Director's Note

As the calendar year draws to a close, I am mindful of a particular benefit of my position at Teaching Matters. I get to know and work with colleagues in every department and at every stage of a career. I get to talk shop about concerns common to all even as we address those concerns differently. This is no small thing. Frank conversation about teaching evaluations or friendly disagreement over grading practices; puzzling out approaches to teaching the "research paper" (a term I argue you should not use) or managing that stack of papers; designing effective assignments or integrating digital tools into our classes: all are opportunities I have come to value very much. I'm especially grateful to partner this year with the Dean's Office on New Faculty Connections and with Emily Corse and Christie de Carolis in the Office of Instructional Technology on our Digital Teaching Fellows initiative. We now have a Camden Faculty Reading Group up and running (which you can join in Spring) and several workshops in the works for Spring.

I single out for special mention our major TMAC event of the year, an all-department gathering on "Threshold Concepts Across Disciplines," scheduled for Friday, January 23 (12-2:15 p.m.; details below). What are the key concepts that, once understood, allow students to progress? What misunderstandings impede development? Threshold concepts are those portals that enable learning. In the first hour, we will work together to articulate threshold concepts that all undergraduates need to succeed and consider how Gen Ed courses contribute to teaching those concepts. In the second hour, we will meet in small groups to flesh out the threshold concepts of our respective disciplines and, sharing those results, conclude by exploring how to build these concepts into course and departmental learning goals. In planning this workshop, TMAC expects attendance of at least two faculty members from each department. (Lunch will be served.)

Fall classes have ended! Reward yourself by enjoying the many links in this December newsletter to topics of interest to those of us in higher education. Best wishes for a restful break and a happy 2015!

Announcing…

You are invited to an information session on hybrid and online teaching, hosted by TMAC and presented by Emily Corse and Christie DeCarolis from the Office of Instructional Design and Technology. When? Friday, December 12, 11 am - 12:30. (That's the day of the Chancellor's Holiday Party.) Light lunch (pizza) served. Where? Armitage 124.

The Camden Faculty Reading Group is underway. We have started with Engaging Ideas by noted educator John Bean. We will read chapters 3-4 for our December meeting on:

- Thursday, December 18, from 3-4 p.m. in the Faculty Lounge, or
- Friday, December 19, from 12:15-1:15 p.m. in the Small Conference Room.

If you are interested in joining, contact us at: teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu
You are invited to an all-department gathering on “Threshold Concepts Across Disciplines” on Friday, January 23rd from 12-2:15 p.m. in the Campus Center Executive Meeting Room. We will work together to articulate threshold concepts and consider how Gen Ed courses contribute to teaching those concepts. We will also workshop in small groups to flesh out the threshold concepts of our respective disciplines and conclude by exploring how to build these concepts into course and departmental learning goals. Lunch will be served!

In The News

Bosses Seek 'Critical Thinking,' But What Is That?  “An Important Skill for Young Workers Has a Variety of Definitions.” Here are a couple of those definitions that Melissa Korn highlights in her article from the Wall Street Journal:
- “Thinking about your thinking, while you’re thinking, in order to improve your thinking.”
- “The ability to work with data, to accumulate it, analyze it [and] synthesize it, in order to make balanced assessments and smart decisions.”
Korn speaks to students and future bosses in an effort to clearly define the complex concept.

College Shouldn't Prepare You for Your First Job. It Should Prepare You for Your Life.  As the college admissions season moves into high gear, Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, urges students to consider college not just as a chance to acquire particular expertise but as a remarkable opportunity to explore their individual and social lives in connection to the world in which they will live and work. (Higher Education, 11/26/14)

How Many Ways Must We Say It? There has been a great deal of talk recently about college being a business and students being customers. Do you agree? In this publication from AAUP, Joel Thomas Tierno argues that we should denounce these claims as literally false and metaphorically dangerous, and he lists 31 ways to do so.

Common Core: It Really Is All About the Tests (and Corporate Profits) - Some commentators have defended the Common Core and blamed opponents of high-stakes testing for distorting the public's understanding of the benefits of the national standards. But Alan Singer argues that when you look at the history of the push for national standards you realize Common Core is all about testing. (11/17/14)
The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) creates the opportunity for incarcerated men and women to earn a Bard College degree while serving their sentences. The academic standards and workload are rigorous, based on an unusual mix of attention to developmental skills and ambitious college study. The rate of post-release employment among the program’s participants is high and recidivism is stunningly low. By challenging incarcerated men and women with a liberal education, BPI works to redefine the relationship between educational opportunity and criminal justice.

E-Portfolios

E-portfolios provide a place where students can display and discuss the significant submissions and experiences that occur during their learning process. They provide an online record of education with actual evidence of achievement, and they facilitate students’ reflection on their own learning, leading to more awareness of learning strategies and needs...

The Lafayette Language Portfolio is a digital archive that documents the achievement of specified goals and learning outcomes within language learning. Because students document their learning throughout their college careers, the e-portfolio provides a unique vehicle for tracing the evolution of language proficiency and cultural competence. Rather than basing assessment solely on traditional exams or papers, the e-portfolio showcases what students can actually do with a language.

The University of Central Florida’s Department of Writing and Rhetoric provides a guide and resource site for e-portfolios, complete with a thorough overview, recommendations for development, and student samples.

The University of Wisconsin’s Teaching and Learning Technologies site explains why e-portfolios aren't just for artists or architects! They are an excellent and efficient way for students to organize their work and share their accomplishments with parents, teachers, advisors, and potential employers. See the examples and resources.

Crossing the Threshold

Before and After Students 'Get It': Threshold Concepts: James Rhem, executive editor of the National Teaching and Learning Forum, looks at the notions of "threshold concepts" and "troublesome knowledge" as ways to excite faculty and engage them in deeper inquiry into the dynamics of teaching and learning in their subjects.

Reading at the Threshold: Recent considerations of threshold concepts in the rhetoric and writing studies discipline fail to consider the role that reading plays in the learning of student writers. This article from Across the Disciplines reports results from a three-part, two-year, empirical study of seventy-five learners enrolled across four sections of a writing-intensive course. The study used observations, surveys, and interviews to examine the relationships among the course, the learners enrolled in it, and the reading associated with it. Results indicate that the reading that occurs in a writing-intensive course is transformative across the disciplines.

In this Introduction to Threshold Concepts, Glynis Cousin, from the Higher Education Academy, outlines the features of threshold concepts and points to the distinctive value for curriculum design.

Peer Review

The Writing Studio at CSU provides a teaching guide for using student peer review. Resources include sample workshop sheets, advice on how to plan for peer review sessions, and strategies for helping students make effective comments.
Calibrated Peer Review (CPR) is a web-based, instructional tool that enables frequent writing assignments in any discipline, with any class size, even in large classes with limited instructional resources. In fact, CPR can reduce the time an instructor spends on reading and assessing student writing. CPR offers instructors the choice of creating their own writing assignments or using the existing assignments in the rapidly-expanding central assignment library. CPR has been adopted in undergraduate and graduate institutions, in professional medical and business schools, and even in secondary schools.

The Teaching Center at Washington University in St. Louis offers strategies for approaching peer review in the classroom and explains how the practice helps students improve their writing.

RU Using Rubrics?

TMAC recently presented a workshop on grading and rubrics for new faculty. See the handout and additional resources.

From our Teaching and Learning Peers: Center of the Month

Stanford Teaching Commons delivers useful resources for aspects of teaching such as integrating your teaching and research as well as a frequently updated blog that covers a variety of teaching topics.

Teaching with Technology

Online teaching has generated plenty of discussion in higher education, but it’s still used by a relatively small percentage of professors. A comprehensive study sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has identified a more pronounced trend in teaching at colleges and universities lately: a greater move toward student-focused teaching practices such as class discussions and group learning, and a corresponding move away from lectures and other teacher-centered styles. See the full report, press release, or research brief.

We continue to build an ever-expanding list of apps and technology that our faculty here at Rutgers Camden are using…

- Explain Everything is an app that allows teachers and students to create presentations or record screencasts to demonstrate a concept or illustrate a tutorial. Combining inking, images, text, and voice, Explain Everything offers a one-stop shop for student created work.
- Socrative is a smart student response system that empowers teachers to engage their classrooms through a series of educational exercises and games via smartphones, laptops, and tablets.

Check out all of the apps and technology resources on our website!

Are you using an app or teaching tool not on the list?
Send it to us at teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu

Reading is Fundamental

When Students Don’t Do the Reading, What Can You Do? We love it when students come to class well-prepared, engaged by the material, and ready to learn. But what happens when they don't do the reading? What can you do aside from giving (still more) quizzes? Find out here.

Looking for Strategies that Foster Critical Reading? This guide explains approaches like the ‘KWL Tool’ and the ‘Believing and Doubting Game’ that faculty can use to promote careful reading and critical thinking.
The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines

Drawing on their extensive experience training instructors in all disciplines to incorporate writing in their courses, Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj of Cornell University provide time-saving strategies and practical guidance in this brief, well-written reference. Accommodating a wide range of teaching styles and class sizes, Elements offers reliable advice about how to design effective writing assignments and how to respond to and evaluate student writing in any course. (Bedford/St. Martin's Professional Resources, 2004)

Let TMAC know if you would like a copy! teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu.

The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations, and Books offers strategies for structuring time to get writing done. It's a unique book because Zerubavel's a sociologist who has studied time and how it gets structured culturally, and he writes the book from the perspective of a busy academic trying to find time to write.

Conferences and Workshops

Call for Participation! The Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado Boulder presents a Conference on Community Writing: Building Engaged Infrastructure.


This is not your average conference, and the theme, Building Engaged Infrastructure, isn’t just a concept—it’s a challenge, a call to action.

How do we, on a local and a national scale, create engaged infrastructure? What does that look like? What barriers do we foresee? What resources and support structures do we need?

The conference will consist of presentations, dialogues, workshops, and DeepThink Tanks, which the conference committee will arrange to create a narrative structure that moves attendees through theories and proposals and project examples interspersed with sessions to reflect, incorporate, and collaborate. From the pre-conference hikes and planned outings to the final, full-conference DeepThink Tank on Professionalization and Engaged Infrastructure, we will build relationships and forge networks of engagement and support.

Please contact the conference committee with any questions.

Announcing AAC&U’s Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success: June 9–13, 2015 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

This Institute helps campuses, higher education systems, and consortia achieve inclusive excellence and advance goals related to engagement, inclusion, and success for all students. Campus teams of five individuals representing both academic and student affairs perspectives are invited to apply for participation in a program that follows four primary tracks:

- high-impact and highly effective educational practices and pedagogies;
- problem-focused, evidence-based work for deep learning and degree attainment;
- methods of building and scaling up student success initiatives; and the politics of change

Applications due March 4.
Follow us on Twitter: @RUCamdenTMAC

If you’re interested in being interviewed for the Faculty Spotlight, or if you have a link or topic you’d like to share, please email us at teaching.matters@camden.rutgers.edu.