

THE THIRD ACADEMIC Freedom

We believe autonomy is essential for our own academic success. Why don't we insist on it for our students?



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Academic freedom: Good for the instructor, but not the student?

A defining feature of life in academia is the degree to which we get to decide what is important to us.

In many fields there is broad agreement as to what must be taught or what the major research questions are. But there are, outside some certification requirements in the professional faculties, no provincial or national curricula we are required to follow.

In our work as researchers, we decide what topics and approaches are interesting and appropriate to pursue. We set our own research agendas and,

through our citation and publication patterns and our service on editorial and funding boards, we decide collectively what our generation considers to be the most important questions and results.

Not everybody shares in this autonomy, of course, including a growing number of adjunct faculty. And even for those of us who do share in it, a few brilliant exceptions aside, the exercise of our freedom is constrained by our need to work within the consensus and reward systems we have helped establish. But for the most part the working lives of tenured researchers and teachers, at the very least, are marked by a remarkable degree of autonomy.

This is not, as a rule, however, how things work for our students.

The academic freedom we enjoy as researchers and teachers was developed, in its modern form, in nineteenth-century German universities. But the theorists who defined our *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom of teaching) and *Freiheit der Wissenschaft* (freedom of research) also defined a third freedom, which they considered equally fundamental: *Lernfreiheit*, or the freedom to determine the course of one's own study.

As Fuchs notes in his history of the translation of Academic Freedom to the United States, however, this third, student-centred freedom “has on the whole received secondary consideration” (Fuchs 1963, 432). Our students are, for the most part, told what they should learn, how and when they should learn it, how their learning will be evaluated, and, in the end, how well they have learned what we taught them. In most modern university systems, students do enjoy some agency in their choice of their majors and courses. But this autonomy stops the moment the “shopping period” ends: after that it tends to be the instructor and the syllabus that decide what is going to happen.

Given how important autonomy is to our work as lecturers and researchers, this lack of agency on our students’ part is surprising. It also contradicts much of what we know about pedagogical best practice. As Hattie notes in an impressive review of over 800 meta-studies of pedagogical practice,

the art of teaching reaches its epitome of success after the lesson has been structured, after the content has been delivered, and after the classroom has been organized. The art of teaching, and its major successes, relate to “what happens next”—the manner in which the teacher reacts to how the student interprets, accommodates, rejects, and/or reinvents the content and skills, how the student relates and applies the content to other tasks, and how the student reacts in light of success and failure apropos the content and methods that the teacher has taught. (2008, chap. 1)

Many of the most effective interventions discussed in his study involve creating or supporting opportunities for such self-directed and self-evaluated learning (see, in particular, Appendix B). His claim that the most important parts of teaching derive from students’ agency is supported, even more categorically, by Ryan and Deci in their meta-analysis of feedback and grading studies:

...[A] recent meta-analysis confirms that virtually every type of expected tangible reward made contingent on task performance does, in fact, undermine intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, not only tangible rewards, but also threats, deadlines, directives, and competition pressure diminish intrinsic motivation because... people experience them as controllers of their behavior. On the other hand, choice and the opportunity for self-direction appear to enhance intrinsic motivation, as they afford a greater sense of autonomy. . . . Students who are overly controlled not only lose initiative but also learn less well, especially when learning is complex or requires conceptual, creative processing. (2000, 59. Bibliographic

references have been removed from the original for the sake of clarity)

“[T]angible reward[s] made contingent on task performance” are, of course, the core pedagogical and organizational tools of the “traditional” university classroom. “[T]hreats” of poor grades, “deadlines” tied to grade penalties, “directives” in the form of detailed assignments and rubrics, and, “competition pressure” through instruments like the Dean’s List, merit-based scholarships, and professional and graduate-school entrance requirements are, likewise, a constant in most of our students’ lives. While we assume that most faculty are self-motivated, our classrooms are often set up on the assumption that students will work only in response to external rewards.

Introducing Lernfreiheit to my teaching practice

For the last decade, I have been working at finding ways of changing this—of attempting to build greater student autonomy into my classroom to match the autonomy that I consider to be essential in my life as a researcher. I began with the integration of active learning techniques about a decade ago followed by an explicit division between formative and summative evaluation in my grading. I then experimented with blogging, posters, and “the unessay” –an approach to subverting students’ generic expectations about essay writing. Finally, I have been experimenting recently with new approaches to (low-anxiety) grading. Preliminary anecdotal evidence and instruments like course evaluations and RateMyProfessor.com scores suggest that this approach has been successful. In O’Donnell (2014), for example, I was able to report a one-point difference (a 144% improvement) in my average pre- and post-intervention scores on the RateMyProfessor.com scale following the introduction of the unessay (numerous studies suggest that RateMyProfessor scores track student learning, e.g. Otto, Sanford Jr, and Ross 2008; Legg and Wilson 2012, however, show that self-selected RateMyProfessor scorers tend to evaluate teacher performance more negatively than in-class evaluations, even when the same questions are asked in both contexts).

The rest of this paper reviews the techniques I have adopted in attempting to improve this autonomy. In broad terms, these involve three main emphases:

- the communal nature of research and learning;
- the necessity of taking responsibility for one’s own research and learning; and
- reducing the reliance on extrinsic markers of success or failure, in preference for an internal sense of accomplishment.

After describing the different elements involved in this approach, I conclude with a discussion of the way the different pieces interact. As I note there, the overall purpose of these interventions is to create a controlled and supportive model for my students of the scholarly ecosystem I inhabit as a university instructor—a world in which I play a role in deciding what is important, in which I am evaluated in terms of the broad appropriateness and relevance (or not) of my work, and, above all, in which my work derives meaning from the context of the scholarly communities to which I belong.

Using blogs to promote the communal nature of scholarship

The most important theme to my interventions involves the communal nature of scholarship. Communication of results to others is what turns research into science and scholarship, and the traditional academic freedoms are meaningful only if research is reported: nobody would have forced Galileo to recant if he hadn’t disseminated his work in the first place.

The main tool that I use to establish this sense of community among my students is blogging. The educational potential of blogging has been recognized since the arrival of the first easy-to-use online tools in the late 1990s. Almost two decades later, however, there remains little consensus as to best practice and instructors still find themselves debating core generic questions:

- platform (commercial platforms like WordPress or the blogging modules of a learning management system [LMS] like Moodle?)
- assessment (minimum word counts? required topics?)
- participation (Should a certain number of blogs be required? Should students be required to comment on the work of others?)

My own practice is based on informal surveys and focus-group discussions with several generations of students as well as detailed discussions and experiments conducted with student employees and teaching assistants (TAs). Undergraduate students in these groups and surveys have told me that they prefer to blog behind a firewall, that is, on the University’s LMS. This is in part to avoid confusing their classwork with their personal social-media presence, and, in part, because of an explicit concern about the impact exposing naive or unformed views might have on their online reputations (although my sample is much smaller and the dynamic very different, graduate students seem, in my limited experience, to be more willing to share their work on a public platform and use it in their self-presentation).

My normal practice, therefore, is to use the blogging application in Moodle (the U of L's LMS). Although I have used commercial platforms occasionally in the past, I have never had much success with them with undergraduates: participation falls off rapidly, the blogs that are published tend to be relatively conservative, and students generally show no evidence that they are engaging with others' work. On the LMS, in contrast, most students contribute to the class blog on a weekly basis and show evidence that they have read others' contributions. Indeed, my TA Gurpreet Singh has calculated that students in my classes on average write *in their blogs alone* about twice the number of words required by my department for each class-level: from 4,000-6,000 words in the case of my first-year students through 16,000-20,000 in the case of my fourth years.

Students use the blog to ask for help, identify problems, share their essay drafts, prepare notes, and organize study groups. By trusting in the good-faith willingness of students to contribute to this virtual classroom and to help each other understand their common research and learning tasks, I have been able to use blogging to create a "community of practice" that very much mirrors the scholarly community I inhabit as a professional academic.

A second component to the success I have had in maintaining student participation in class blogging is the rubric that I use. In contrast to recommendations found in some studies and instructor manuals (e.g. Krause 2004; Poore 2015), I set no minimum word counts, no commenting or reference requirements, and no required subjects. As I explain to my students in my policies document (and emphasize repeatedly in class), this is because blogs in real life have no such requirements: there are some that are scholarly, some that are thematically organized, some that bounce between the personal and the professional. The main requirement is that the posts in my class represent a "good-faith effort"

to contribute to the discussion, most of the time:

Unless you are given specific instructions in the course, what you write about in your blog is up to you. Sometimes, you may want to write about something you looked up about a book, author, or project. Other times, you might want to discuss things you didn't understand or difficult passages you think you can help others with. It might be about emotional responses you had to something we read, a reflection on things discussed in class or in the hallway, a funny anecdote about something to do with the class, or an interesting and relevant web page or video. Sometimes you may want to write about something else entirely—in a blog, all these things are allowed...

Above all, don't worry too much about topic: if your blogs are consistently off topic or we feel there is some problem with how you are doing it, we will let you know about the problem before we begin penalising you. (O'Donnell 2015)

The remarkable thing about this is that I have great participation and *no* problems with poor effort. In the decade since I first starting using versions of this rubric in my classes, I have had to warn only one student about blogs that my TA and I felt did not represent a good-faith effort. And I have never had to assign a penalty. Not all students contribute every week and a small number participate barely at all. But the majority contribute at least one good-faith blog a week. My better students often end up in detailed exchanges with each other about the class material.

In keeping with the spirit of this approach, I also do not require students to comment on others' posts. This does not mean that students are not engaging with their colleagues: many posts, perhaps a majority, refer in their main body to what others in the class are thinking—noting for example, that the author shares the opinion of others in the class or commenting on trends in others' posts. Since it is actually a little difficult to read other blogs in Moodle (the link to the "compose" page bypasses the place where you read class postings), this means that students are going out of their way to read their classmates' contributions before writing their own (one feature of many modern blogs that is greatly missed in Moodle is a "like" button: interaction would rise considerably, I believe, if students could also quickly vote posts up).

The result of this approach is the creation of a real community within my classes. Students use the blog to ask for help, identify problems, share their essay drafts, prepare notes, and organize study groups. By trusting in the good-faith willingness of students to contribute to this virtual classroom and to help each other understand their common research and learning tasks, I have been able to use blogging to create a "community of practice"

that very much mirrors the scholarly community I inhabit as a professional academic. By sharing with each other, they help define the nature of their study discipline and I acquire a very strong insight into student opinions on and difficulty with class material. I also consciously and frequently refer to blogs during my lectures and class discussion, framing my own contributions as often as I can in terms of issues raised by students in their posts.

The "unessay": Taking responsibility for research and learning

This emphasis on good-faith effort as the main criteria for determining what counts in blog postings is part of a broader attempt on my part to encourage students to take responsibility for their own research and learning. By leaving questions of form and content in their hands, I encourage students to think about what makes work interesting and important (although I am discussing essay writing here, this approach works, *mutatis mutandis*, with other disciplines; for an example from physics, see Lindsey et al. 2012). A student who cannot define disciplinary excellence, after all, is unlikely to achieve it in practice except by chance. The unessay is an even more radical approach to this problem.

The unessay is a replacement for the traditional "university paper." It requires students to take complete responsibility for the topic, format, and purpose of their assignment. In our introduction to the form in my blog, student research assistants (RAs) Emma Dering, Matt Gal, and I define the unessay as follows:

The "Unessay" is a constructivist approach to teaching the academic essay. Its main premise is that traditional approaches to teaching writing are not effective with contemporary students because they are focussed on getting students to internalise (relatively artificial) formal criteria rather than helping develop as researchers and communicators . . . because they teach "the theme" rather than "the essay."

The "Unessay" addresses this problem by borrowing from the techniques of the Digital Humanities, particularly the "Unconference" and the "Hermeneutics of Screwing Around." Instead of emphasising form over content, the unessay encourages students to experiment with free form writing in the form of exercises and blogs. Instructors then mark what is promising in the students' writing rather than what they get formally wrong. The technique then gradually introduces more the formal aspects of the "undergraduate essay," treating these, however, primarily as an element of genre rather than an essential feature of good writing. Students are encouraged to push at the boundaries of

the form they are taught, producing work that is true both to their own interests and the demands of the writing situation. (O'Donnell, Dering, and Gal 29 August, 2013)

From the teacher's perspective, the exercise is a semester-long program of writing that can be divided into three main parts:

- an initial unessay in which students are invited to “do whatever [they] want” in terms of topic and format;
- a second assignment in which students are given the same instructions as the first, except that they must in this instance “engage with somebody else's ideas”; and
- a third assignment at the end of the semester, in which students are asked to engage with somebody else's ideas in a written format; this submission is then revised and resubmitted by the students after a discussion of traditional essay format.

I use the unessay primarily in first year, where it is intended to address student anxiety about the formal requirements of the “university essay” (for a discussion see Miller 2010). Its point is to teach students to view essay writing as being *about* something, rather than the academic equivalent of “compulsory figures.” Throughout the semester, students are told that the main criteria for success will be “how compelling and effective [they] are.” Exactly what these terms mean, they are told, depends in large part on what they are writing about and the format they choose to disseminate their ideas:

An unessay is compelling when it shows some combination of the following:

- it is as interesting as its topic and approach allows
- it is as complete as its topic and approach allows (it doesn't leave the audience thinking that important points are being skipped over or ignored)
- it is truthful (any questions, evidence, conclusions, or arguments you raise are honestly and accurately presented)

In terms of presentation, an unessay is effective when it shows some combination of these attributes:

- it is readable/watchable/listenable (i.e. the production values are appropriately high and the audience is not distracted by avoidable lapses in presentation)
- it is appropriate (i.e. it uses a format and medium that suits its topic and approach)
- it is attractive (i.e. it is presented in a way

that leads the audience to trust the author and his or her arguments, examples, and conclusions). (O'Donnell 2012)

And the topics are all student developed: while I used to be criticized regularly in course evaluations for my reluctance to hand out essay topics for “regular” essays, I have yet to receive a single complaint about what is now the complete absence of instructor-composed topics from students assigned the unessay.

“Compelling” and “effective” are, of course, the way writing (and research) is evaluated in real life. When we submit articles for publication as professional academics, our referees ask themselves whether our arguments are convincing and our presentation shows what we intend it to. And they send it back to us if our work is not both. The “essay” itself, moreover, is, also in real life, an extremely flexible format, without a single set form or set of requirements. By encouraging students to “choose [their] own topic, present it any way [they] please, and [be] evaluated on how compelling and effective [they] are,” I am, in fact, encouraging them to behave like professional academics: matching form to content and thinking how best to report the results of their work to others.

This is not how the traditional “college essay” is taught . . . or thought about by our students. As Rebecca Schuman memorably argues,

Everybody in college hates papers. Students hate writing them so much that they buy, borrow, or steal them instead. Plagiarism is now so commonplace that if we flunked every kid who did it, we'd have a worse attrition rate than a MOOC. And on those rare occasions undergrads do deign to compose their own essays, said exegetic masterpieces usually take them all of half an hour at 4 a.m. to write, and consist accordingly of “arguments” that are at best tangentially related to the coursework, font-manipulated to meet the minimum required page-count. Oh, “attitudes about cultures have changed over time”? I'm so glad you let me know.

Nobody hates writing papers as much as college instructors hate grading papers. Students of the world: You think it wastes

45 minutes of your sexting time to pluck out three quotes from *The Sun Also Rises*, summarize the same four plot points 50 times until you hit Page 5, and then crap out a two-sentence conclusion? It wastes 15 hours of my time to mark up my students' flaccid theses and non sequitur textual “evidence,” not to mention abuse of the comma that should be punishable by some sort of law—all so that you can take a cursory glance at the grade and then chuck the paper forever. (Schuman 2013)

In the case of the unessay, however, we discovered that the lack of rules changed things considerably. For one thing, unessays were, on the whole, mechanically and intellectually superior to work the same students were submitting in other classes (we were able to determine this on the basis of comparative work by my then-TA Jessica Bay, who taught several students in multiple classes that semester; we are in the process of developing a protocol for testing this experimentally). The students who submitted written papers—and most still submit written papers that look somewhat like formal essays—showed none of the mechanical errors Schuman writes about: in four years of unessays, we have found only a handful of run-on sentences, major errors of grammar or punctuation, or even spelling or diction errors—far fewer in all that time, indeed, than would typically show up in a single intake of traditional essays. The topics chosen by the students, likewise, tend to be of a much higher calibre—no more “same four plot points” repeated fifty times or “non-sequitur textual evidence.” And the topics are *all* student developed: while I used to be criticized regularly in course evaluations for my reluctance to hand out essay topics for “regular” essays, I have yet to receive a single complaint about what is now the complete absence of instructor-composed topics from students assigned the unessay.

Marking the unessay, however, as my then-TA Heather Hobma and I discovered when the first batch came in, required a significant change in practice on our part. A good deal of traditional university essay grading, we discovered, involves identifying things that students have *not* done that we wished they had—“incorrect” citation formats, “incorrectly”-placed thesis statements, “incorrect” diction, and so on. As much as we may wish to teach students to write well, what we often actually end up doing with traditional essay grading is focusing instead on teaching them not to write poorly: identifying how far students have deviated (in often largely mechanical ways) from our stated or unstated norms. The result is that students begin to write extremely conservatively: since we are focusing on their “mistakes,” they in turn make mistake-avoidance their primary focus—a deadening approach to any intellectual work, theirs or ours.

The unessay, however, forced us to concentrate

on the students' goals and ideas: since there were no extrinsic norms, we were forced to grade them on the basis of how good their material was and how well it was supported by the form they chose. This did not mean that we had to accept things uncritically—students can make technically or intellectually poor videos, short stories, or non-fiction prose pieces as easily as they can poor essays (though in practice, unessays are generally higher quality in terms of their “production values” than a typical batch of essays). But it did force us, as it clearly had the students themselves, to consider why they were presenting the work the way they were. Because the ultimate goal of the assignment is to bring students to the point where they were comfortable with the essay form as a vehicle for their own thoughts (the final part of the assignment teaches them to edit their writing into essay form), we used our comments to identify aspects of their work that they could use in some future essay—a focus on what students could do well in the future (rather than what they have done poorly in the past) that had until this point never been part of my normal grading practice. To see their essay writing as a formative exercise designed to improve their skills and knowledge (much the way our research functions in our careers), rather than a summative exercise determining how well or poorly they have learned what we taught them.

Grading

The final component of my approach to encouraging student agency involves grading. When an assignment comes with instructions that insist that there is no “right” way of doing things, comparative grading seems an especially unsatisfactory form of assessment. This is not because it is impossible to distinguish between excellent, good, or poor work. Rather, it is because grades intrinsically discourage the kind of intellectual risk taking and willingness to experiment that the exercises are designed to encourage. As a vast amount of research has demonstrated, grades are understood by students as a summative and extrinsic reward/punishment system rather than a formative prompt to curiosity-driven work (see Kohn 1999 for the classic discussion). The response, even among many good students, is therefore to engage in intellectually counterproductive behaviour: hiding weaknesses and avoiding mistakes, underperforming and avoiding challenge, masking genuine interests in the hopes of presenting ideas they believe may be more in line with “what the instructor wants” (there is a huge literature on this; for a classic discussion, see Butler and Nisan 1986).

These are not qualities we value in our own work and we should not encourage them in our students. Changing this behaviour in the classroom, however, required (for me at least) a completely different approach to

grading. For the last decade, I have made a distinction between summative and formative assignments—summative assignments are those where students receive a letter or percentage grade that counts toward their final grade in the class; formative assignments are those that either do not count toward the final grade or that are graded on a pass/fail basis, depending on whether the assignment was completed satisfactorily. Over time, the relative number of summative assignments in my syllabi have fallen, while the number and variety of formative assignments have gone up: by the 2013-14 academic year, a typical course might split approximately 50:50 between formative (pass/fail) and summative (A to F) grades.

In the last two years, I have added “badges” to this mix. Now a typical course will consist of approximately 40% to 45% “pass/fail” or “appropriate/inappropriate” assignments and another 40% to 45% (normally consisting of a final paper and/or exam) graded on an A to F scale. The remaining 10% to 20% is devoted to badges that students can earn for doing excellent work on any assignment during the semester: usually 1.5% badges for work of “distinction” and 3% for work of “great distinction.” These badges are worth the same regardless of the weight of the underlying exercise: a “distinction” badge on a quiz worth 5% provides the same benefit to the student as does a “distinction” badge on an essay worth 20%. As I make clear to students, these badges are also extremely difficult to earn: in the two years I have been using this system, very few students have received them and no student has earned more than about 10-12% in this way.

The big difference between this system and the more traditional system I previously followed has to do with the role of “term work”—that is, the various essays, quizzes and tests, and assignments I give throughout the semester. In my previous system the main distinction between summative and formative work was how “big” it was. “Formative” grades were saved for small, low-value activities like participation, blog postings, and quizzes; “summative” grades applied to most things that required significant effort—essays, mid-term and final exams, major tests.

Now, however, I classify work by function rather than weight: term work is where students learn and practice new skills—it is therefore now graded almost entirely on a formative basis, regardless of difficulty or size; summative grades, on the other hand, are reserved for milestones—places where you show what you have learned from the term work: mid-term exams (in some cases) and, generally, final papers and exams (see, for example, the evaluation section in O'Donnell 2016).

This means that students receive a “pass” or “appropriate” for all or most pieces of work they submit in the term, regardless of size, provided

it meets my minimum standard (approximately a C; work falling below this receives either the lower grade it earned or can be resubmitted). But I also grade this work qualitatively (i.e. with comments and a letter grade) whenever possible, even though this score does not count against the students' final grade. This provides students with, on the one hand, the freedom to experiment intellectually and risk making the mistakes that research suggests is essential for successful learning (see Hattie 2008 *passim*); but it also provides real-world feedback about how the students are doing and how their work would calibrate on a standard grade scale, comforting those who have been conditioned by years of schooling to understand their progress through marks (Bower 2010; Butler and Nisan 1986). It also, moreover, mirrors how professional academics are (on the whole) evaluated by our peers: having an article accepted for a journal involves being judged on a fail/pass/distinction system in which most work also receives comments from editors and referees and in which “failed” work can be (and usually is) resubmitted to the same or a different journal.

The approach has been extremely well received in my student evaluations. In particular, they especially appreciate the certainty it provides for the term work they hand in (because students vary relatively normally in terms of how much they do hand in, the grades for term work show a reasonable spread). I like it because it also encourages them to use grades diagnostically: students no longer come to my door to ask, “Why didn't I get a B?”; they come to ask how they could get a B on a similar piece of work next time. Because I reserve between 10% and 20% for (very hard to get) badges, moreover, this new marking scheme accomplishes this without (thus far) inflating my grades: a comparison of the distribution in sections of courses graded using this system against my average in the same courses over the previous twenty years suggests, if anything, that grades under this new system are slightly lower, although the experimental sample size is still too small to claim this with certainty. And finally, the system is very freeing for the grader: for most of the students' term work, I can grade and comment on student work realistically without worrying about how poor grades or (constructively) critical comments will be received by somebody whose only focus is on their GPA.

Conclusion

Professional academics enjoy a great degree of professional autonomy. Although there are always some limits, we decide, on the whole, what is worth teaching and researching. Indeed, we consider this ability to set our own agendas and follow our own (collective) interests a crucial safeguard for the quality of our research: we resist attempts to establish top-down research agendas and we jealously guard our right to

teach and write things without regard for what those above us in the administrative hierarchy may prefer.

Given the degree to which we believe academic freedom is central to our own teaching and research practice, the extent to which traditional approaches to university instruction restrict student autonomy is very surprising. This is the more so because the student right of *Lernfreiheit*, or the right to determine the course of their study, was originally considered one of three crucial academic freedoms by the theorists who established our rights to research and teach.

In the last ten years, I have been working with my TAs and RAs at reconstructing this right for the students in my classes, focusing on three main qualities: building a sense of community, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning, and emphasizing intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic, task-contingent rewards. Although my results are at this point still preliminary and largely anecdotal, the evidence I have suggests that all three qualities contribute to improved learning outcomes and greater satisfaction on the part of my students.

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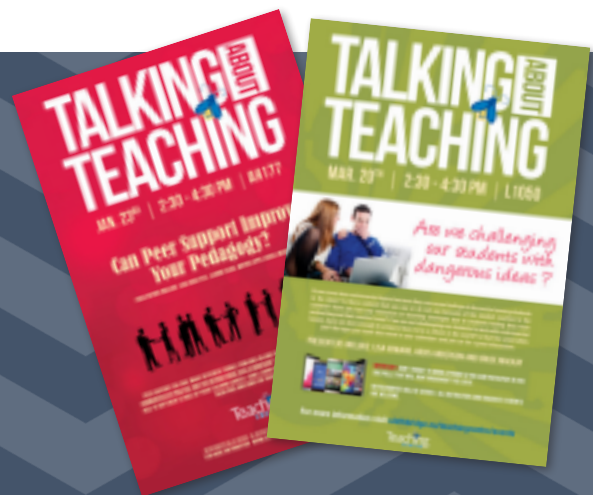
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TALKING ABOUT TEACHING



Talking About Teaching is a discussion-rich session that covers different aspects of teaching in higher education often related to current issues in the field. All instructors and graduate students are welcome to attend and are encouraged to ask questions and participate in discussion with the panel members. Past topics have included: Can Peer Support Help Your Pedagogy? as well as Are We Challenging Our Students with Dangerous Ideas?



Join us again this semester for hot topics, engaging panels, and some fantastic conversation.

For more information about these events and how to participate, please visit: www.uleth.ca/teachingcentre/talking-about-teaching