



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ALC: Activating Learning in the Classroom

The faculty participants say: "The ALC Program is a time to reflect—a hardworking sabbatical." "I know it is a little corny, but I feel as if my teaching is being celebrated." The students participating in the Activating Learning in the Classroom classes say: "The *Course Guide* asked us to supply our own input and feelings—I loved it! If every class had something like this, I think I would like school better." "It's been a while since I had fun in the classroom. I need that kind of attention to do well. Thanks for letting me be myself, not my student number." What in this program produces such positive reviews from both faculty and students?

The ALC Program considers the crucial elements present in any classroom learning environment and then focuses on the three variables of the classroom equation: instructors ↔ information ↔ students (to be read in either direction). The instructor's task is to facilitate learning, and the students' task is to learn. But how? There is a process to teaching as there is a process to learning. In order to activate these processes, ALC offers an instructor the opportunity to stand back from a course and consider each of its ingredients. Instructors analyze their own styles of teaching, the thinking of their students, and the materials in their course. They clarify their goals for the course, then ponder the most effective ways to motivate a varied group of students to embrace them.

Once these questions have been considered, the instructors begin the challenge of translating their ideas about the classroom component into a *Course Guide*. Thus, the *Guide*, which is developed for each ALC course, reflects the individuality of the instructor and connects the students to the experience of learning. It serves as a concrete avenue for faculty members to try out new approaches to presenting material, and it provides a way for students to experience supportive and personal comments from the instructor as they work through the course material.



Pretend that you are a student arriving on the first day for your humanities course. You settle into your

chair and open up the large *Course Guide* that the professor has just handed to you. On the first page, you see the following information:

The Course Guide (this huge notebook sitting in front of you right now) will help guide you through the course material.

It contains:

- a calendar for the semester;
- maps—for identifying the areas about which we will be studying;
- journal entry questions (more details on these later on);
- previewing exercise—to introduce you to the texts you will be reading for this course and give you a preview (*before you begin reading*) of useful background material and relevant information outside the actual "body" of the text;
- reading *Guide* question—to help you focus on and respond to the material you will be reading in preparation for class;
- occasional pithy, personal, wise, and whimsical comments from me; and
- other oddments and errata.

You will find that you are asked to write a lot—perhaps more than you've been used to in other courses—on your thoughts about topics to be discussed in class, answers to specific questions, questions *you* want answered.

But it's *your* interaction with the "stuff" of this course that will make it more worthwhile—for you and for the rest of us.

Now, on to some of the requirements and expectations.

What do you think? You probably have a sense that this professor is well prepared, but you also get a feeling that you will be an active participant in the



course. The instructor's sense of humor comes through in this brief introduction, and you may feel a personal connection to the teacher standing in front of you.



The ALC Program is designed with an appreciation for the individual teaching style of each faculty member. Research and practice have provided educators with evidence of indicators and characteristics of effective teaching; but individual teachers translate what they know about good teaching into their own course content, their own style, and their own classrooms of students.

The ALC Program attempts to help instructors with this translation by bringing together a supportive group of peers to discuss ideas for the classroom and materials for the *Course Guide*. Faculty members in the ALC Program come from different disciplines at the college, and the sharing of perspectives among the faculty members provides insight into how a similar problem is solved across disciplines. Through lively discussion and group projects, faculty members begin to consider new possibilities for engaging students in the course content and for understanding the process of learning from a student's point of view.

Offered as a yearlong instructional development program, ALC began with eight instructors from each of the divisions of the college and has now, as a result of their request, added a ninth member from administration and staff. The ALC nine meet in seminars with the two Faculty Coordinators to redevelop courses that they plan to teach within a year's time.

The ALC seminar begins at the close of the spring semester with a four-day session introducing and discussing the classroom equation, continues through the summer with the preparation of *Course Guide* materials, and resumes with the weekly seminars in the fall. The fall seminars cover many areas of the classroom experience. They provide a lively forum for discussing teaching styles, learning styles, and critical thinking skills; the rhythms of the semester and the use of space within the classroom; the incorporation of writing, collaborative learning, and interdisciplinary and global issues; as well as time for sharing and group critiquing of work in progress. By December, the *Course Guide* is completed. The seminar reconvenes for occasional meetings during the spring semester as each instructor pilots the *Course Guide* and the multitudinous ideas that have evolved throughout the fall.

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