HOW THE FACULTY TEACHING CERTIFICATE PROGRAM
HAS CHANGED MY TEACHING

Enrique Torner, Modern Languages

I have been teaching Spanish at Minnesota State University, Mankato for almost fourteen years in the Department of Modern Languages. During these years, I have received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. It might, therefore, surprise you that I am in this program, mostly created to help faculty in their first year(s). However, going through the program has been very inspirational and educational, and has helped me make changes in my teaching philosophy and practice which have already rendered fruitful improvements in my classes. I plan to summarize in this paper the main changes I have made and plan to make in my teaching.

First of all, I have to start by stating that, during all my years at MSU, it has been colleagues in my department who have helped me, through class observations and informal talks, improve my teaching. However, I have to admit that sharing the program with people from different disciplines has offered different perspectives through which I have been able to glean new insights into my own teaching. It has also been refreshing to just be able to stop the daily routine to talk about teaching with people from different departments and colleges. It has also been nice to meet faculty from other disciplines, whom I might not have met otherwise.

Let’s start by trying to define my teaching philosophy. My philosophy has always been very simple, at least in abstract terms: a teacher may only excel in what he/she teaches unless he/she is aware of the importance of being a life-long learner. I always think I can always teach anything better. For that reason, I like to ask for other people’s advice on how to teach better. How is one going to learn anything meaningful without somebody else’s advice?

I think that the key in improving one’s teaching rests in three kinds of people: the students, colleagues, and oneself. Trying to learn from students’ evaluations, faculty observations, and one’s own experience is the challenge that one has to face on a regular basis. The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has provided me with a new source for teaching improvement, and I am going to focus on how this program has affected my teaching philosophy and practice.

Out of the seven areas we covered during the program, the ones which made the most impact on my teaching were active learning and technology. I will explain how each affected my teaching philosophy.

Active Learning Strategies in the Classroom

I teach Spanish language, culture, and literature. These are very different courses: language courses teach skills, while culture and literature courses deal mostly with content. Language classes are and should be, naturally, very active. Students spend most of the hour practicing their Spanish, whether it is in pair, group, or class discussions. Lecture takes only 5-10 minutes of the whole class, and, sometimes, not even that. Given
that, the natural question to ask is, why would you need more active learning strategies? Well, since you learn to speak a foreign language practicing it, any extra means to encourage students to do that is appreciated! In all of my classes, I have added several strategies which I have learned from the program and from Stewart in person:

1) **Use of icebreakers**: these are great and fun activities I have successfully used in class, especially in the beginning of the class. I really liked asking students to get up and arrange themselves in a line, following all kinds of requests and orders: birthdays, first names (alphabetically), time at which they get up or go to bed, and others. In each instance, after they had situated themselves in the right order, each one of them had to say a sentence or two, responding to the request. For example: “My name is Amanda, and my birthday is on January 23”; or “My name is Paul, and I get up at 7.” These icebreakers really helped me remember their names in the beginning of the semester. Later on, I eliminated the name, and it became a fast language exercise which provided lots of feedback for everybody.

2) **Cooperative Learning**: I already used this before in my language classes, but I have been including more and better of it. I hardly used this strategy in my culture class, and now I am using it a great deal. I use the structure proposed by Stewart: I provide everybody with an exercise and ask all students to complete it individually; then, I arrange them in groups, and ask them to compare and discuss their answers, and come up with one final paper; finally, I collect the paper from each group. This activity can be done in many ways, depending on the goal. Traditionally, I had been collecting the papers as soon as each group finished, correcting them as necessary, and returning them to the groups for them to keep correcting them until they got everything right. Now, I have added two new variations: the first one is the use of “scratchies” (provided by CETL), which eliminate the time factor and offers immediate feedback, which students have enjoyed a great deal; the second one has been very helpful in teaching composition, and implies showing each group paper on the document camera, and correct it collectively with the whole class. In this manner, students learn from seeing their own mistakes, especially the ones which they tend to make repeatedly. I have also used this technique with the application of technology: when teaching in the GLL, I have asked students to look up something on the computer individually, then share it and discuss it in group, and finally present it to the whole class. This has been very successful and enjoyable in my culture class.

3) **Active Lectures**: I have added strategies to help with my lectures in my culture class, which was hardly an example of active learning before this semester. I have been using clarification pauses, the muddiest point technique, as well as increasing my wait time when asking questions. I have been working hard at not lecturing on what students read at home, but rather eliciting the information from students, and commenting and adding to those responses. I can tell that my students are much more alert and excited than they were the previous times I taught the course. I have also been using individual and group presentations with
success. For presentations, students also had to bring images to class to illustrate their topic(s), and everybody has seemed to enjoy that. I have been asking students to deposit their presentations (with images included) on my MavDisk so that all present and future students can see them and use them for reference and study. I have not used the one-minute paper technique, but plan to use it in the future, as well as the feedback cards, in my culture class.

4) **Games:** I have been using games in the classroom for a long time. As a matter of fact, games play an important role in foreign language classes. I like using competitions to inspire student learning. My verb conjugation game has become quite famous among students. I divide the class in two groups, and have them line up. The person at the front of each line competes with the one across from him/her. If we are practicing the present tense, for example, I will first say the infinitive of a verb, and, then, the subject pronoun. The student who first says that form correctly wins, and goes to the back of his/her line. The one who loses sits down. As the game progresses, you end up with two student finalists. The great final consists of 5 verb conjugations. The winner may earn one extra point in the final grade.

5) **Role Play:** We also use this very much in foreign language learning. Students have to play a given situation in group, like trying to return a piece of clothing to a store clerk who refuses to offer a refund, for example.

In conclusion, my language classes have become more active than they were before, and my culture class has gone from mostly passive to a balance between lecture and student-centered activities.

**Technology**

Technology has always been a challenge for me, but this semester I decided to take over new risks, and try to increase my use of it in the classroom. After attending Kent Kalm’s seminar on D2L, I realized the big potential this could have in my classes, but also became aware of my lack of knowledge in the area. For this reason, I decided to sign up for the D2L workshops offered by IT. Learning the use of D2L has been my biggest achievement this semester. Or, should I better say, trying to learn how to use it, because I still have lots to learn about it. However, I set up all my classes for D2L, which has been a start.

The first and easiest thing I learned from D2L, which I have used a great deal, has been the capability to e-mail all of my students at the click of a few buttons. Just that has been extremely useful for me, especially in conjunction with the “News” section of D2L. I have been able to e-mail students instructions when I had to cancel classes when I was sick; send them extra materials, exercises, activities, website addresses, and many other things. Being able to e-mail them website addresses was very practical, since it is very hard to read them on screen, and sometimes they are long and complicated. On a couple of occasions, I was able to tell them to access those websites in class by going to their e-mail and retrieving them.
D2L gave me a way out the day I was not able to hand back some quizzes. I told them that I would finish correcting them during the weekend, then I would e-mail them the quiz, with the correct answers, and inform them that their grade was now on D2L. In this manner, they were able to get that feedback before they took an exam.

I have many ideas on how to use D2L to improve my teaching which I still have to implement. Using on-line quizzes would give them immediate feedback, and I plan to use them in the near future in my language classes. Creating and organizing a content area would be very beneficial for my Spanish culture class, since students would then be able to access teacher’s notes, extra materials, web links, images, charts, etc. I am thinking that this would be a good project to include in a sabbatical.

I have also started using MavDisk with my Spanish civilization class. Students have been depositing their presentations (with illustrating images) in my mailboxes. In this manner, all students, present and future, can access them and use them for additional information on the material covered in class. However, I still need to learn how to apply this better to my courses.

Conclusion

This program has been very beneficial for my teaching. It has already helped me improve the way I teach, and has inspired me to want to add more and better techniques to my classes. Stewart’s class observations were also very helpful, and the application of his recommendations has also aided me to become a better and more conscientious teacher. Now my teaching has become more student-centered than it was before, particularly in my culture class, which has become a much different class. Now I consider myself more of a facilitator than a lecture-centered teacher, and I am much more sensitive to students’ learning.