

Reflecting on a Year Involved with CETL as a Teaching Assistant

Last August, it was quite a surprise to learn that as a Teaching Assistant I could become involved with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and I was eager to do so. Dr. Ross had made me aware of the opportunity open to me regarding CETL and encouraged me to get involved. I was somewhat apprehensive due to worries of inadequacy, as it would be mostly faculty participating, despite Dr. Ross' assurance that T.A.'s had been regarded with egalitarian status by faculty in the past. Regardless, I was still nervous, but these feelings of apprehension dissolved immediately during the first meeting. The faculty members in my group were very gracious in welcoming and accepting of all of the T.A.'s in the CETL program. In fact, faculty seemed to be quite interested in my/our opinion on all matters discussed in our group.

Since returning to college I have held an interest in a career of teaching at the university level. Several assistantships had been offered to me, and I planned to make my decision based primarily on which Professor I would work under with the specific position. Dr. Forrest Wilkerson has been an inspiration, mentor, and a friend to me since we met in the fall of 2004. I made my decision from previous experiences I had with Dr. Wilkerson. As an undergraduate I had taken lower level classes from him during the summer semester and upper level classes during the academic year. This had usually allowed for small class sizes of less than twenty in a room. Dialogue was always encouraged within the classes, active learning was applied, and it was as ideal of a learning environment as I have experienced here at Minnesota State University.

This prior experience had contributed to my enthusiasm towards the opportunity to work as Dr. Wilkerson's Teaching Assistant for two large sections of a 100 level Geography course. The first section had nearly 200 students each semester this year, and the second section held close to 300. I feel that some active learning applications would have been quite difficult and time consuming to administer, but some had also been applied with success. One of note would be the course lab manual. This lab manual was co-authored by Dr. Wilkerson with the objective of students using the labs to re-enforce

what they had learned in the lectures, reading assignments, and multi-media presentations. These labs helped to keep students attentive during the 75 minute classes through participation. Also, they encouraged attendance by occasionally being counted as attendance points.

Given my experience both as a student and my exposure to teaching this past year, I am certain that active learning is extremely effective. I have always been, as a student, comfortable with straight lecturing in a class. Regardless, I would undoubtedly learn more in an educational experience which utilizes active learning techniques. I would also insist that the average student here at Minnesota State University, or any university for that matter, would learn, comprehend, and utilize concepts and theories much more effectively being exposed to them through active learning techniques as opposed to exposure via reading assignments and straight lecturing.

My support of active learning applications in the classroom being clear, I would like to suggest the possibility of another kind here at MSU. I would agree that it is primarily the University's responsibility to employ active learning techniques to better educate students of different learning styles. But I suggest that the student also bears a certain level of responsibility to understand which ways and learning styles work best for themselves, and then make the effort to approach their course material in the way most beneficial to their specific needs. One idea would be to have a class or workshop developed for students to help them better understand what works best for them and how to correspondingly approach their course material. This possibility could be developed at the high school level, or maybe even earlier in their educational development.