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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds

From the Director

First-year courses offer students unique opportunities to acquire new knowledge, to learn new approaches to thinking and communicating, and to develop independent learning and reasoning abilities. In this issue of *Focus*, colleagues from across the Dalhousie community reflect on some of the assessment strategies they use to set expectations, to guide students in their learning process, and to evaluate student learning.

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FOCUS ON UNIVERSITY LEARNING & TEACHING

Creating Assignments for First-Year Classes

The CLT sponsored Discussion Group on Learning and Teaching in First Year Classes:
Iris Black, (French), Margie Clow Bohan (Writing Centre),
Anne Marie Ryan (Earth Sciences), Kaarin Tae (Environmental Programmes)

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching first-year classes is the diverse backgrounds and experiences of our students. As instructors we must be aware of students' starting points and be able to guide them from there in an exploration of our disciplines. From a student perspective, the major signpost directing that exploration resides in the assignments and evaluations we create. As Barbara Fister notes in 'Reintroducing Students to Good Research' (2001), following our signposts can be a daunting task.

> *"Imagine being told you had to contribute a paper to a conference in a field other than your own. How would you know what kinds of research questions would be appropriate? What evidence would be considered authoritative and persuasive? What discourse conventions would you need to observe? How would you avoid totally humiliating yourself? Yet in a sense, that's what undergraduates are faced with when asked to choose a topic and write a paper on it."*

So to be fair, we must ask ourselves the following question: What kinds of assessment tools best suit our aim to nurture first-year students as apprentices in our disciplines?

Interestingly, while there is expansive scholarship in the teaching and learning literature on the first-year student experience, grading and evaluation in higher education, and different kinds of innovative assignments across disciplines, little attention has been paid specifically to how we might best assess first-year students. As a result, when designing assessments that best foster entry-level students' learning, university instructors must extrapolate from the general assessment literature and from their own experience of teaching first-year students.

At monthly meetings throughout the year, our discussion group reflected on a number of issues relating to teaching first-year students and facilitating learning in first-year classes. We offer here our ideas for best practices in light of the challenges we face as instructors in designing assignments for first-year students, and offer a practical example of a successful assignment that addresses many of the issues raised.

Challenges in Assignment Design

The first set of challenges reflects the nature of the 'first-year' student population:

- Not all students enter first-year courses with the same skill sets or knowledge base;
- Not all students in a first-year class come directly from high school. Some are returning to school after some time away; others are returning for professional training but with extensive work experience; and still others are upper-year students who need to take a first-year course.

The second set of challenges involves student engagement in our disciplines:

- How do we make assignments relevant to students' lives in order to engage interest and promote learning while maintaining the intellectual integrity of our disciplines?
- How do we balance the need for specific assignments with detailed instructions with students' desire to explore their own choices?

A third set of challenges is largely administrative in nature:

• Balancing first-year students' need for frequent practice and feedback with the time available for grading students' work in large classes.

• Identifying the skills and knowledge first-year students will need to develop to be successful in upper-year courses.

In sum, our group recognized the need to design assignments that provide guidance to students new to the university setting and to our disciplines, while at the same time offering them opportunities to explore their own interests and concerns. Students who are interested in the material, and who see relevance in what they are working on, become more engaged in the learning process, and begin to develop the higher level thinking skills that allow them to enter more fully into the discipline.

Useful Approaches to Assignment Design

In response to these challenges, we identified a number of strategies:

Student Variability in First-Year Courses

Initially, the instructor might establish the level of students' knowledge at the outset of the course and then use this information when designing assignments. This information is often surprising: we commonly assume that first-year students have more knowledge and skills than they actually possess, a situation that may be exacerbated by the generational gap where the events and issues of our life-spans are not always in accord with those of our students. On the other hand, we can sometimes underestimate their abilities so suspending our assumptions might be the best policy at this point.

Therefore, assignments in first-year courses that provide detailed instructions, guidance about ways to begin, and grading keys (see references for examples), can provide students with both clear expectations and frameworks for thinking and writing in our disciplines. Yet our assignments need to remain open enough for students to be challenged and excited by topics of interest to them.

Guiding and Engaging Students in our Disciplines

Multiple assignments that break down larger processes and that consider how students might learn specific skill sets assist them in developing their skills within the framework of the course material and allow them to see progress over time. This approach to assignments is often useful for first-year students who may find the task of a large, lengthy project overwhelming, frustrating, and confusing.

Assignments that encourage students to ask questions teach them to think critically about what they read. Asking students to generate their own questions can result in closer reading of the text and more engagement with the material at higher cognitive levels. With this approach, though, it is important to discuss with students the different levels and types of questions you would like them to construct, ideally providing examples of each. Having students select at least some of their own readings may also increase interest and result in deeper learning.

Making material relevant to students' lives can be accomplished by connecting assignments with current issues and events and by framing the assignments in a form other than an essay or report. Such alternative formats might include journals, reviews, interviews, children's stories, newspaper or magazine articles, letters, and posters. Personalizing the assignment within the students' lived experience or local environment will also help to spark their interest and curiousity.

Preparing First-Year Students for Upper-Year Courses

Frequent assignments and feedback in first-year classes are important for students to attain the requisite skill levels needed to progress. The large size of many first-year classes makes it difficult to grade numerous assignments and/or to give detailed feedback. The use of peer- and self-assessment are two ways to address this conundrum, allowing students to attempt multiple drafts or an increased number of problem sets and to receive feedback from a variety of sources. For this process to be successful students need to be instructed on how to provide feedback to others and need to be given a grading key that they will use in the process. (Constructing a grading key in class promotes active learning.)

Frequent practice and feedback are most beneficial, however, if the skills students are acquiring prepare them for the courses they will take in following years. Discovering, if it is not already clear, what skills and knowledge students need for upper-year courses can be helpful in considering the types of assignments we should be creating in first-year classes. Informal, open dialogue between instructors of first-year and upper-level courses is important, but broader departmental developments that examine connections and skill-building across the curriculum are integral to students' success as they progress through our programs.

By the end of our discussions, the group concluded that our goal as instructors of first-year classes is to create assessment tools that allow upper-year students to look back on their incoming year as having inspired them to learn more about their chosen discipline and having provided them with the necessary skills they needed for academic success. Such students would be ready and eager to venture further with us in their upper-level courses than they otherwise might be and, ultimately, will be better prepared for whatever challenges they face beyond their undergraduate education.

Learning to question: questioning to learn

Anne Marie Ryan, *Earth Sciences*
Kaarin Tae, *Environmental Programmes*

Designed for first year students in environmental science and earth science, this activity is adaptable to any discipline, and for any level.

Premise: Students who ask questions as they listen and read are more apt to acquire deeper understanding of the material and develop creative and critical problem-solving techniques. Particularly in large classes or lecture-dominated classes, students do not have much opportunity to develop or practice questioning processes.

Activity: Students select and read an article of their choice within the literature of their discipline. We suggested some possible sources of journal articles. The assignment requires that students create a number of questions related to this article; their questions, along with a copy of the article, are passed to one of their peers in class. Their classmate then reads the article, responds to the questions, and is free to offer constructive criticism regarding the questions. Students are given some guidance as to how to be constructive in their comments, and are reminded to "be kind," imagine they themselves are getting the feedback, and remember what they themselves have found most helpful in terms of feedback. The article and responses are returned to their owner, who then refines the questions prior to final submission.

Constraints: We specified that the questions be of varying types: (i) a "what" question, related to factual content; (ii) a "why" question, also related to specific content in the article; (iii) a "thinking" or "application" question, which required students to create a problem-solving question related to the content; and (iv) a "beyond" question, which required that students pose a question that would need further research. The "thinking" question typically requires clarification for students, as it challenges them to move towards more divergent thinking. For example, the question may ask that they consider changing one or more variables or parameters, and what effect this may have on the outcome; or how something might be applied in a different place or time; or even what assumptions underlie the argument or thesis.

Conclusion: Students have created some very thoughtful questions through this process. Student feedback indicates that this activity encourages them to explore the literature in their discipline, to critically consider an issue of personal importance to them in some depth, and to develop their questioning abilities.

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See Also: *Journal of the First Year Experience & Students in Transition* and *Assessment and Evalution in Higher Education.*

Rethinking and Re Thinking: Assessment in First Year Law School

Steve Coughlan, *Faculty of Law*

Teaching and assessing first year students in a professional program includes different challenges from those involved in teaching first year undergraduates. Our students at the Law School arrive almost universally having completed an undergraduate degree, and come equipped with skill sets and perspectives from a variety of backgrounds. In a lot of ways this is very valuable: it equips the students to engage in more sophisticated analysis of material and leads to exciting class discussions informed by a variety of viewpoints.

It is here that one of the challenges of a professional school arises. Precisely because our students arrive with extensive and varied backgrounds, helping them learn to 'think like a lawyer' often necessitates that they unlearn how they have thought about issues in other ways. This has professional advantages, though they are coupled with potential personal disadvantages: here I will pursue only the former issue. Legal reasoning is a unique process. Particular laws must be combined with particular facts to produce the answers to particular questions: "who gets to keep the ring" or "is the accused guilty." The approach is very streamlined and goal-directed, and generally unfamiliar. Most students initially struggle with what they see as the rigour of being forced to justify virtually every statement. Another challenge we face at the Law School is that we pursue the twin goals of studying law as an academic discipline and of preparing students to practice in the profession of law, and those goals are not entirely consonant. We aim both to instruct students in the more practical, analytical skills they need to practice law, while including in our materials a variety of perspectives to encourage students to consider the broader social implications of the legal issues.

In our evaluation methods of first-year law students we try to recognize students' unfamiliarity with the discipline and have adjusted our assessment accordingly. Most of our assessment tools are aimed at determining whether students have learned to 'think like a lawyer'. Our goal is not entirely reductionist, of course, and any exam will expect students to be thinking about and dealing with broader social considerations, whether that is in an essay question or elsewhere. Nonetheless, on any given first year exam, the majority of marks will be assigned to 'hypotheticals': questions which set out a particular factual situation and ask the student to conclude whether a contract has been formed, whether the defendant is required to pay damages, and so on. Answering those questions properly involves combining the particular facts with the applicable law to suggest an answer. Our first year courses are primarily full year, with an exam at Christmas and another at the end of the year. To acknowledge that many students simply haven't worked out this method of legal reasoning by Christmas, all of those exams operate on what we refer to as a 'fail safe' basis. That is, the Christmas exam counts for 30% if that will improve the student's overall grade: if not, the final exam counts for 100%.

The Law School does offer two first year courses, though, which are exceptions to our general model, and which represent opposite ends of the academic discipline/professional training spectrum.

Our most practice-based course is Legal Research and Writing, which trains students in the use of the law library and in how to write legal memoranda. Student assessment is based on a series of written assignments, several of which are legal memoranda nominally handed in to a lawyer for whom one is working. I recall from my own first year in law school bringing my undergraduate Arts background to bear in dealing with the problem assigned to my group. My plan was to discuss the historical circumstances which led to the development of "Factors' Acts" hundreds of years ago, to examine the policy decisions reflected in the current versions of those laws, and so on. However, I eventually realized that the mark for the assignment would be marked on the response to the straightforward question that the hypothetical client wanted to know: "Do I have to pay this money?" - but we will let the point at which I came to that realization be the subject of speculation.

In contrast to this course would be our least practice-based course, Orientation to Law. This course, consisting of a series of lectures by about a dozen different instructors, is intended to inform students about the legal profession from a number of perspectives. Some lectures are primarily factual, and try to explain the role of the Barristers' Society in governing the legal profession, or the difference between "common law" and "civil law" systems. Other lectures are perspective-based, such as feminist or critical race theory views of the legal system. For some years now we have examined students in this course on a pass/fail basis, through a single oral exam occurring after the series of lectures has ended. Every faculty member conducts some of these exams, not just those who gave the lectures. This approach reflects our expectation that by attending these classes the students begin to share the common knowledge of lawyers and take part in the common discourse: it is in some ways as much of an initiation as anything else. The stated "pass" standard is that the student has shown an intelligent interest in the material, and my own approach to conducting these exams is, after covering one or two factual areas, to ask the student which of the lectures he or she disagreed with and why. The resulting discussions can be informative and enjoyable, and at the least they show whether the student has taken an interest.

To conclude, it is worth noting one way in which assessment in first year law might seem to be out of step even with the practice-based goals of the profession. The issue is this: examinations, memoranda, and moots all present students with a defined set of facts, and ask them to make legal arguments about what conclusion should follow. That approach suggests that most of the time what is in doubt about a legal dispute is the relevant governing law. In reality, however, there is usually no dispute over what legal result would follow from particular facts: the real task of the lawyers is proving to a judge that he or she should accept one version of the facts over another. Most law students only have this epiphany after graduation, when they discover that the great bulk of their time is spent on facts, not law. Indeed, one sometimes hears lawyers claim that they 'learned nothing' in law school. Is, then, assessment out of step with one of the ultimate goals?

I argue that it is not. What is occurring is part of a natural and necessary progression. To be able to say "given these facts this result follows, given those facts this different result follows" is to presuppose agreement on the correct legal reasoning. It is to take for granted that everyone concerned sees the inevitability of a particular legal analysis: that is, that they can all think like lawyers. That law school should, in some large measure, focus on testing for and assessing that particular skill, especially in first year, is therefore entirely appropriate: it is the building block upon which much else is based. In fact, lawyers who think they learned nothing in law school are, in all likelihood, not evidence of failure of the process but rather evidence of success. At least with regard to technique, their knowledge has become so ingrained they have forgotten there was ever a time they did not have it.

Creating a Foundation: First-Year Student Assessment in Skills-Based Courses

Suzanne Le-May Sheffield,
Centre for Learning and Teaching

Based on interviews conducted in March 2005 with: Catherine Browning (Assistant Professor for Foundations for Learning ASSC 1050 and Foundations for Science Learning SCI 1050), Barrie Clarke (Professor for Elements of Writing SCI 1111), Ann Dwire (Assistant Dean, Student Affairs, Faculty of Arts and Social Science), Guss Gassman (Director, Bachelor of Commerce Program), Dawn Henwood (Assistant Professor for Business Communications – Written and Oral COMM 1701), Amita MacInnis (Program Manager, Academic Advising, Bachelor of Commerce Program), Beth Retallack (Assistant Dean, Student Affairs, Faculty of Science).

Introduction

Over the last decade, some Faculties at Dalhousie University have designed skills-based courses (both mandatory and optional) to assist first-year students in acquiring the skills they need to be successful in their disciplines. I recently conducted interviews with three instructors of first-year skills-based courses and four administrators in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Science, and Commerce. My intent was to discover the kinds of skills these courses address, how the skills are assessed, and the assessment challenges instructors face. I also wanted to identify the Faculties' aspirations and responses to challenges represented by skills-based courses. Interestingly, while these courses all focus on discipline-specific skills and were constructed at different times, by different people, and for varying purposes, what was nevertheless most striking was the similarities that exist among them.

Skills

The broad purposes of skills-based courses include: assisting first-year students in making the transition from high school to university, setting a standard for student achievement that prepares them to succeed in upper-level courses, introducing students to the academic culture of the university, and encouraging students to understand that the skills acquired will serve them well throughout, and in all aspects, of their lives. Ann Dwire recognizes the importance of providing these opportunities for students in their first term: "When students get accepted to university that's when they're excited and we're not capitalizing on that. You know, they're keen, they're excited, they will do anything!"

The skills identified by the interviewees as necessary for success at university will likely be of little surprise, but the list is a formidable one if the goal is to enable students to achieve competence in all of these areas. Generally, they drew attention to the following skills: writing, critical reading and thinking, oral communication, team work, research (using the library, assessing the value of different source materials), information technology, study skills, time and stress management skills, ethics, exam writing, understanding university expectations, and being aware of campus resources. The focus in Arts & Social Sciences is on researching and writing term papers. In Science additional skills included hands-on lab skills, problem-solving, numeracy, thinking objectively, and grant proposal writing. Commerce students who undertake co-op terms also need career development skills, including resume writing, interview skills, and business etiquette, as well as reality checks about their own and their employers' expectations. All of these skills are addressed by a variety of Faculty-level initiatives and courses.

Approaches & Challenges in Assessment

Assessment practices address both the broader educational goals and the specific skill requirements of skills-based courses. So Barrie Clarke's, Catherine Browning's, and Dawn Henwood's courses all introduce students to the idea of process: that multiple drafts are the norm and that each piece of their work has a context and interconnections with the real world. These instructors agree about the importance of frequent, clearly articulated assignments; giving prompt feedback based on a grading rubric; and allowing students the opportunity to revise their work. Browning notes that "smaller, more pre-planned assessment gives … [the students] a chance to recover if that just wasn't … [their] day. It's … fair[er] too; I think more frequent, smaller assessments are truer to your ability than the 50% or 80% assignment." Browning and Henwood also incorporate ungraded classroom assignments to allow students to practice skills as much as possible. Clarke and Henwood extend the idea of process for students by designing interconnected assessments. For example, Clarke asks students to write a grant proposal for "a baseline study that would be useful 10-15 years down the road in terms of assessing whether or not the petroleum industry has had any impact on the ecology of Sable Island." This assignment connects to the next, which is to imagine their grant proposal has been accepted and to write the introduction to the paper. Clarke noted that "…it was really interesting … how their grades improved, as a result of being able to build on the previous one."
Still, while learning is an on-going process, Browning notes students are increasingly "impatient with process." Henwood concurs: "Their impression is that you just write something. It comes out however it comes out; maybe you use an outline, but maybe not. You write something and hand it in." Thus, instructors in skills-based courses try to get first-year students to understand that learning is never finished. Rather, it is an on-going process that requires certain skill sets to enable them to learn, grow, and develop as individuals and in their field of work long after they leave university.

Another broad focus is communication. Clarke starts with communication as the foundation of his Elements of Science Writing course. Science students, says Clarke, need to learn to think and write like "dispassionate scientists." To help students master this skill, he sets them an admittedly difficult task, asking them to "describe a sculpture on campus objectively." He warns his students "that they have to keep the results and interpretations scrupulously separate" but he notes that they often "can't resist" interpretation, "so it's a challenge for them." Yet Clarke also tells his students from the outset that the broader skill of communication will be something they will use regardless of whether or not they become scientists.

However, instructors face a conundrum: the need to encourage students to practice oral skills versus the impracticality of doing so in a large class. In a precursor to his Elements of Science Writing course with an enrolment of 25, Clarke required students to present at a day-long event organized "exactly like a scientific conference with 15 minutes of presentation time and 5 minutes of questions, and that sort of thing. We used to tape those things, and they were marked and so that gave them a chance to be able to do this. But with 60 or 90 students I can't do it." Henwood uses peer assessment to allow students time to practice their interviewing skills. She has also introduced an 'elevator pitch' assessment tool wherein students are asked to create a "one-minute opportunity for you to present yourself to potential employers so you pretend you are in the elevator on the bottom floor with your ideal employer and you have until the top floor to sell yourself." This assignment allows students to consider their audience, articulate a tightly focused and well-organized pitch, and practice and present during class.

All three instructors have had to encourage students to discover their own intrinsic motivations for being at university. Browning includes inspirational sessions which involve taking pictures of students in borrowed hoods and gowns. Students post the photos on their desks as an inspiration to finish. She explains, "I think part of the process of university is making it meaningful to you personally." Similarly, as part of their reflective writing she asks students to answer the following question: "Imagine it is graduation day. What would you like your professors to be thinking about you as a student?" The skills-based courses also fill the role of acclimatising students to an academic culture that can be foreign to incoming students. Browning observed, "I think that professors speak a language that may not be understood by incoming students and that may account for some of their problems." She says that while professors may say "read Chapter 8," by which they mean study Chapter 8, students believe that if they read and highlight the chapter, their work is complete.

These instructors agree that there are constraints: of class size, available time (both instructors and students), and the pressure for skills-based course instructors to cover skills training in many areas. However, they also agree that allowing students extensive opportunities to practise the skills in interesting, exciting, and relevant ways is critical to student learning and to the success of these courses.

Institutional Challenges & Future Goals

Both the administrators and instructors I interviewed believe skills-based courses can build a foundation that should reverberate far beyond first year. Amita MacInnis notes that "…what we are trying to do is

introduce more skill-based courses in the first year so that we can reduce the attrition further along in the program." Ann Dwire argues that if we just let students struggle on their own and become disillusioned "then we are not going to get committed alumni."

Faculties and programmes often have high expectations for skills-based courses and there is a lot of pressure on instructors to achieve the near impossible. When the Commerce programme is looking for a place to make sure students learn a particular skill they turn to the Communications course. Henwood says of her Business Communications courses, "We probably try to do too much in it actually … [there is] too much crammed into it." And yet all three Faculties noted the increasing need to develop these kinds of courses aimed specifically at improving the skill levels of incoming international students. Beth Retallack believes that the emphasis of the skills-based courses should be on building strengths, not fixing weaknesses: "…giving them [students] access to trying to discover what their strengths are, so they can use these strengths as they work their way through academics they can expand on these strengths and then ultimately build those into their careers, so that they can start thinking about who they are on day one."

And yet, one of the concerns of instructors and administrators alike was follow-through. If students begin to build a foundation for certain skills in the first-year, are other course instructors building on these skills in upper-level courses? Browning wishes she could reconnect with her Foundations for Learning students and ask them how they have utilized the skills they were beginning to formulate in their subsequent studies. Henwood agrees, "I introduce them to this whole process-based way of looking at writing, and I am not sure whether they will have the opportunity in upper level courses, for instance, to revise their work." MacInnis noted that the Commerce programme still has to work out a way to make sure students continue to develop the skills they learn in Business Communications, "I think that is where we fall down a little bit, without maintaining those skills throughout the other courses."

One of the most difficult hurdles for skills-based courses to overcome, in all faculties, is the perception that they are remedial courses. Henwood asks her students at the beginning of the mandatory Business Communications course to write about their expectations for the course and says that most of them resist it. "I don't think anybody, before this course, has said to them you need these skills; they either enter in a state of terror, or they enter believing they already have these skills." However, when asked on exiting the course to reflect on their experience by giving advice to incoming students, Henwood reports that they often will say things like "Yeah, this is an important course." MacInnis provides support for this trend. At the end of the work term Commerce co-op students are asked on a survey, "'Which courses have you taken to date that have helped you the most in this job?' And inevitably the one they circle is Communications."

The interviewees stressed the need to recognize and communicate the importance of skills-based courses. Dwire argues that in the Arts and Social Sciences, "We need to do something in the summer, before they come." She also suggested that a Foundations for Learning course in the high schools would be a great help to incoming students, or that all first-year students should be required to take Foundations for Learning in their first term. If either of these approaches were taken Dwire believes that the course could "play a major role" in improving students' experience in their first year and preparing them for upper-level courses. The Faculty of Arts and Social Science, as part of Learning Connections @ Dal and in conjunction with Student Services, is currently investigating the possibility of introducing students to an on-line Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) before they arrive in September. They are also considering creating a mentorship programme so that a new student would be able to ask a faculty member questions about university.

In Commerce, MacInnis and Guss Gassman would like to ensure skills instruction continues in upper-year courses. However, the lack of instructor continuity in any particular course from year to year, problematizes this goal. MacInnis also suggests that they need to invite employers to talk to students about how the skills they learn in these courses will be important after university.

Retallack noted that the Faculty of Science will continue to offer Clarke's Elements of Writing, Browning's Foundations for Science Learning, hands-on instruction during lab sessions, interactive tutorial sessions for small student groups, extra Saturday mathematics tutorials, and the Faculty of Science Mentoring Programme to enhance the ability of incoming students to succeed. The Early Programme Management (EPM) is in its fourth year and continues to assist students who at six weeks are falling through the cracks.

In conclusion, although these skills-based courses for first-year students have developed and continue to grow and change in isolation from one another, it is clear that the needs, goals, and values expressed through these courses are shared across the university. Notwithstanding the distinctions among disciplines, similarities in the approach to teaching and assessing skills highlight the common experiences of students, faculty, and administrators at Dalhousie and demonstrate that opportunities for more dialogue on practices and challenges across the curriculum would be valuable and productive.

teaching with technology discussion group

Location: CLT Time: 12-1

Dates: Starts Thursday October 20 (and every third Thursday through March)

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best practices in safe spaces initiatives

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The Dal Allies invite you to attend this workshop facilitated by guest speakers from the University of New Hampshire: Bob Coffey (former LGBTQ advisor) and Cari Moorhead (Vice-Dean of the Graduate Faculty). They will share the results of their research on best practices in the area of "safe spaces" initiatives at campuses across North America.

The location will be published on the Allies' website:

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- How to develop a teaching dossier.
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- How to ask effective questions in the classroom.
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For information on workshop locations, dates, and times, call CLT at 494-1622 or visit our web site at

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