Re-vitalizing the First Year Class
through Student Engagement and Discovery Learning

Erin Steuter[1] and Judith Doyle
Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada, E4L 1A7

Abstract

The first year course in Sociology at Mount Allison University introduced students to so-cial issues via dynamic class interactions and assignments that are designed to build con-ceptual and applied skills. Developments to the course organization have maximized the opportunities for discovery learning and have made the class an enjoyable teaching ex-perience. This article will outline the core innovations that have been developed: 1.) A workbook, similar in style to a hands-on science lab manual, has been developed to en-gage students in active in-class discovery learning projects. 2.) Client-based interactive class activities are used to help students engage in the solving of contemporary social problems in a manner that reveals the contemporary relevance and application of knowl-edge regarding social problems. 3.) Research assignments are provided through an in-ternship at the simulated ESPRIT (Evaluating Social Policy Research Investigation Team) think tank which provides students with the opportunity to develop research and analysis skills that are relevant to careers in the field of social analysis. 4.) The course in-cludes the analysis of a contemporary best-selling book that addresses a relevant social problem so that students have the opportunity to participate in current debates about is-sues of social importance.

Keywords: Student engagement, first year experience, discovery learning, soci-ology.

The first year course in our department has been a pedagogical challenge for us for many years and the subject of much experimentation. Despite the fact that we have a vibrant program with award winning teachers and engaged and insightful upper-level students, in the first year we are concerned about the lack of student engagement. Essentially we face four challenges: boredom, passivity, disconnectedness, and resistance. Students who are not engaged with our material can be disruptive in class by chattering, surfing the web, or walking out. Attentive students are often passive and unwilling to speak out in class or participate in group activities and seem to expend their energy on memorizing facts that they are unable to apply to real world scenarios. A lack of awareness of the importance of sociology as a discipline and its relevance to varied and rewarding careers, means that many talented students do not choose to major in our department. Finally, discomfort with the unpleasant truths about poverty, racism and inequality often put our students on

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[1] Corresponding author's email: esteuter@mta.ca

the defensive regarding our critical discussions on the organization of our society. Sound familiar?

It may sound familiar as many have discussed teaching large introductory courses and the challenges therein. For instance, Koropeckyj-Cox, Cain and Coran (2006:24) note that "large classes pose considerable challenges for promoting attendance, participation, and interaction." While Damron and Mott (2005:367) discuss in their large political science courses the additional challenges of anonymity, unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts, and "students who see passivity as the least costly approach to success." Durham (1989) found a similar dynamic in his introductory criminology class wherein some students expressed their opinions strongly while others remained silent and disengaged and both types resisted moving beyond already held opinions. These challenges in social sciences courses are not unique and may represent what Côté and Allahar (2007:16) argue is "the rise of the disengaged student [as] a new norm among students attending universities in the United States and … Canada."

We refused to allow disengagement to become a norm in our classroom. Indeed, while some of our colleagues have written-off the introductory course saying that it is a necessary evil to get through or claim that there is always going to be one course that a professor hates to teach, we were not ready to give up. Thus, we sought to develop a first year experience that would transform our classroom dynamic and make it more representative of our smaller and more engaged upper-level courses. We find that achieving a higher level of student engagement in class significantly helps to avoid the situation where a few bored students can have a disruptive and dampening effect on the classroom atmosphere. Our ideal is to have attentive students who participate in frequent class discussions with faculty and peers. We would also welcome occasional displays of team spirit, where students would compete or cheer each other on as they complete class activities. As champions of our chosen discipline, we want every student to leave the course with a clear sense of the importance and relevance of the discipline and the opportunities for careers that utilize our skill sets. Ideally, the first year course would prepare students for our upper level courses which require active engagement with course material. In addition, we hope through a dynamic, career relevant, project-based introduction to the discipline we will increase the number of majors.

Literature Review

A new student-centered paradigm has come to dominate thoughts about teaching in higher education. To a greater and lesser degree this thinking has been adopted by individual professors, departments, institutions and disciplines. There is not one definitive name for this new teaching paradigm sometimes characterized as a shift from seeing professors as the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side" (King, 1993). Within this paradigm there have been particular pedagogies such as discovery learning, active learning, collaborative learning as well as learning communities. Although there are differences amongst these approaches, generally these approaches stress student centered learning wherein students develop their knowledge of the subject through participating in

a series of activities and exercises usually done in some form of group work that stimulates critical thinking. These approaches are generally said to help students find patterns and connections in class work and encourage them to test theories, ask questions and come up with possible answers, and to investigate concepts using real life examples and their own experiences. Increasingly, these approaches are seen as having the added advantage of facilitating and contributing to student engagement (McKinney & Reed 2007; Zhao & Kuh 2004). For these reasons, these approaches are seen as good teaching practices for higher education (Chickering & Gamson 1987, 1991; Pascarella 2004).

The nature of what constitutes good teaching has increasingly come to be seen as active learning. Our department seeks to encourage diverse pedagogies, including active learning experiences, to increase student engagement in the discipline. Some of the ways in which active learning could be implemented into the curriculum is through cooperative/collaborative learning and problem-based learning. Many teachers seek to offer community and classroom-based learning experiences that develop students' critical thinking skills and prepare them for lives of civic engagement, thus embracing community-based and service learning as well as class-room based civic education. These can be built into the curriculum by assigning readings linking disciplinary subject matter to real world problems; requiring students to engage in understanding policy solutions directed at a variety of contemporary problems; developing assignments that allow students practice in communicating their disciplinary knowledge to the public; and finally bringing speakers to campus to speak on current issues in the field. Our newly revised introductory course implements many of these ideas as well as presents strategies for doing so in a large class.

Many scholars seem to have taken the above recommendations to heart and have sought to implement active learning techniques throughout the curriculum. The collection of student exercises in McKinney et al. (2001) recommend just some of the ways in which professors have sought to bring active learning into the classroom. Lowney's (2008) collection of essays on teaching social problems is another example of using active learning to garner student engagement in social problems courses. Her project, in which students create a city inside the classroom, was particularly inspiring for the use of simulations in encouraging student engagement. Rohall et al. (2004) discuss introducing students to research methods as directors and participants of small real research projects but note that introducing active techniques in large classes may be difficult (2004:406). Coburn-Collins (2004:209-214) has shown how Webquest assignments can engage students through the internet. Finally, the 2007 edition of the Instructor's Resource Manual on Social Problems (Carroll & Kaelber 2007) emphasized in assignments and exercises sociological data to analyze social problems, such as Carroll's (2007:87-90) which uses online statistics to investigate urban crime and crime rates and race and ethnic changes in cities.

The First Year Experience in Sociology at Mount Allison University

After a five year experimentation with a myriad of teaching innovations, the first year experience in Sociology at Mount Allison University has now been recognized as an exemplary innovation by the university administration and now meets our stated goals for

student engagement. In September 2007, in alignment with our university's new Strategic Plan, we moved away from a traditional buffet-like broad introduction of the discipline to a focus on social problems and social policy students which engage students in contemporary issues as well as better demonstrates how social structures work. The course provides students with an engaging introduction to the study of society via dynamic class interactions and assignments that are designed to build conceptual and applied skills. Developments to the course organization have maximized the opportunities for discovery learning and have made the class an enjoyable teaching experience that contains less of the problems of student disengagement often found in other first year courses. The core innovations that have been developed are as follows:

The Lab and Workbook

Each week the second meeting of the week is changed from interactive lecturing to an even more active learning atmosphere. The course utilizes a workbook that is similar in style to a hands-on science lab manual. We refer to these interactive class activities as "labs" so that students will understand the active nature of participation that we expect. The lab activities showcase social science methodology and practices and introduce the students to the scientific side of our discipline. Thus the term "lab" connotes for us and the students a serious, experiential scientific process.

Students buy the workbook with their texts and it comes in a three-ring binder. The workbook consists of an introduction, details of assignments, in-class activities, and the Sociology Department Handbook. The introduction section includes the syllabus, the submission policy and procedures for the in-class activity worksheets, the evaluation rubric by which all of their assignments are marked and finally, a learning styles quiz in order for them to better understand how they learn and suggestions on how to maximize their learning based on that quiz. The assignment section of the workbook includes details on the book analysis, and the research assignments. The Sociology Department Handbook provides program details and study, writing and researching tips.

The heart of the workbook is the in-class activities. On these worksheets, we explain the activity and provide space for the students to record their answers. Worksheet activities range from reading and analyzing news articles, data analysis, debates on policy, creation of lobbying materials, and design of videos. Our workbook activities are designed for students to actively engage with social problems data and generate thoughtful analysis and viable solutions. The workbook activities follow the topic theme of the social problem outlined in that week's lecture. In addition, the workbook activities are designed to help build skills for the internship assignments which are delivered through the ESPRIT research center web page.

Student Interdependence

Part of our motivation for the active learning component of the course is for the students to learn through a process of dialogue and engage with each other, and not just passively listening to the "sage on the stage." We have organized the classroom to facilitate group

interaction and interdependency, so that students have the opportunity to work effectively in small groups. In addition, we seek to encourage them to listen carefully to their peers and thus we have designed many of the workbook activities to be made up of a series of components that require student cooperation in order for them to fully understand the whole project. At the beginning of the term we attached labels to the rows of seats so that each student is assigned to one of 4 groups labeled A, B, C or D and the rows are numbered so that each student knows from the label that they are in, for example, row #3 of working group B. The class has 100 students in it which breaks down into 25 students working on each problem, in 5 rows of about 5 students per row. The students in the row work actively as a team and are often required to consult with students in other rows that form part of their working group in order to confirm their answers and share insights. This makes it easier to assign parts of a project. The worksheets also make reference to these group assignments so that when the students are recording the results of the activity, they will have the topic assigned to each working group listed in their workbook with room to fill in the results developed by their peers. This makes for a complete set of notes for the students to study from. We used the term "working group" to give the students a sense of how research is conducted in the real world and we provide examples of workplace situations in which they might expect to see working groups of this type contributing to the development of social analysis.

For example, the workbook activity on suicide provides different sets of statistical tables on suicide to each of the working groups. Working Group A examines tables on suicide by sex, Working Group B examines tables on suicide by ethnicity, Working Group C examines tables on suicide by age, and Working Group D examines tables on suicide by region. The students are asked to read and interpret the assigned tables and the results for each working group are shared on the board or in verbal presentations. With this arrangement, we have found that there is a high degree of attentiveness when other class member's speak as all the students need to know the results of each working group in order to complete the assignment. They will even hush each other if they can't hear the speaker, which is unusual in a large first year class. Once all the working groups have presented we can see the big picture on suicide factors and then start to brainstorm what social solutions would be valid given the nature of the causes.

We make clear that students will need to work through the activities in order to be successful in their other assignments and the exam. The suicide activity, for example, teaches students to identify social factors behind personal decisions such as taking one's life but the organization of the activity also provides an opportunity for students to learn and build skills such as reading and interpreting a statistical table, which is something they will need to do in an upcoming assignment. We always highlight the relevance of the worksheet activities to the upcoming assignments to help the students understand the value in actively participating in the class activities. We have experimented with marking each worksheet or simply leaving them as an unmarked but necessary prerequisite for completion of the other assignments

Simulated Clients

A technique that we use to highlight the applicability of the social problems analysis skills is the use of simulated clients for some of the workbook activities. We start the class by identifying a client who would theoretically be interested in the social problem we are discussing and then assign the students a task to undertake for that client. We have asked the students to identify the pros and cons of environmental policy initiatives on behalf of a government client and provided media talking points for leaders of a controversial needle exchange program that was under fire. In an activity during the poverty and inequality section, we showed the students a YouTube video that featured activists leading a large march of protestors who were raising concerns about the homeless. The protest march and the video had clearly captured the public and media's attention but it did not contain any solutions to the social problem. For the lab activity, the students were told that this anti-poverty coalition was our "client" and it was our task to create their next video which would present viable solutions to poverty and homelessness to the public. The students took their newly found understanding of the structural theories of inequality, which had been covered in the lecture class, and created video storyboards on solutions to poverty complete with suggested sound tracks. The students relished this activity and developed very thoughtful outlines for videos that included compelling arguments supported by data.

In another case, we did a worksheet on blaming the victim and provided the students with a newspaper article about a mentally ill homeless woman who gave birth on the street and was then charged by the police for "failing to provide the necessities of life." We told the students that they would be consulting for a mental health advocacy group who was preparing for a meeting with the local newspaper in an effort to gain more compassionate coverage of the mentally ill. In the lab, the students worked through a series of questions about the way the media story presented the homeless woman's situation and we asked them to highlight the ways in which she was blamed for her situation. Then the students, in the working groups, developed recommendations for media best-practices regarding coverage of the mentally ill and then presented these suggestions to our fictional client. The students enjoy the application of their insights to a simulated client and we found that it gave them a sense of what career opportunities might be available with a degree in this field.

The Simulated Think Tank

Another component of our course is the ESPRIT web site. The ESPRIT acronym stands for Evaluating Social Policy Investigation Team. The web site is designed to look like a think tank or research center whose mission is to analyze contemporary social problems and develop policy solutions. The students in the class are told that they are to act as interns for this center and conduct research and prepare materials on behalf of the think tank much in the way that actual interns do. We highlight examples of some of our recently graduated students who have actually done work such as this in the real world. The major research and writing assignments in this course are provided to the students in the form of tasks for the ESPRIT center. The ESPRIT web page is colorful and attractive and

showcases the research work done by previous interns. Each year, we choose a social problem's topic to serve as a theme for the course assignments. Previous topics includes: AIDS, Hurricane Katrina, Olympics, and Representations of Women and Men in the media. Most recently, we worked on racism and were able to address several connected issues through the assignments. There are three assignments (one every 4 weeks, worth 20% each). The assignments are referred to as "internship tasks" and the expectations and details for the assignments are posted for the students on the ESPRIT web page.

In the first assignment we try to build knowledge of the assigned theme and relate it to central concepts in the analysis of social problems. We try to avoid traditional essay formats, and instead ask the students to provide written documents that would be more common outside of academia. For example, one of the first tasks that we have assigned involved asking the students to prepare a 1000 word newsletter on behalf of the ESPRIT center that focused on the issue of racial profiling. The task required the students to explain clearly why racial profiling by police is a social problem and demonstrate how blaming the victim is part of the process of racial profiling. Finally, they were asked to discuss the negative consequences of racial profiling for all citizens. The lectures and previous workbook activities provided the students with the necessary skills to complete this task in a thoughtful and sophisticated manner. In addition, the students were asked to include insights that they had learned from an assigned text on Racial Profiling (see discussion of the book component below).The students were asked to present their work in the format of a research center newsletter. We told the students that preparation of a newsletter such as this is often done by freelance consultants who are often paid by industry and government for work of this type. We told them that we wanted to see a final product that was worthy of a consultant's fee. The majority of the students took our tasks very seriously and produced very high quality work. Because some of our students live with their families in our small college town, we have occasion to meet their parents who spoke to us about this assignment, saying that their child was working hard on the newsletter and that the whole family was learning a lot about racial profiling. This type of interaction rarely takes place when our students work on traditional essays. We were pleased the issue and real world nature of the assignment made the project a legitimate topic for family engagement.

The second assignment is designed to build data analysis skills and apply them to the theme in manner that would be expected in the world of business or government research. This year we gave the students a series of statistical tables detailing various forms of discrimination reported by visible minorities. The students were asked to provide an overview of the state of racism in Canada by analyzing these tables and reporting their findings in the form of a report typically produced by government bodies. We provided them with several examples so that they could see the expected format. The analysis had to demonstrate knowledge of what the tables indicated and the text needed to be analytical but still accessibly written for the intelligent and interested reader. The students were a little apprehensive about working with the numbers but our lab activities had prepared them with the necessary skills. These assignments were very well done and the students felt very proud of what they had accomplished.

The final assignment was the preparation of a policy document on hate crime that would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of how to analyze a social problem and recommend viable policy suggestions. This task was 2000 words and the students were asked to provide an overview of the social problem that moved from the general to the specific, providing quantitative and qualitative evidence to show the scope of race-based hate crimes. They needed to identify the negative consequences caused by this social problem and explore how all parts of the society are affected by the social problem not just those directly experiencing the problem. The students were asked to identify the social causes of hate crime, ensuring that they explained the social context of the situation and identified relevant concepts and processes. They were asked to address the arguments of those who opposed social policy solutions for hate-crimes and provide a clear argument in favor of the need to make changes. Finally the task required the students to present three policy recommendations that successfully address hate crime. These assignments were very gratifying to mark because they showed the tremendous amount of learning that students had achieved in a short period of time. Many students were eager to talk about the policies that they discovered in their research and had endorsed in their papers. This was particularly helpful as a way of connecting with the students outside of class, so when we met one of them on the campus or in the community, they would often stop and tell us about the hate-crime policies they had recommended in their final projects.

Book Analysis

One of things that we decided to introduce was an assignment that analyzed contemporary best-selling books that address relevant social problems so that students would have the opportunity to participate in current debates about issues of social importance. Over the years we have had the students read Joel Bakan's *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power,* Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber's *Trust Us We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles with Your Future,* Ben Bagdikian's *The New Media Monopoly*, John De Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor's *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic,* and David Tanovich*'s The Colour of Justice: Policing Race in Canada*. In the book assignment we ask the students to read the book and submit written answers to a series of questions that we have outlined for them. The questions tend to seek knowledge of detailed understanding of the book's core argument and examples to ensure that the students' have read it! In addition, we include questions that ask the students to apply course concepts and theories to the book content to test their ability to connect the course material to the new examples and insights in the text.

Results

To assess the impact of the changes we instituted**,** we organized a study in 2007-2008 which involved 141 participants who were enrolled in various sections of the introductory Sociology at Mount Allison University. 129 participants were first-year students and were surveyed electronically by way of a course evaluation at the time that they completed the course. An additional 8 from the same demographic were contacted for per-

sonal interviews. To further evaluate the impact of the changes we had made starting in 2005, we interviewed four students who had for various reasons taken the course twice. Once when it was lecture and multiple choice exam based and for a second time when it was active learning based. The interview and survey questions sought the students' opinion on the various facets of the course.

The vast majority of students indicated in both personal interviews and the online survey that the experiential learning activities were enjoyable. Students who took the course twice indicated that following the curriculum changes in September 2005, they enjoyed the 'engaging' and 'interactive' lectures, and for those who had experienced the lab component and the internship tasks of the course described them as being 'helpful', 'enjoyable', 'engaging' and 'informative'.

In the online survey, 81% of participants who responded indicated they enjoyed the experiential lab activities. The majority (87%) of students also indicated that they enjoyed using the Workbook. Those students who indicated enjoyment of the active learning activities of the class indicated they found them 'helpful' or 'an asset'. This was reassuring to us as this confirmed the value of the active learning activities. This suggests that the students enjoyed an experiential approach to learning and in the case of those who found it enjoyable, 64% believed that it was a strong asset to their learning or that it really helped them understand the material. The students also indicated that the enjoyed feeling engaged by the subject matter, a much more difficult feat without an interactive lab session. One student indicated that they would like to see an entirely lab based course; cutting out the lecture part as they felt they were learning a substantial amount more during the lab sessions than in the lecture sessions.

The ESPRIT website was well received by students, the majority (93%) of respondents felt that it was easy to use and a convenient resource for the class. The aim of including the website was to help simulate a professional environment while providing a place for students to find any and all resources that they would need for the internship tasks. The Internships tasks themselves were enjoyed overall (80%) by the students who responded and described as engaging and exciting. The intention of the internship tasks was to simulate some of the publications one might create if one was employed by a sociological research group such as articles and policy recommendations and students responded that they enjoyed the chance to participate. Some students remarked that it really made them feel like they were part of the solution – to be able to thoughtfully analyze a social problem and to make recommendations. Others commented that they simply enjoyed the break from the long established university formula of "assignment, midterm, paper, final exam". Of the 20% of students who responded that they did not enjoy the internship tasks, the largest group indicated that they felt they were too difficult.

A majority (80%) of student respondents indicated that they enjoyed reading the assigned book, *The Colour of Justice* for the class. Of that group the majority indicated they enjoyed reading it because they felt it was 'eye-opening' and very interesting. The positive feedback from students on using a monograph or case study suggests that students respond well to learning about current social issues from a 'best-seller'.

From an administrative perspective all of the changes and the student's reactions to them may be a boon for the department. Over half, 60.9%, of the participants indicated that they were considering taking more classes in the department in the future, signaling that the course was successful in generating interest in the discipline.

Measuring success via Assignments

Our sense, as teachers, is that the changes we have made to the curriculum of the first year class has resulted in improved student work as well as increased enjoyment for students and faculty. The average grades for the course has increased throughout the experimental changes to the course but it would impossible to isolate the exact causes and consequences. Some high-performing students have been attracted to the courses newfound reputation for being a stimulating and rewarding experience, while other students just looking for an easy elective have stayed away. However, our evaluation of one project in particular leads us to believe that the course changes are resulting in improved student learning. We surveyed the students about their favorite worksheet activities and many of them mentioned the creation of a pay equity brochure. In this activity we included some campaign materials from a local women's organization which was lobbying for equal pay between men and women. Their lobby materials included an urgent call for increases to women's salaries supported by recent data on the wage gap. In addition, the group had developed a clever ad featuring a young girl with a dour expression on her face with the caption "Introduce your daughter to the facts of life: Give her 79% of your son's allowance." In the lab we asked the students to review the campaign materials, identify the core causes and consequences of unequal pay and then, using a set of statistics, create their own brochure, complete with catchy ad. The students eagerly engaged with this class-activity and generated very thoughtful brochures that revealed a clear understanding of the gendered nature of wage differentials.

Our experience is that teaching about gender inequality is always bound to attract a certain amount of backlash, especially in a large first year class so our suspicions were alerted when the back row of football players started laughing and high-fiving each other during the new class activity. But when we went to check on them, it turned out that they were congratulating each other for having come up with a very clever design for their pay equity ad. We were particularly gratified by this moment because this exercise had been intentionally designed to create a change in classroom atmosphere when addressing inequality issues. Over the years, we had noticed that the students were uncomfortable with learning about the levels of poverty, discrimination and intolerance that they were generally unaware of. Some of these students respond by challenging our facts or going into denial mode. We hoped to re-direct this attitude through the design of the activity so that instead of lecturing on the inequality of women in the workforce, we focused on assigning students a project to take a set of statistics and present them in a creative manner. This had the effect of side-stepping their resistance. As they worked on a project that was ostensibly about communicating statistical material, they engaged with the data and so "discovered" fundamentally inequalities for themselves. Many of the students were very shocked as they calculated figures that showed that women with a university education earned almost the same as men with a high school education. When they asked about this,

we affirmed their calculations and commiserated with their findings. We were please by the quality of their insights on these assignments because in the past we had found that the students had not performed well in more traditional assessment of this material, such as exam questions, that dealt with this same subject matter.

Another workbook assignment that produced improved results was one in which the students were ostensibly learning content analysis and pattern recognition skills using a set of qualitative data. Before we started presenting them with statistical tables, we wanted them to realize that behind the cold numbers, lay powerful stories of human experience. But to meet our other goals of introducing material that challenged their prior worldview about inequality issues, the raw data that we gave to them to code and summarize was a set of first-hand accounts of discrimination faced by new immigrants which we had collected from an online support forum. The students learned their data skills but also started to thoughtfully engage with the stories of the immigrants whose stories revealed that they felt that their skills were not valued in the workplace and that the promise of acceptance in a tolerant and multicultural country was more rhetoric than reality. The student's compassion for these stories was much more heightened than when we had taught immigration issues in the past, where knee-jerk anti-immigration sentiments were more likely to be raised. The resulting analysis showed greater understanding of the nature and impact of institutional racism in the workplace.

Measuring Success by Final Grade

Finally, an additional proxy measure of student learning can be found in their final grades. Prior to the introduction of these changes, Introduction to Sociology was taught as a traditional broad introduction to the discipline with three multiple choice exams throughout the term (each worth 20%) and a final multiple choice exam (worth 40%). The average grade when taught like this was a C- (60%). Since introducing the above changes the average grade has been a C+ (69.2%). Certainly we feel like this grade represents the students' improved learning.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, we are very excited by the changes we have made. The experience of teaching is much improved for us and for the students too. We are encouraged that all the students who take our first year course now have a better understanding of both what sociology is and how it is done in our department. Those who choose to become majors in our department are self-selecting for an active learning experience that enhances the research skills and critical thinking that we focus on.

Teaching sociology and/or social problems in large classes remains a challenge that many of us have to face. We are very excited about the changes that we introduced and pleased that our evaluation of those changes shows that they have re-vitalized the first-year experience of our students.

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