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ON COURSE

Teaching Philosophy 101

A new Web site offers one of the most comprehensive classroom guides available online

By JAMES M. LANG

In 2004, after John Immerwahr took charge of a freshman leadership program at Villanova University, he would routinely encourage students to develop a personal mission. He focused their attention on four areas: Live, love, learn, leave a legacy.

But after a year of directing the program, as part of his job as associate vice president for academic affairs, Immerwahr decided to do some assessment of his own personal mission. He had spent the previous nine years in administration. Now he was approaching his 60th birthday and experiencing some transformative events in his life — the death of both of his parents and the graduation of his children from college.

So in 2005 he embarked upon a 60-mile solo hike in the Cotswolds (helped along, he notes, by a service that transported his luggage from destination to destination). He spent part of each day thinking about what sort of legacy he wanted to leave.

The first thing he realized was that he wanted back in the classroom. At the university's request, he stayed on for two more years as an associate vice president and stepped down in the summer of 2007. He taught a semester and then took a sabbatical in the spring of 2008 to finish the thinking he had begun on his hike about how to make the most of what he calls the "third third" of his life.

His lifelong interest in teaching and his commitment to experimenting with new strategies led him first to think about writing a teaching guidebook. But to see a book from conception to print would take more time than he was willing to give, so he decided to take another route. After hiring a student to build a Web platform, Immerwahr began to design a Web site to promote effective teaching in the introductory philosophy courses that he has always loved to teach.

The result is Teach Philosophy 101 (http://www.teachphilosophy101.org), an online resource for philosophy instructors that offers one of the most comprehensive, well-researched, and accessible guides for teachers that I have ever seen.

"The most specific target audience," Immerwahr explained to me in an e-mail message, "is a relatively new teacher of philosophy in a liberal-arts college. I hope there is

something here for teachers in other disciplines, and I hope it is easy to find, but the farther off from that target they are, the less they will find."

My reconnaissance of the site suggests that he is being modest. Almost any teacher will find something of interest on his site, though professors in the humanities will find the healthiest dose of useful materials.

The site has eight tabs on such broad topics as "planning your course," "lectures and discussions," and "change-of-pace exercises." Each tab leads to an introductory overview and then to subtopics and more detailed recommendations. Under "lectures and discussions," for example, you find suggestions for "discussion starters" and "grading class participation." Follow the link on "grading class participation," and you find a thoughtful overview, as well as links to three grading rubrics that instructors could adopt in the classroom.

One of the challenges of offering guidance to teachers, in my experience, is striking the right balance between advice and evidence. While the best teaching guides have a solid foundation in the scholarship on teaching and learning, the ones that read like technical manuals don't get read (and probably don't deserve to).

Immerwahr's site negotiates that challenge effectively. Most of his recommendations come supported by research, noted at the bottom of the page or linked from key words within the text. The range of sources he has marshaled in support of his ideas is wide and impressive, and he welcomes contributions from other teachers. (In the interest of full disclosure, let me note that my own book on teaching, *On Course,* is mentioned on Immerwahr's site.)

I asked Immerwahr whether he still teaches Philosophy 101 (or its equivalent) and whether the research he has compiled on the site has changed his own approach in the classroom. It turns out that introductory courses are the only ones he wants to teach. He has asked his department chair to allow him to do that, and to teach freshmen whenever possible.

Creating the site, he says, has indeed changed and improved his teaching. For instance, he says, he never really understood how to use small groups in class until he read the literature on the subject and attended a workshop.

He has also developed rubrics for grading student work and has been experimenting with "clickers" in the classroom that allow students to answer questions by remote control — "the students are crazy about them." He has even developed an entirely new approach to assignments. Instead of asking students in his humanities seminar to regurgitate Plato for their final papers, he has them analyze various images of St. Augustine found on Villanova's campus, and then use wikis to create a Web site that considers the historical context, meaning, and function of each image.

Most important, his work on the site has convinced him of the need for transparency in the classroom.

"My motto has become 'Make the implicit explicit,'" he says. "One of the biggest lessons I have learned, and am applying, is to tell students exactly what it is I want them to do, how to do it, and why I want them to do it. So, for example, today we were working on class participation. The students talked about why it was hard, we reviewed different skills and approaches, and they practiced."

It would have been easy for Immerwahr to retire from his administrative post into the ranks of the faculty and coast for the remaining years of his teaching career. His commitment to revitalizing his own teaching, and passing what he's learned along to others, offers a great reminder that teachers at any stage of their careers can find new reasons to fall back in love with their vocation.

Immerwahr's ultimate hope is to join forces with teachers of other disciplines to build a brand of Web sites modeled on his own — Teach Marketing 101, Teach History 101, etc. He has a software platform that can be replicated for other sites and thinks there may be grant money to pursue that dream.

"However," he concludes, "I didn't get out of administration to write grants and try to get people to do things they don't want to do, so I am not sure how much energy I want to devote to this."

In the spirit of promoting the terrific work he has already put together, and perhaps helping him to connect with others who might see the value in building a ring of discipline-specific Web sites on teaching, I'll finish here by asking readers to pass along to me the names of other discipline-specific Web sites on teaching that deserve a wider audience. I will try to share some of those in next month's column.

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