the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Marietta Daily Journal*, *Mobile News*, *Savannah Times*, *Chattanooga Times and Free Press*, *Slam Magazine*, *Bleacher Report*, and *Basketball Times*.

Congratulations, Coach Ingle!

## Faculty and Staff Recognition



Dr. Tami Tomasello



Dr. Clint Kinkead



Mr. Nick Carty



Mr. Jerry Drye



Ms. Sarah Min

In the upcoming year, several members of the Dalton State Faculty and Staff will be involved in preparing open educational resources and open access textbooks for students, thanks to Affordable Learning Georgia grants from the USG.

Dr. Kris Barton, Dr. Barbara Tucker, Dr. Tami Tomasello, Dr. Clint Kinkead, Mr. Nick Carty, Mr. Jerry Drye, and Ms. Sarah Min of the Department of Communication will be writing the textbook and creating the ancillaries for COMM 1110. This work will include filming student speeches and creating test banks. Ms. Melissa Whitesell of the Roberts Library will be assisting them.

Dr. Jenny Crisp and Dr. Lydia Postell, also assisted by Ms. Whitesell, will be creating a textbook and ancillaries for Learning Support English and Reading. Learning Support classes are going through a transition in the USG, and Learning Support English has been the focus of DSC's Quality Enhancement Plan for SACSCOC.

Dr. Natalie Johnson, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, and Dr. Hassan El-Najjar, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, will be adapting an OpenStax textbook from Rice University for use in the Introduction to Sociology course here at DSC.

In total, about \$60,000 in grant money was provided to DSC faculty for this initiative, which projected saving to students in the hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.



Dr. Lydia Postell



Dr. Jenny Crisp



Ms. Melissa Whitesell



Dr. Hassan El-Najjar



Dr. Natalie Johnson

## Faculty and Staff Recognition



*Dr. Molly Zhou*



*Mr. David Brown*



*Dr. David desRochers*



*Dr. Susan Burran*



*Dr. Chuck Fink*

Dalton State College is exceeding expectations in receiving grants for Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG), making high quality materials available to students at no or very low costs.

To this point, there have been three rounds of ALG grants. Awardees for Round 3 are shown on page 4. Earlier, Dr. Molly Zhou, Assistant Professor in the School of Education, in conjunction with David Brown, who is now Instructional Technologist but formerly in Roberts Library, were recipients of two grants to create materials for Dr. Zhou's education classes, EDUC 3214 and 2130; those materials are now housed on the Library's libguides.

Faculty in the STEM disciplines were recipients of grants in previous rounds. For Round 1, Dr. Chuck Fink and Dr. Marina Smitherman received a grant to incorporate Open Educational Resources into the Anatomy and Physiology course. In Round 2, Dr. David DesRochers and Dr. Susan Burran obtained a grant to develop laboratory materials for Principles of Biology. Both of these are courses with high demand, again saving students on textbooks.

The ALG program is especially interested in awarding projects related to courses in the first two years with high enrollment. They are calling these the TOP 50 lower division courses.

For more information about Affordable Learning Georgia and grant proposals for Rounds 4 and 5, check out the website at [ALG](#):

There will also be a Brown Bag Luncheon Session  
on September 23 at 12:15  
on the Affordable Learning Georgia grants.

## CAE DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

Dr. Marina Smitherman



What do Student Motivation, E-portfolios, Open Education Resources, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning all have in common? They are all part of this year's theme for our CAE events! Welcome back to this brand new academic year 2015-2016. I hope you enjoyed the summer, whether you were working or playing, and are ready to get back in the classroom to continue engaging and encouraging our students along their academic journey.

We at the Center are here to both help you do that and at the same time get you the Professional Development and Renewal that you deserve to help you help our students. I am so excited to share the plans we have for this year. Our overarching theme, and conference title, is "Teaching Students to Fish: Motivating Students and Supporting High Impact Teaching and Learning" and we have a fantastic array of great speakers and events lined up to address this topic.

On September 11, the Center is joining with the QEP to host Dr. Kathleen Gabriel, author of *Teaching Unprepared Students* (Stylus, 2008), for a lunchtime workshop sharing practical solutions for engaging and supporting students who are capable of achieving but who arrive totally unprepared for college. This is a topic that most of us feel passionate about and will be particularly applicable for those working with learning support classes and freshman students.

Following that on October 16, Linda Nilson from Clemson returns to discuss Competency-Based Education and "Specifications-grading" method to help maximize student learning gains while saving

yourself time grading in the process—which sounds great to me!

Also in October, we have Edward Watson coming from UGA to share his experiences of using E-portfolios, something both students and faculty are likely to be using in the near future for assessment and beyond. To round off the Fall, Michele DiPietro, co-author of *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), is coming to speak with us on November 13 on "The Whole Person and Stress-Reduction," something we can all use some help with right before the holidays hit. This session will also include some yoga, so come dressed appropriately!

In the spring we have Derek Bruff (AKA the "Clicker Guy") from Vanderbilt, Ronald Taylor from Berry College on Problem-Based Learning, and Carl Moore on Experiential Learning. To top it off, we will be hosting our Seventh Annual Teaching and Learning Conference to address our theme in various ways. All of this year's speakers are leaders in the field of Educational Development, and I hope you can find the time to come and take advantage of the opportunity to benefit from their expertise without having to leave campus!

Along with our workshop series, we have several small groups running throughout the year. Natalie Johnson and Barbara Tucker are leading a "Coffee and Conversation" reflective practice group based around the book *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* by Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner. Brian Hibbs and Barbara Tucker are leading a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning group. Newer faculty will be discussing various chapters



of the *Teaching at its Best* book by Linda Nilson. However, this group is open to anyone that is interested, and it has a lot of great solutions for different challenging classroom issues.

A book group designed for women leaders on campus will be discussing the book *Pushback: Negotiating Skills for Women* by Selena Rezvani and a “Critical Conversations” group led by Kim Hays will meet to discuss the book *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* by John Krakauer. Although these are designed with a particular group in mind, anyone who is interested in the discussion is welcome to attend.

Our new Instructional Technologist, David Brown, will also be providing training sessions for various tools, and there will be a faculty learning community for those who desire to develop and teach online courses. This learning community will mentor faculty and walk them through the design and approval process for new online courses. Also, a big “Welcome” to Dr. Sarah Mergel of the History Department, our Open Education Resources guru. Further, Dr. Jenny Crisp of the English Department and Director of the QEP will be helping the Center for Academic Excellence with assessment

There are a couple of opportunities for you to get involved in the exciting developments in teaching and learning taking place on campus over the next couple of years. First, we will be putting together a cross-discipline action team of ten individuals who will be meeting monthly to work on a long-term strategic plan for adopting High Impact Practices. If things like undergraduate research, internships, writing-intensive courses, service-learning or other HIPs are a passion of yours, please contact me or a member of the leadership team (in the next paragraph). In addition, we are putting together a committee to organize our Seventh Annual

Teaching and Learning conference and help make this one the best yet, so if you have ever thought you would like to learn about conference organization, please give me a shout.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce our CAE Leadership Team for this year. Welcome back to Barbara Tucker, who oversees the CAE in the Academic Affairs Office; Elizabeth Lucht and John Asplund, who will work predominantly with our newer faculty (John also helps with our CAE BrightSpace page and session recording); and Christy Price as an Advisory Fellow. Welcome also to Brian Hibbs as a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning expert, Chris Wozny as our 2016 Conference Chair, and Leslie Harrelson as a team member who will be supporting a couple of different programs with her expertise. I appreciate each of these faculty volunteering their time to help us all develop and grow throughout this academic year.

Further information on our events is available on our CAE webpage at this [LINK](#). Remember, registering for our events helps us to serve you better by preparing sufficient refreshment and handouts, ensuring the rooms fit our audience, and enabling us to easily recognize your participation. Do please let us know as soon as you can if you are unable to attend as planned, so someone else can benefit from the opportunity so we can preserve our minimal budget for future events.

I look forward to welcoming you to an event soon, and remember if there is anything you are interested in learning about or would like to see running through the Center, please just let myself or a member of the leadership team know. It is going to be a great year!

Onwards and Upwards,

*Marina*

## Thoughts from the Editor: Exciting News for Online Learning

Barbara G. Tucker



Online learning is moving forward at Dalton State. David Brown has transitioned from the Roberts Library to the position of Instructional Technologist. He is located in the Brown Center (he gets to work in a building with his own name!). David is ready and willing to help all faculty with instructional technology questions and projects, and he will be providing training on D2L and other technology products.

Additionally, this summer the Academic Programs Committee approved two proposals related to Online Education at Dalton State.

The first was a revision of the “standard components” for online courses. After research into other systems of quality control for online classes, the Online Education Committee revised the standard components into rubrics for online and hybrid classes that are more specific and that can serve as both guides to developing the courses and evaluation tools for peer mentors.

The second was a plan to have students who want to enroll for an online course take an orientation quiz online before Banner will allow them to register for the online course. The quiz is patterned after the one that prospective eCore students complete. One of the concerns for online students is their readiness for the online environment, which, among other things, requires more self-direction. This quiz will take effect this fall for spring registration.

Now, let’s turn the lens. Are you, as a faculty member, ready for online course development and teaching? Although I have done it since 1998, and it’s my job and passion to increase the number of online offerings at DSC, I would have to admit it’s not for everyone, just like taking an online course is not for everyone. Here are a few questions to consider:

1. Do you like (or at least have no problem with) communicating through email? Do you generally answer your email quickly (as in within 24 hours?)
2. Do you like learning about new technologies? Do you already use PowerPoint when lecturing? Have you at least thought about using tools like iClickers? Have you been posting your content to GeorgiaView already or using it to supplement your classes?
3. Do you tend to plan your classes as a whole semester or week by week?
4. Do you like learning and being stretched when it comes to teaching and learning?

There is a method to the madness behind each of these questions. This year there will be a faculty learning community for those who want to start developing a course for online delivery. The community will walk together through the process of creating a fully online or hybrid course, with mentoring and the approval process involved.

If you are interested, please contact David Brown ([dobrown@daltonstate.edu](mailto:dobrown@daltonstate.edu)) or me ([btucker@daltonstate.edu](mailto:btucker@daltonstate.edu)). Right now we will base the schedule around your time, and most of the “meetings” will be online so that we can use the tools as we learn about them. Please join us!



# Aug 2015

Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.
10	11	12 New Faculty Orientation	13 Fall Faculty Assembly	14 Registration
17 First Day of A&B classes	18	19	20	21 <b>Promotion &amp; Tenure Workshop</b> 10am-12noon Brown 105 Celeste Humphrey & Andy Meyer
24 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	25 CAE Open House	26 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> New Faculty Group 3:30-4:30pm PH202	27 <b>Advising with EAB Analytics</b> Platform Intro Training 2:30-4:00pm or 4:00-5:30pm PH105.	28

"Teaching at its Best" New Faculty Group led by Elizabeth Lucht & John Asplund.

"Heart of Education" Coffee & Conversation Group led by Barbara Tucker & Natalie Johnson.

SOTL Group led by Brian Hibbs & Barbara Tucker.

Critical Conversations group led by Kim Hays.

Women in Leadership group led by Marina Smitherman.

Counseling & Career Counseling Sessions run by Travis McKie Voerste supported by the CARE team.

Library Schedule organized and led by Melissa Whitesell and David Brown.

Instructional Technology Sessions led by David Brown.

Any necessary changes will be sent via Email and updated on the web. Event sign-up on our website <https://www.daltonstate.edu/academics/cae-event-calendar.cms>.

notes



Dalton State CAE.....



# Sept 2015

Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.
Aug 31 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	1  Brown Bag 12:30-1:30pm Topic TBA	2 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> 3:30-4:30pm PH 202	3	4
7  Labor Day  ALG Textbook Transformation Grant R4 Deadline	8 Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Group, 3:15-4:15pm LIA 310	9	10  "Critical Conversations" 12:15-1:15pm PH202	11 <b>Kathleen Gabriel, (UCHIO)</b> <b>"Teaching Unprepared            Students,"</b> <b>Workshop 10:00am-12:00</b> <b>Brown 105</b> <b>Event supported by QEP.</b>
14 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	15	16 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> 3:30-4:30pm PH 202	17 Women in Leadership Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	18
21	22 Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Group, 3:15-4:15pm LIA 310	23 Brown Bag 12:30-1:30pm Open Education Resources Room TBA	24  "Critical Conversations" 12:15-1:15pm PH202	25 Advanced Red Folder Training 10am-12noon CARE Team PH207
28 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	29	30 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> 3:30-4:30pm PH 202		

Notes

Adult Learning Consortium Full Day on Adult Learners, Atlanta, Sept 25, contact [msmitherman@daltonstate.edu](mailto:msmitherman@daltonstate.edu)



# Oct 2015

Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.
			1	2 Edward Watson (UGA) "E-Portfolios" 9:30-12noon Brown 105 and T&L Summit at KSU
5 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	6 Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Group, 3:15-4:15pm LIA 310	7 Brown Bag 12:30-1:30pm Topic TBA	8 "Critical Conversations" 12:15-1:15pm PH202	9
12 Fall Break	13 Fall Break	14 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> 3:30-4:30pm PH 202	15 Women in Leadership Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	16 Linda Nilson (Clemson) "Specifications Grading" 9am-12 noon Brown 105.
19 Brown Bag 12:30-1:30pm Topic TBA	20 Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Group, 3:15-4:15pm LIA 310	21	22 "Critical Conversations" 12:15-1:15pm PH202	23
26 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	27 A Session Drop Date	28 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> 3:30-4:30pm PH 202	29	30 OER event Brown 105

## Notes

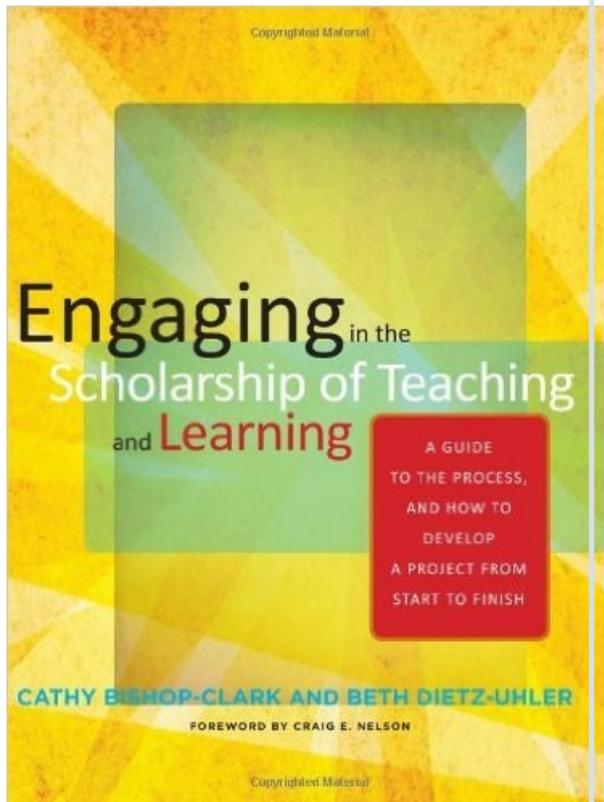
Research on Teaching and Learning Summit at Kennesaw State, Oct 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>. <http://cetl.kennesaw.edu/summit>  
AAC&U Academic Renewal Meeting: Global Learning in College, Fort Lauderdale, Oct 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>,  
<http://www.aacu.org/events/network-for-academic-renewal>  
45th Annual Conference of the International Society for Exploring Teaching and Learning, Savannah, GA  
October 15th-17th, <http://www.isetl.org/conference/>



# Nov-Dec 2015

Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.
2	3 Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Group, 3:15-4:15pm LIA 310	4	5 "Critical Conversations" 12:15-1:15pm PH202	6 QPR Suicide Prevention Training Travis McKie-Voerste 9am-12noon PH207
9 <i>Heart of Education</i> Reflective Practice Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	10 Brown Bag	11 <i>Teaching at its Best</i> 3:30-4:30pm PH 202	12 Women in Leadership Group 12:30-1:30pm PH202	13 <b>Michele DiPietro (KSU)</b> "Professional Renewal and Stress-Relief using the Chakra System" Come dressed for yoga! 10am-12noon, Brown 105
16	17 Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Group, 3:15-4:15pm LIA 310	18	19 "Critical Conversations" 12:15-1:15pm PH202	20
23	24	25 Thanksgiving Break	26 Thanksgiving Break	27
30	Dec 1	Dec 2	Dec 3	Dec 4
Dec 7 Last day of A & C Session classes	Dec 8 Finals 8 <sup>th</sup> -14 <sup>th</sup> . Graduation	Dec 9	Dec 10	Dec 11 ALG Textbook Transformation Grant R5 Deadline Dec 15 <sup>th</sup> .

notes



The Center for Academic Excellence wants to help you put your best teaching practices into writing!

The Center will host a Scholarship of Teaching and Writing Group based on the book, *Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, by Cathy Bishop-Clark and Beth Dietz-Uhler.

This group will be focused on mutual mentoring through the process of planning, writing, and submitting either a publication or a conference proposal in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

The group will be co-led by Brian Hibbs, Assistant Professor of Spanish, and Barbara Tucker, Associate Professor of Communication.

Thanks to a generous grant from the USG, books will be provided, but the group will involve a mutual commitment to producing some kind of deliverable within the year, one that would result in a conference presentation or article.

The group will encourage cross-disciplinary interaction and co-authoring relationships

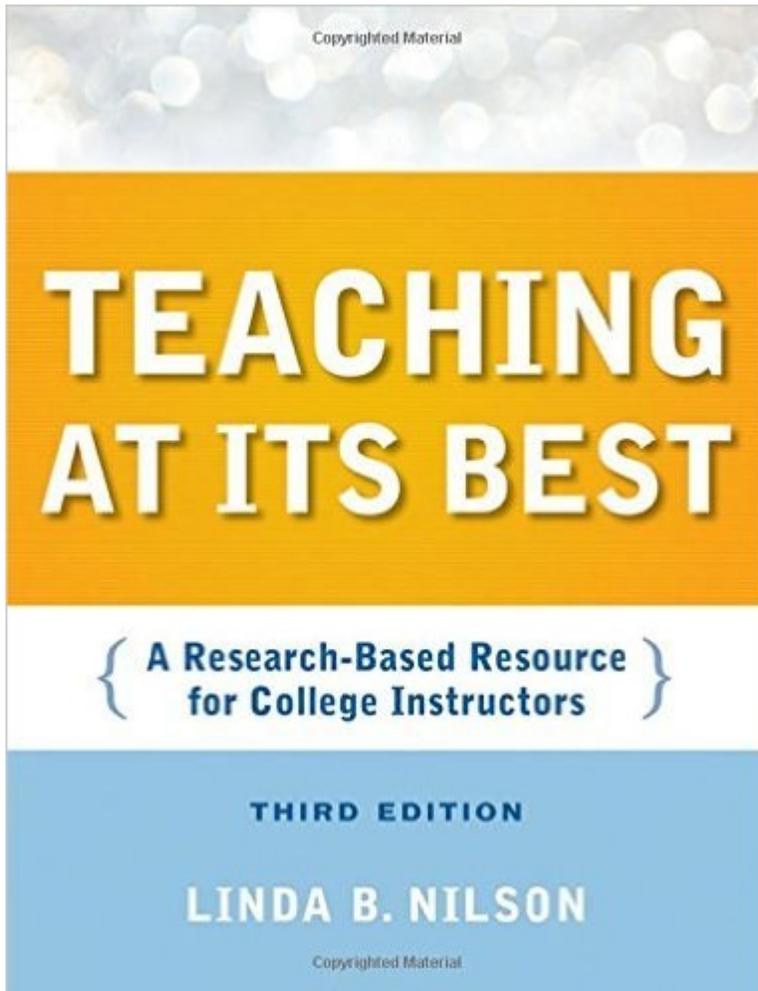
The group will meet at 3:15-4:15 on these dates in Liberal Arts 310:

Tuesday, September 8 and 22

Tuesday, October 6 and 20

Tuesday, November 3 and 17

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)



Author Linda Nilson is considered a leader in educational development. She is the founding director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation at Clemson University.

Dr. Nilson is the author of *The Graphic Syllabus* and the *Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course*. She has co-authored *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students' Self-Awareness and Learning Skills* with Barry Zimmerman and *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* with Claudia Stanney.

Dr. Nilson will be joining us on September 11 for a two-hour workshop on Specifications Grading.

Although this book group is part of the New Faculty Orientation, all faculty members are invited to attend. The groups will meet on the following days at 12:15-1:15 (Liberal Arts 31) and 3:30-4:30 (Peoples Hall 202):

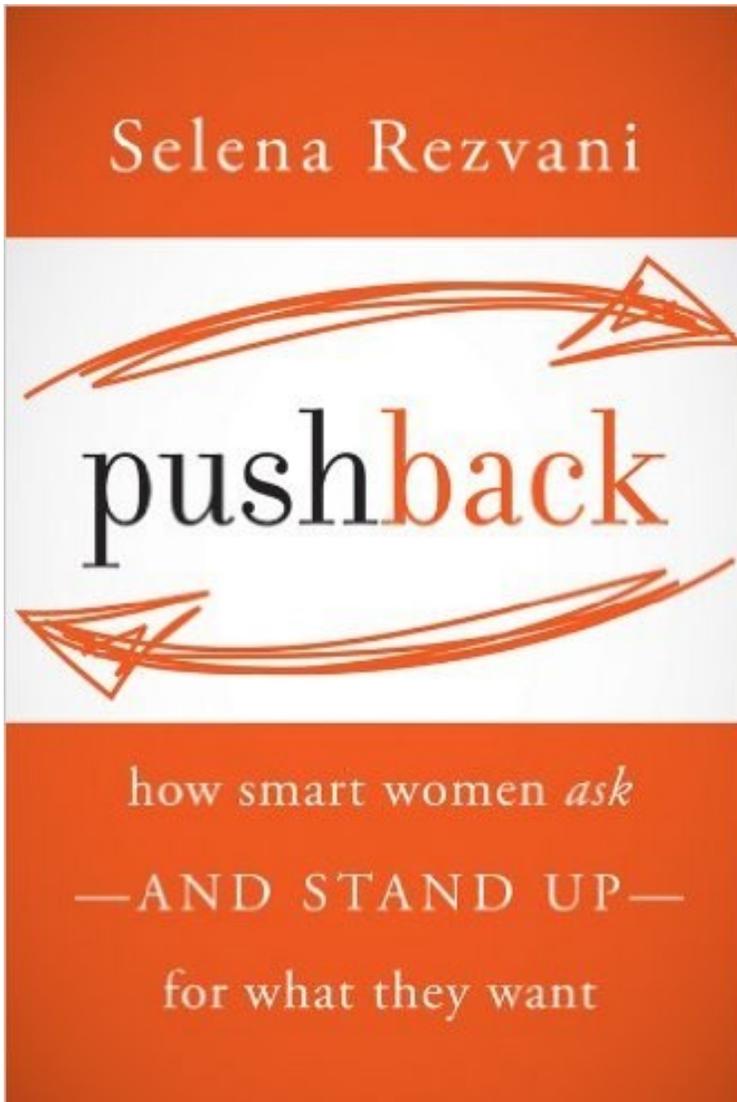
August 26

September 2, 16, and 30

October 14 and 28

November 11

Please indicate your plans to attend at **THIS SITE**.



In the tradition of Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, *Pushback* by Selena Rezvani is "Chock-full of bad habit breakers . . . teaches women how to become resilient negotiators" (Janet Hanson, Amazon review).

Discussions of this book will be held in Peoples Hall 202 at 12:30-1:30 on the following days:

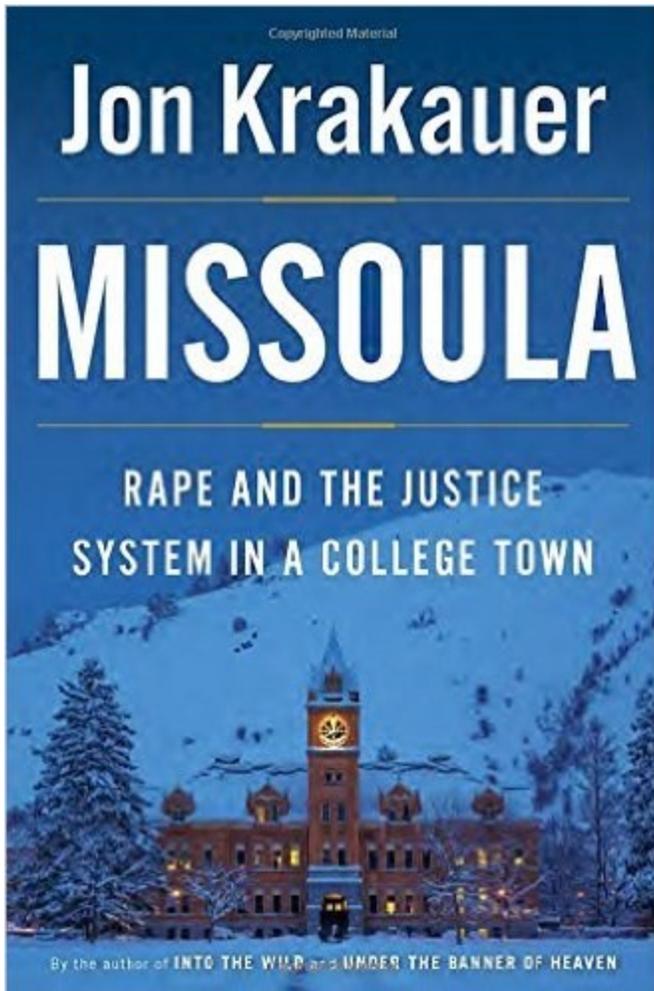
September 17

October 15

November 12

Please indicate at the site below if you plan to attend.

[HERE](#)



Dr. Kim Hays, Assistant Professor of Biology and 2015 Winner of the Dalton State Foundation Teaching Excellence Award, will be co-leading a book group on *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*. Dr. Jodi Johnson, Vice President for Student and Enrollment Services, will be joining her in leading the discussion group.

As reviewed by the Chicago Tribune, this book is "[C]lear and dispassionate, offering level-headed, in-depth reportage.... [T]he disquieting fact running through Krakauer's narrative is this: Missoula is typical." (borrowed from Amazon.com)

Jon Krakauer is a best-selling author of nonfiction, including *Into the Wild*.

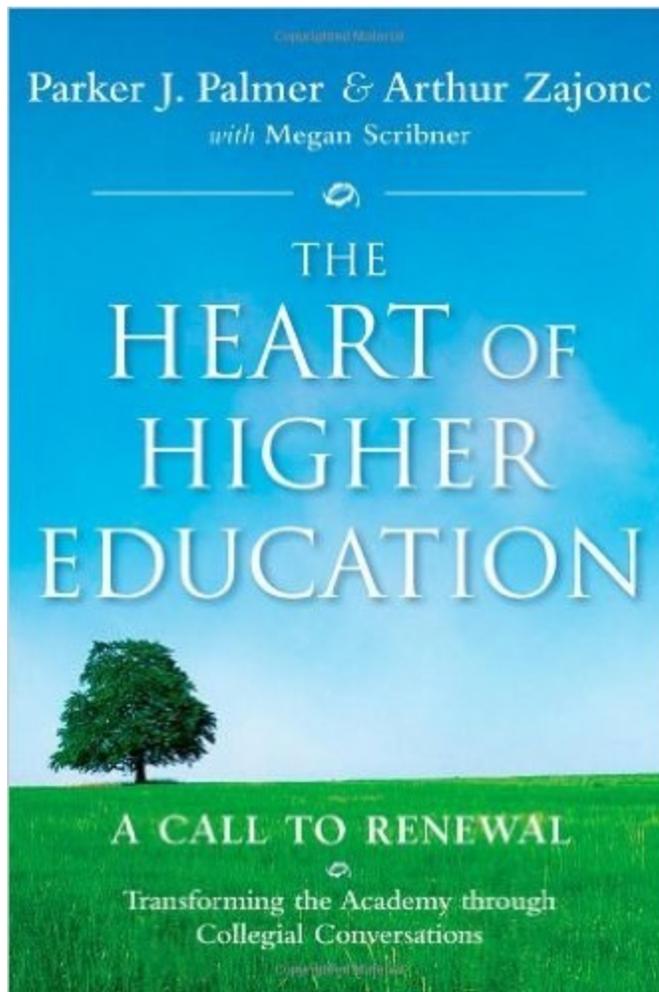
The discussions will be held in Peoples Hall 202 on the following Thursdays at 12:15-1:15:

September 10 and 24

October 8 and 22

November 5 and 19

Please indicate [HERE](#) below if you will be attending.



Dr. Natalie Johnson, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, and Dr. Barbara Tucker, Associate Professor of Communication, will be hosting “Coffee and Conversations” groups based on Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner’s book, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*.

Using the ideas in the book as a starting point, the group is designed to create conditions for mutual support and mentoring of faculty as we navigate a changing higher education landscape, fulfill our vocation of teaching, and try to meet students’ learning needs while achieving work-life balance.

The group is meant to be a space for personal and group reflection.

The discussion groups will be held on the following Mondays at 12:30-1:30 in Peoples Hall 202:

August 24 and 31

September 14 and 28

October 5 and 26

November 9

If you have questions, please contact Dr. Johnson at [njohnson1@daltonstate.edu](mailto:njohnson1@daltonstate.edu) or Dr. Tucker at [btucker@daltonstate.edu](mailto:btucker@daltonstate.edu). They can provide free access to the resource.



## Re-Capturing Curiosity: Promoting Self-Directed Learning through Study Essay Assignments

**Abstract:** Self-directed habits are essential for success within academia and the workforce. Teaching self-directed skills requires complex, yet interesting assignments where students take the lead and craft meaningful learning experiences. Incorporating a study essay, and its subsequent component assignments, is particularly useful within all classes, but specifically lower level liberal arts courses where students are largely still trying to define themselves as students and individuals. In its inclusion of technology, research, collaboration, and curiosity, the study essay exemplifies the self-motivation and metacognition of self-directed learning.

**Author Information:** Dr. Jennifer Randall is Assistant Professor of English at Dalton State College. She holds a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition Studies from Georgia State University and has taught at DSC for five years.

### Popularity and Nuances of Self-Directed Learning

The terms “student-centered” and “self-directed” have continued to gain momentum since their inception over forty years ago, and subsequent, relevant assignments are always in demand. Macaskill and Denovan (2013) focused on positive psychology and how self-directed classroom assignments and lectures boost confidence and self-esteem through improving levels of curiosity, gratitude, hope, forgiveness, and optimism improve autonomous and life-long learning. They noted the considerable breadth of research on self-directed learning and how this topic was “one of the most popular in educational publications between 1980 and 2000” because of how this educational philosophy meets “the fast-changing needs of the global world,” though “at the heart of self-directed learning is the autonomous learner” (p. 124). Self-directed learning requires practice and relies upon student-focused assignments to engage student self-analysis.

The foundational definition for self-

directed learning (SDL) comes from Knowles (1975), who highlights how students “take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and materials resources for learning. . . .” (p. 18). In addition Patterson, Crooks, and Lunyk-Child (2002) delineated six specific areas within SDL, where students are able to assess gaps in learning, evaluate their own and others’ skills and knowledge, reflect on their own educational journey, successfully manage information, and engage in critical thinking and critical appraisal. For college classes, and particularly for humanities courses such as composition, criminal justice, or even foreign language, shifting research and writing responsibilities into the hands of students to meet the nuances of (SDL) requires a delicate balance. Creating exciting assignments where students take control of their own learning can be a challenge, particularly if the goal of SDL is to help students achieve lifelong success (Du, 2013).

Hong, Haefner, and Slekar (2011) surveyed full and part time faculty at a four year college, stressing the need to make SDL

activities integral within the classroom. Wolters and Benzon (2013) discussed how “early efforts at characterizing self-regulated learning emphasized students’ use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, self-awareness, and feedback” (p.199). They further argued that these three areas can be used to study the regulation of motivation to improve classroom assignments and understand how and why students become motivated to learn or improve their effort and/or performance. Hong, Haefner, and Slekar (2011) defined SDL as preparing students to take control of their own lives by first taking responsibility for their own learning and behavior, and, in essence, preparing individuals for the job market and future employment.

Beyond the potential for greater personal growth and for greater career opportunities, Markant, DuBrow, Davachi, and Gureckis, (2014), in their study of 31 NYU community members, note that self-directed study leads to better memory because students “select information on the basis of their own uncertainty or existing memory” (p. 1212). Self-directed study, they found, also leads to an increase in performance and learning. Yeager, Henderson, Paunesku, Walton, D’Mello, Spitzer, and Duckworth, A. L. (2014) asserted students are motivated to complete self-directed tasks because they are looking for benefits for the self and career choices but also really want a greater meaning and purpose to their work. Educators and students alike are searching for relevant assignments that are not simply useful beyond the classroom but also enjoyable, assignments that encourage student enthusiasm and dedication to life-long learning.

Indeed, such self-directed assignments should not be limited to junior- or senior- level classes but are particularly vital within lower-level and learning support courses. Dynan, Cate, and Rhee (2008), in their study of eight sections of international business courses, question whether letting students “pattern their skills after their professor’s skills (structured) or practice their own (unstructured) self-directed skills improves readiness to engage in SDL [self-

directed learning]” (p.96). These writers discovered that “the structured environment provides a more suitable one for improving readiness for self-directed learning (SDL) for more students,” though “[t]he other approximately 40% of students who are prepared for SDL may not improve in their SDL skills to the same extent that they would in an unstructured environment,” concluding that “[o]ne way to meet this challenge is to focus on SDL skills much earlier than at a 300-level (juniors and seniors) course. SDL skills that would serve students over the course of their lifelong learning efforts could, and should, be built across the college curriculum” (p. 99).

In addition, Devi, Devan, Paw Chen, and Wee Pang (2012), in their study of medical students taking hybrid and traditional classes, uncovered that the traditional face-to-face classroom more effectively influences students than hybrid or even online classes (p.1047, p.105), again emphasizing the important elements of collaboration and student modeling within SDL.

Within Du’s (2013) pilot program of an intensive Chinese training program, he noted the need for “more study and assignments” (p.225) and “more confidence-building activities to boost student motivation” (p. 230), concluding “[t]he main issue is how teachers can seamlessly incorporate SDL features into traditional teaching” (p. 231). Through designing activities that rely upon technology and collaboration, greater flexibility and confidence can be achieved within the classroom to spur students to the type of SDL that prepares them for further education and the workforce.

### **Technology, Collaboration, and Curiosity within the Self-Directed Classroom**

Numerous scholars and studies address the benefits of creating assignments that enhance student use of technology and require peer work. Bartholomew (2015) observed that in today’s twenty-first century classroom, students rarely go to the library since they believe Google can provide instant answers. In addition,

Hsueh-Jui, Yu-Ju, and Cludia Ya-Yu, (2014), who studied first- and second-year university students from six English classes at a private university in Taiwan, noted that because the Internet is the most popular way college students communicate, relying upon the technology and collaboration students are already comfortable with allows them to become independent learners who take control of their own learning, knowledge, and skills.

For this reason, student self-directed assignments should largely hinge upon technology and technological language with which students are most comfortable, even if that technology is simply Microsoft Word and the ability to insert tables or graphs. Connecting assignments with popularly used technological programs allow students greater option as they craft their assignments.

Martinez and Mcgrath (2013) stated that as teachers offer students more freedom of choice, students are allowed to develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and are able to “think critically and analytically, communicate effectively, and collaborate productively” (p.23). These researchers further concluded that when teachers offer students more freedom of choice, students are allowed to develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and are able to “think critically and analytically, communicate effectively, and collaborate productively” (p.23).

Tempelaar, Wosnitza, Volet, Rienties, Giesbers, and Gijsselaers (2013), in their study of first-year students of the Business and Economics School of Maastricht University, uncovered how collaborative learning carries goal-setting beyond the direction of one individual and often creates more relevant and meaningful dimensions for self-directed and social learning. Relying upon websites such as SurveyMonkey, GoogleDocs, or Facebook or upon the learning management system emphasizes the role collaboration plays in learning and self-development; assignments that highlight the collaborative nature of technology and

learning improve student understanding of their own learning.

In Bartholomew’s (2015) definition of SDL as both assessing one’s knowledge and lack of knowledge, he stressed seeking answers to questions. Students need problems, challenges, and assignments that are open-ended enough to spark personal interest and investment (Bartholomew, 2015). Furthermore, Van Deur and Murray-Harvey (2005) emphasized how SDL allows students to assess their own learning needs in order to create activities to find out what they want to know.

Particularly with the use of writing assignments, students are able to fully grasp the complexities of SDL. Harris, Graham, Friedlander, Laud, and Dougherty (2013) shared six interactive stages for self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) within writing assignments that gradually release the responsibility of writing to students and include developing knowledge, discussing abilities and knowledge, modeling knowledge, memorization and self-knowledge, support and collaboration, and independent performance. Each of these steps is mirrored in the writing process, but can also be broken down into several components within an overarching assignment, such as that of a student designed study essay.

### **Components of the Study Essay Assignment**

While a study essay is often required in science courses, for classes in subjects such as English, communication, history, or even foreign language, introducing students to empirical research by requiring them to create and conduct their own study is often a foreign concept, but one that encourages SDL and the application of a semester’s worth of material. A student-designed study essay promotes and enhances the self-learning dynamic where curiosity and questions along with technology and collaboration are encouraged. These small-scale studies offer students the opportunity to explore an area of interest and take charge of their own learning, while the educator becomes a facilitator and mentor.

Aiken et al. (2013) noted how the “micro study assignment offer[s] greater insight into all of the complexities of conducting research” (p. 135). Though these smaller student studies are not generalizable or definitive, they inspire and promote student introspection, answers, and interest, attributes necessary in the life-long quest for learning. Aiken et al. (2013) highlighted how

The benefits of including small-scale, low-stakes practice attempts at empirical research studies in the methods course curriculum are many: gaining practical, hands-on experience identifying and employing research questions; exploring methods of researching writing (collecting, returning to, and making sense of data through coding and analysis); and writing up one’s findings in a manageable and (relatively) non-intimidating form. (p. 147)

As an assignment designed to teach students how to become self-directed learners, implementing such a study essay in the college classroom, similar to the IMRAD Research Essay relied upon in research for the Social Sciences, can be done most effectively by incorporating smaller graded components that result in a larger, more substantial final product.

### **Creating the Research Question(s)**

The first component of the study essay assignment involves exploring possible study questions and topics students are interested in understanding or wish to investigate further. This stage relies upon creativity and curiosity and is the framework for all other assignment activities. Therefore, the completion of this beginning stage should not be rushed. Students can fill out an instructor-created questionnaire to be graded in class where they brainstorm and discuss possible topic ideas with classmates and/or create a list of three to five possible questions or topics for homework, which is then brought to class, graded, and used for further activities and assignments.

For the study essay, the research questions function as the thesis, which forces an adjustment in traditional student thinking and writing. Students analyze their interests and knowledge as well as how they can increase their own knowledge on their chosen topic. The instructor can set parameters for research topics or allow students complete freedom in choosing a topic, creating such questions as:

- What age group engages in the most texting and driving?
- Is vehicle color a factor when receiving a speeding ticket?
- How many hugs or personal connections are needed a day?
- Should stem cell research be legal?

Students should also decide whether they wish to use a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approach. The type of study depends upon the topic, but also upon the instructor’s and students’ comfort levels. A quantitative approach should be used if objectivity is the goal, if raw numbers of respondents will be turned into percentages, if the study will seem more authentic and dependable with numbers, if the purpose is to classify or count, or if questionnaires and charts should be utilized.

If, on the other hand, the study benefits most from subjectivity; on a diverse array of connections or responses; or on pictures, objects, words, description, gesture, or quotes, qualitative studies might be best. Lastly, a mixed methods approach that relies upon quantitative and qualitative research methods can create a more complete picture (Venkatesh, Brown, and Bala, 2013). If quotations, gestures, observations, and numbers should all be included, and if the study is both objective and subjective in data collection, then a mixed method approach should be chosen.

### **Writing the Introduction Section**

Now students are ready to begin crafting their study essay by capturing attention, presenting context, and creating a thesis statement



or list of questions to research. Students can also list a hypothesis or what they expect to find in answer to their question(s). This first section is typically found after the abstract and is one to three paragraphs long. Students can begin a graded draft in class and/or complete a draft for homework that could—again—be brought to class for further collaboration and use in-class activities.

Students should address why and how their topic is relevant and what valuable connections can be made as a result of their study. As Harris et al. (2013) noted in their six interactive areas for SDL, the first concern is to develop knowledge, which is underscored as students introduce their thoughts and the need for their study. Each component forces students to evaluate their interests and ideas, and particularly these first few activities require the type of self-reflection required for life-long learning.

### **Completing the Annotated Bibliography and Scholarly Section**

Before students can begin their own research, it is necessary that they first understand the notion of secondary sources and the available studies on their topic. These student “mini-essays” are joining a conversation, and therefore must demonstrate appropriate research and communication skills. Here student knowledge and comfort with technology and research is stressed, and students quickly realize their strengths and weaknesses in the area of researching and formatting.

After surveying studies and sources on their given topic, students will complete a graded annotated bibliography of at least three scholarly sources. Students should then continue their research to find the most recent and effective sources that can then be included in a scholarly section examining similar works and studies. This section also tests student ability to integrate and rely upon scholarly ideas and quotes within their own work. As Harris et al. (2013) noted in their six areas of self-direction, these two assignments

afford students numerous opportunities to discuss and model knowledge, memorize information, and, in a sense, collaborate with previous scholarly work related to their own research topics.

### **Writing and Administering a Survey and Questionnaire**

Once a solid introduction and evaluation of secondary sources section has been completed, now students should define study parameters and gather their own data. Students could create a list of eight to twenty questions with which to survey the class and collect primary data to help answer their research question(s). Many students do not understand the difference between primary and secondary sources, and requiring students to create a tool for gathering their own data makes the distinction clear.

It is also advantageous to require students to administer a survey or questionnaire beyond the classroom for improved primary source data collection, results, and comparison. The use of SurveyMonkey, Facebook, or other survey generating website is encouraged. As Harris et al. (2013) have noted, forcing students to discuss their abilities, knowledge, and limits and engaging in support and collaboration of others is a crucial step in the development and continued practice of SDL.

### **Defining the Personal Study Section and Parameters of the Study**

Next, before students can discuss the results of their data collection and assess their learning experience and findings, they must describe the conception and variables of their study. Students should address why their topic was selected, how and why they created their research questions, the location of their study, why and how participants were questioned, the number of participants involved, and other applicable correlations in terms of age, gender, class, major, ethnicity, or even employment



status of each anonymous respondent. Pushing students to question themselves and be as thorough as possible when describing and justifying each step in the research process aids in proactive, SDL.

This study essay component forces students to think about their thinking and reconcile a variety of audiences. Metacognitive development is difficult to extrapolate from students, yet the study essay, with its many components and student centered design, forces independent thought and performance, the final and most vital area outlined by Harris et al. (2013). Designing a mini-study for the first time can be a very daunting task, testing students' ability to apply the expertise and tips discussed in class, from the writing process itself to research and critical thinking.

### Assessment and Conclusion

In the final section before their conclusion, students are now ready to piece together the previous assignment components, analyzing their primary data findings, noting interesting respondent percentages and commonalities and listing significant quotes and discussions or observations. The study essay should also be accompanied by appendix sections for all questionnaires, surveys, and primary source tools and methodologies as well as graphs, charts, or images pertaining to study findings. Requiring students to create at least one graph or chart is a further beneficial assignment that improves presentation of primary data as well as the evaluation of that data.

Submission of the final essay can also be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation, highlighting the most noteworthy results. Subsequently, the study essay takes students on a journey of their own making, instilling life-long learning skills characteristic of self-directed learners. Students assess themselves as well as their environment, relying upon technology and the collaboration of their peers to find answers to questions they have created.

Though a successful study will often raise more questions than it answers, these student-designed mini-studies extend an exciting invitation to think about how to think and how data and information are gathered and discussed. Such an assignment develops self-directed learning habits because each step is grounded in student introspective curiosity and interest. Subsequently, these mini-study essays inspire self-motivation, bridging the gap between student, knowledge, educator, and class to recapture and create a passion for learning that extends far beyond the classroom.

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## Pursuing Professional Development through Teacher Research

**Abstract:** This article highlights the process of teacher research as a vehicle for professional educational development. The article begins by defining teacher research, points out potential benefits for engaging in teacher research, and provides a summary of background studies on the scholarship of teaching and learning. The article subsequently describes my own process in conducting a teacher research study with my students enrolled in three second-semester university Spanish courses. The article concludes by exploring how teacher research can contribute to the professional development of university and college educators.

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### What is Teacher Research?

Several definitions of teacher research exist in the scholarly literature on professional development. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990), however, provided a concise explanation of teacher research, which they describe as “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 3). They contended that teacher research is

- systematic: thoughtful decisions are made with regard to ways of collecting and analyzing data;
- intentional: research activities are thoughtfully and conscientiously planned; and
- inquiry: research questions are devised in order to help one make sense of his/her pedagogical experiences.

Teachers often see research as an experience in which only university professors participate. It is important to note, however, that teachers engage in research in their classrooms on a daily basis by designing and executing lessons plans and subsequently reflecting on these lessons. Teacher research can support educators’ efforts by making their everyday reflections systematic and intentional while also helping them better understand the teaching and learning processes occurring in their

classrooms.

Freeman (1998) believes that teaching and research are not two separate and distinct activities but that research is an extension of teaching. Consequently, he defines this pedagogical practice as “teacher-research” (p. 2) and hyphenates the two words to emphasize the synergy of these two professional activities. He underlines this point by arguing that “teacher-research is the story of two nouns joined by a hyphen” and that “being a teacher-researcher means working at that hyphen” (p. 5).

### Why Do Teacher Research?

There are numerous advantages to engaging in teacher research. First, researchers are frequently seen as producers of knowledge, while teachers are often recognized as consumers and transmitters of this knowledge. In other words, researchers discover new knowledge and teachers put this knowledge into practice. Teacher research inverts this paradigm by supporting teachers as they join researchers in producing new knowledge. Secondly, teacher research empowers educators to contribute their knowledge, understandings, and experiences to professional conversations on pedagogical practice by demonstrating the extent to which

researchers' findings do or do not apply to the classroom. Thirdly, engaging in teacher research can potentially lead to other professional development activities (i.e. publications, workshops, conference presentations). Fourthly, teacher research helps educators make instructional decisions based on actual data instead of anecdotal impressions and encourages them to develop a questioning stance towards their own teaching.

### Literature Review

Numerous foreign/second language educators have completed teacher research projects in an effort to better understand the teaching and learning processes occurring in their classrooms. Several studies have specifically addressed the role children's and adolescent literature can play in fostering language acquisition and culture learning. For example, in an effort to extend her students' developing literacy in both English and German, Malloy's (1999) middle school students participated in a series of activities in which they interacted with authentic picture books in German. Malloy found that her students were deeply engaged during read-alouds by attempting to understand the storylines of the picture books while also learning about important aspects of German culture. Students commented that although they were older students, they did not believe reading picture books was "infantile" because they understood that they were learning German at the same level and pace as native-speaking children.

In another study, García's (2004) students enrolled in an intensive university Spanish course read a selection of bilingual children's books and fairy tales in Spanish from Colombia, Spain, and the United States as part of the course curriculum. Her students noted that, although they encountered some initial difficulty in adapting to the new course curriculum, they found the books and surrounding activities interesting and engaging. García

discovered that the pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities helped guide students through the texts but that students needed more explicit instruction in foreign/second language reading strategies. She additionally determined that including such texts as part of the course curriculum was straightforward and that traditional course activities could easily be re-appropriated to support students' engagements with these texts.

A number of university educators interested in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) have also engaged in teacher research projects from a variety of disciplines. For example, in Maurer et al. (2010), five professors at Georgia Southern University in child and family development, anatomy and physiology, nutrition and food science, nursing, and foreign languages formed a faculty learning community focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Each year, the members of the learning community design a research project related to teaching and learning and meet monthly to update other members on their projects and share results of their research with colleagues outside the learning community.

The work emerging from the group at Georgia Southern has resulted in conference presentations, publications, booklets, seminars, and initiatives and inspired members to collaborate with colleagues both within their respective departments and outside the university. Community members indicate that they have learned more through the group than in other professional development activities, that the group helps them integrate both teaching and research, and, for one member, that the group "has been the most influential and rewarding experience of my entire academic career" (p. 5).

In Australia, Goel (2012) collected and analyzed data concerning the role of assessment and feedback in her university courses in social work. She found that her research project created enthusiasm among her colleagues to focus on the development of their own



professional growth. As a result, the study raised other faculty members' consciousness concerning effective feedback strategies that can be used with their students. Goel argues that action research "give[s] an evidence-based grounding for implementing changes so that both teachers and students are able to benefit from research outcomes" (p. 3).

### TEACHER RESEARCH STUDY

The next section outlines a teacher research study I completed in three second-semester university Spanish courses in order to better understand students' experiences reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish.

#### Gaps in Previous Spanish 102 Courses

My experiences teaching second-semester Spanish (Spanish 102) courses in a large university in the American Southwest lead me to notice a number of gaps in the course. The course focused largely on promoting students' grammatical knowledge and speaking abilities, which left little room to develop students' reading abilities in Spanish. The few reading selections included in the course were informational in nature and described cultural and historical aspects of various Hispanic countries; these texts were short and written by textbook authors who were not native speakers.

Students did not read texts in other genres and were neither exposed to longer written discourse in Spanish nor immersed in authentic input in Spanish. As a result of these gaps in the course, I began to think about ways students could develop their reading skills via immersion in natural and authentic language and exposure to longer literary texts in Spanish. Also, as a scholar in literature and second language acquisition, I was striving to discover connections between these two disciplinary fields. I consequently implemented a teacher research study with my students enrolled in three Spanish 102 classes in order to document

their experiences reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish.

#### Research Questions

Two research questions framed the teacher research study:

1. What are second-semester Spanish students' perceptions of the influence of reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish on their language learning?
2. What are second-semester Spanish students' perceptions concerning their experiences reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish?

#### Participants

Seventy-eight students were enrolled in three Spanish 102 courses for which I was the instructor; sixty-eight students consented to participate in the study. All participants in the study were college-age students. Two classes took place during the fall semester of 2008 (Classes #1 and #2), and one class took place during the spring semester of 2009 (Class #3). Data for the study were collected via journal entries, surveys, a focus-group interview, and a composition. While all students participated in the data collection activities, only the data from those students for whom consent was obtained were analyzed as part of this study. IRB approval was obtained for this study (Project # 08-0813-02), and informed consent was obtained from those students who wished their comments to be used as data for the study.

#### Synopses of Children's Books

Two children's books in Spanish were selected for this research study: *Me llamo María Isabel* [*My Name Is María Isabel*] and *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* [*Baseball in April and Other Stories*].

The main character in *Me llamo María Isabel* is María Isabel Sálazar López, a nine-year-old girl from Puerto Rico who emigrates to the

United States with her family. On the first day of classes in her new school, the teacher notes that there are already two girls named María in the class and suggests changing María Isabel's name to Mary. María Isabel ponders the ramifications of her new name and subsequently becomes aware of the importance and significance of her names by recognizing that she was named for her two grandmothers, one of her grandfathers, and her uncle. *Me llamo María Isabel* traces María Isabel's experiences in school during the fall semester and explores issues of self-identity through the significance of one's name as well as one's heritage.

This book was selected for several reasons. I felt that the book would be linguistically accessible to students since the book contains simple vocabulary related to schooling, and the majority of the verbs in the book are in the *pretérito* and the *imperfecto*, two verb tenses students would be studying during the course. Additionally, the book describes the life experiences of a nine-year-old girl immigrating to the United States, and I felt that students would be able to vicariously experience immigrating to a new country and thus empathize with the situation of Latino emigrants to the United States.

*Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* consists of eleven short stories in which the characters in the stories describe their childhood experiences growing up as Latinos in California. The stories use small events of daily life to elucidate themes common to all adolescents such as love and friendship, youth and growing up, and success and failure. Students read two stories from *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*.

In the first story, "Béisbol en abril" ("Baseball in April"), Jesse and Michael are brothers who decide to try out for the local baseball team, Los Hobos. The brothers train hard, but neither they nor the team is very good. Towards the end of the season, they play a game against a much better team, the Red Caps, and lose the game. After their defeat, the local boys lose interest in playing baseball,

particularly Michael, who quits the team after he begins dating his girlfriend.

In the second story, "El Karate Kid", Gilbert is frequently picked on in school because of his small size. Inspired by the film *The Karate Kid*, he decides to enroll in a karate class to defend himself from his classmates. Gilbert soon finds out, however, that the class is much more difficult than he had anticipated. He soon tires of the karate class and decides instead to read superhero comics.

This book was chosen for several reasons. The two short stories contain Latino adolescent male characters which balance the Latino female character of María Isabel. Additionally, I felt that the book would enlarge students' knowledge of Latino characters by reading about the life experiences of adolescent Latino characters living in the United States.

### Data Collection

Data for the study were collected through journal entries, surveys, a focus-group interview and a composition in Spanish. Students wrote journal entries about every two weeks in which they reflected on their experiences and explored their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as they read the children's books. These journal entries were approximately one page and written in English.

Students completed two surveys during the research study in which they summarized their experiences reading the children's books. Survey #1 was administered in the middle of the semester after they finished reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, and Survey #2 was administered at the end of the semester after students finished reading the two short stories in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*. The surveys asked students to explore their thoughts, feelings, and impressions in English about each book and document aspects of language (grammar and vocabulary) and culture they noticed while reading each book.

Students participated in one focus group interview at the end of the semester in which they commented on their responses on the two surveys. It was hoped that the focus group interviews would encourage students to reflect on their experiences reading the children's books and expand on their responses on the surveys after listening to classmates' comments.

Each class was divided into two focus groups of approximately thirteen students each in order to simplify the logistics of conducting the interview and also to maximize student responses. The interview was semi-structured in nature in order to document students' answers to the research questions while still encouraging them to freely express their views concerning their experiences with the children's books. The interview with each focus group lasted approximately one hour and was videotaped; significant student quotes from the interview were subsequently transcribed.

As part of the curriculum for Spanish 102, students wrote three one-page compositions in Spanish during the course. For Composition #2, students wrote a description of the significance and the importance of their names. My students were additionally asked to compare and contrast the story of their name to that of María Isabel. The goal of this additional requirement was to facilitate students' reflections on María Isabel's experiences with her own names and help them make connections between María Isabel's experiences about her names and their own.

### Data Analysis

The data collected in the study were analyzed using the following process. First, I read through the surveys, journal entries, focus-group interview transcripts, and compositions and made initial notes of themes I found important or significant. I then began an initial analysis of the data by writing a short memo with the title and explanation of each theme along

with several quotes taken from the data sources that exemplified these themes. Due to the large number of themes, I then reorganized them by grouping them into broader categories. Finally, I re-read the data sources to triangulate these categories across all data sources.

### Findings

The findings of the study center around four categories: (1) understanding language in context, (2) engaging in authentic language use, (3) connections between the children's books and the course textbook, and (4) experiencing culture.

Several abbreviations will be used when presenting students' direct quotes. This information is given in brackets after each quote, including an anonymous name given to the student, the class in which the student was enrolled, and the source of the quotation.

"C" = the class the student was enrolled in

"S" = surveys

"J" = journal entries

"FG" = focus-group interviews

"CP" = composition

Since students wrote their compositions in Spanish, direct quotes from their compositions are accompanied with English translations provided by myself. Students' errors found in the direct quotes taken from their compositions are preserved in order to give a more authentic voice to their comments. All students' names are pseudonyms.

First, a number of students commented that reading the children's books help them better understand vocabulary words in Spanish. These students noted that they were able to learn new words by attempting to figure out the meanings of these words through contextual clues.

There were many words I didn't know in the text, but . . . you could put words around

that you knew to get a sense of what they were saying. [Caden, C#2, S #2]

One thing I have liked from reading [*Me llamo María Isabel*] is learning how to grasp the idea of a passage by looking at the sentences and words around it and trying to get the main idea, which then helps me better understand what I originally did not. [Lara, C#2, J#2]

Secondly, class activities surrounding the children's books were designed to develop students' proficiency in reading, listening, and speaking. Students completed each chapter and short story by first reading each chapter/short story aloud to their group partners and subsequently engaging in class discussions in Spanish on the text they read by offering their opinions and listening to their classmates' comments. Additionally, students were engaged in communicating in Spanish for the real-world purpose of striving to make sense of the children's books. As a result, many students noted that the process of reading the children's books helped them develop their communicative abilities in Spanish.

#### Reading

I liked reading *Me llamo María Isabel* because it...helped me with reading Spanish and understanding what I am reading in Spanish better. [Tabatha, C#1, S #2]

Reading fiction helped expand my reading comprehension in the Spanish language. [Teresa, C#3, S #2]

#### Listening

I enjoyed reading [*Me llamo María Isabel*] out loud because it was easier for me to comprehend. [Katherine, C#1, S #2]

At the beginning of reading *Me llamo María Isabel* it was difficult to read. This was due to the fact that most of the words were hard to pronounce and I didn't understand them. After hearing repetitive

words it became easier to understand the text. [Mia, C#2, S #2]

#### Speaking

Reading [*Me llamo María Isabel*] has been an effective way to improve my Spanish speaking skills. [Evelyn, C#1, J #2]

The success I have had [while reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*] is an improved speaking ability, while reading aloud in groups...reading aloud has helped me in forming the wording...and helps me get a better feel for speaking aloud in Spanish. [Isaac, C#1, J#6]

Thirdly, numerous students commented that reading the children's books had a positive impact on their language learning because they were seeing vocabulary words, grammatical features, and cultural information in the children's books that they had previously studied in the course textbook. In other words, the children's books reinforced what students had previously learned via the course textbook.

#### Vocabulary

The vocabulary I noticed while reading *Me llamo María Isabel* is a lot like the vocabulary we have learned in class. [Eddie, C#2, S #2]

[*Me llamo María Isabel*] is easy to read because of some of the similarities in vocabulary we have been learning in class. [Evelyn, C#1, J #2]

#### Grammar

Throughout [*Me llamo María Isabel*] I saw different [verb] conjugations that we were learning about in class. [Hannah, C#3, S#2]

There are many times in [*Me llamo María Isabel*] where it was hard for me to understand. With the recent [studying] of [the] *pretérito* and [the] *imperfecto*, I was able to understand the book more clearly. [Keith, C#2, J#4]

### Cultural Information

When reading *Me llamo María Isabel* I noticed a connection to the section we read about Hispanics living in the United States. [Madison, C#2, S#2]

Lastly, the children's books supported students as they went beyond merely learning cultural information and experienced Latino culture vicariously through the life experiences of the characters. For instance, when reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, many students commented that María Isabel's discovery of the origin of her names reinforced her cultural identity and helped her maintain her cultural heritage while simultaneously establishing her identity in the United States. Early in the book, María Isabel waxes nostalgic for Puerto Rico and has flashbacks of her life in her home country. Several students commented that these flashbacks not only facilitated her transition into mainstream American culture but also displayed her pride in her cultural identity. They admired her perseverance and tenacity in establishing her cultural identity. Additionally, many students believed that María Isabel exemplified the experiences of Latino immigrants to the United States.

Immigrants need to be accepted for who they are and should not be forcefully Americanized. María Isabel came from another country and her new teacher could have cared less what her nationality or language was. Everyone should be accepted everywhere. [Naomi, C#2, S#2]

The teacher wanted to change María [Isabel's] name to Mary. I think this shows how our culture tries to change other cultures to fit our own, even if they don't like or want the change. [Lara, C#2, S#2]

I saw aspects of assimilation in *Me llamo María Isabel* such as her name change to Mary. This example shows how American culture sometimes tries to drive out our cultural backgrounds. [Parker, C#3, S#2]

Reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* guided students' identification of many commonalities between mainstream American culture and Latino culture. For example, students identified with the school experiences of the characters and the childhood activities in which they engaged. Since the characters live in California, the book is replete with popular cultural references students could identify with, including the sport of baseball, the movie *Karate Kid*, the snack Cracker Jacks, the children's game show Double Dare, and the convenience store 7-11.

### Conclusion

Completing this teacher research study has contributed greatly to my professional development in important ways. First, the study produces new knowledge by making a substantial contribution to the professional literature on facilitating language learning and inter-cultural understanding through children's and adolescent literature. Secondly, conducting the study has led to other professional development activities including publications and conference presentations which have given me opportunities to share my scholarly work with others and also participate in professional conversations on these topics. Lastly, the study has shown me that the pedagogical choices I make every day in my classroom should be decisions based on concrete data and not mere anecdotal evidence. Although the present study specifically explored the role of children's and adolescent literature in language classrooms, it is hoped that this project may inspire other university educators to engage in teacher research by exploring questions they may have about the teaching practices and learning processes presently occurring in their own classrooms.

Hubbard and Power (1999) contended that "there is no real boundary between teaching and research within the real world of classrooms" (p. 3). My hope is that this article manifests the inherent synergy between



teaching and research which can be achieved through teacher research.

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## Journal Submission Guidelines and Editorial Policies

### 1. Faculty members (and professional staff) may submit the following:

- Book reviews on scholarly works on higher education administration or issues, college teaching, or adult learning published within the last two calendar years.
- Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research. This is defined as a study in which an activity, strategy, approach, or method that reflects best practices or evidence-based research is tried in the classroom. The faculty member sets up an intervention, executes it, and assesses the impact, employing quantitative or qualitative methods. Articles should indicate that IRB process was followed where applicable, with documentation.
- Literature review that synthesizes, in a relevant and interesting way, the evidence, theory, and/or research on a particular aspect of higher education, college teaching, adult learning, brain research, etc. Professional staff could write about issues in student services or advising, for example.
- Essay of personal reflection of a classroom incident or phenomenon with an evidence- or theory-based approach to interpreting the incident or phenomenon.
- Articles should have applicability across disciplines.

### 2. Style Sheet

- Submissions should be in APA VI format and Times New Roman 12 pt. font. Use APA guidelines in terms of margins. The writer should try to preserve his or her anonymity as much as possible. The editor will redact the name of the writer from the document's title page before sending to reviewers.

### 3. Review Process

- The submissions will be peer reviewed by three faculty members, whose identity will be known only to editor and not to each other. One member of the review committee will be a faculty member in general discipline represented in the article, one will be a faculty member with an advanced degree in education, and one will be drawn from the advisory committee or other volunteer reviewers.
- Articles will be returned to the writers in a timely manner with an indication of rejection; conditional acceptance (revise and re-submit, with suggestions for doing so), and accepted (possibly with request to edit or make minor changes). A rubric will be used for assessing the articles. It will be available to potential submitters upon request. If none of the members approves the article, it will be rejected. If one of the members approves the article, it will be considered a conditional acceptance. If two approve it, it will be returned for the necessary editions and published when finished. If three approve it, it will be published as is or with minor corrections.

4. Submissions should be sent as Word files to [btucker@daltonstate.edu](mailto:btucker@daltonstate.edu)

5. Published articles will appear in the *Journal for Academic Excellence*, which will be available on the Center for Academic Excellence's website and thus accessible by Internet searches.