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Inviting Experience Rung by Rung: Designing Effective Literature Ladders

By Jan Schmittauer, PhD

Online teachers have a unique challenge to provide active, engaging, and meaningful reading experiences for their students. A quote from the preface to the November 2007 research report from the National Endowment for the Arts titled "To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence" makes this challenge clear: "The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. These negative trends have more than literary importance. As this report makes clear, the declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications." [www.nea.gov/research/ToRead.pdf]

Using literature ladders, a technology-rich tool originally described by Dr. Annette Lamb, a professor at Indiana University-Indianapolis, can

transform reading from a passive practice to an enriched, multidimensional experience.

Literature ladders extend, expand, and enhance student reading of novels, plays, stories, essays, and even poems by connecting students to Web resources, including author home pages and interviews, biographical information, historical background, audio and visual clips, and relevant contemporary examples. Students of all ages and teachers from any discipline can benefit from exploring the vast collection of print/technology connections available online. Explaining how literature ladders work by example will best demonstrate the potential of this innovative assignment.

Each year, thousands of high school and college students are required to read *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the most widely read and taught novels of the 20th century. Many students turn directly to study aids in order to answer their teachers' customary questions about characterization, setting, theme, and symbolism. Students, however, become immediately energized when they dive directly into the shady, seductive,

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Teaching Upper-Division Math Courses Online

By Markus Pomper

The shift from lower-division to upper-division courses constitutes a paradigm shift for most students. I recommend a three-pronged approach to help students make this transition in online courses.

• **Choose the textbook wisely.** In a traditional mathematics class, the students' first encounter with new material is typically the instructor's presentation in the classroom. In an online class, their textbook might be the primary resource, so choose it wisely.

Choose a textbook that shows students how a proof is developed. We mathematicians know that the polished version of a proof does not readily flow from the author's quill, but undergraduate students typically don't. A proof begins with an idea and undergoes a series of revisions before it takes its final form. Typically, the order of reasoning in the final form of a proof is the reverse of the order in the initial draft. Choosing a textbook that teaches proof-writing and shows the progression from draft to final form helps students succeed in the

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compelling world of Jay Gatsby and Fitzgerald's "Roaring Twenties" through literature ladders. For instance, through sites such as National Public Radio, Studio 360, and PBS, students can hear:

- Eleanor Lanahan, granddaughter of F. Scott Fitzgerald, talk about the fascinating correspondence between her grandfather and his wife, Zelda;
- novelist Patricia Hampl recall Fitzgerald's notorious reputation in their shared home town, St. Paul, Minnesota, through an audio clip from Studio 360;
- contemporary authors such as Garrison Keillor and E.L. Doctorow offer tributes to Fitzgerald and his novel; and
- popular songs from each year of the Roaring Twenties as they encounter the tumultuous years of the "Lawless Decade" in a site by Paul Sann, a pictorial history of this time of American transition. See www.lawlessdecade.net/index-2.htm.

Students can also see:

- the Discovery Channel video clip on "Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* and the Dream;"
- a 10-minute documentary on YouTube in which friends of Fitzgerald and scholars discuss the novel;
- pictures of F. Scott, his wife, his daughter, and the homes in which he lived; and
- the original *New York Times* book review published on April 19, 1925.

The University of South Carolina, which maintains the F. Scott

Fitzgerald Centenary Home Page, is one of several educational sites with links to voice and film clips, the engaging PBS biography of F. Scott and Zelda, a chronology, essays and articles, quotations, lecture series and readings, and numerous celebrations and conferences. Visit www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/.

How does a teacher sift through such a rich collection of resources and create an effective literature ladder that will immerse students broadly and deeply into the world of the text and beyond?

1. Cast a wide net and enjoy the search. Dozens of websites await exploration. Of course it's important to apply solid evaluation criteria to what you discover. As you continue to browse, focus your search terms to yield more useful results.
2. Consider how much time students will spend completing the literature ladder and what percentage of the grade you will allocate for their work. Clearly an extensive ladder on a complex novel such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* would require more in-depth, detailed responses than one on an essay.
3. Decide how many steps or "rungs" you will include, and be sure that each rung is a relevant, meaningful written activity that will enhance learning and allow for creativity. Possibilities include comparing a book to the movie; short-answer discussion questions; writing a persuasive response to an inherent dilemma; agreeing/disagreeing with book reviews; or using multigenre creative responses such as dialogue, correspondence among

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characters, a eulogy or tribute, a speech, an interview, a time line, or a poem for two voices.

4. Specifically explain to students what is expected in each rung. For instance, on the final rung of the literature ladder I developed for *The Great Gatsby* students read:

We conclude our study of *The Great Gatsby* with a scholarly essay in which Jay Gatsby, who is portrayed as a failure in life, attains greatness in death. Martyred by a wrongful and untimely demise, Gatsby ultimately develops into a mythical figure who represents the hopes and dreams of a postwar America. Your final rung on this ladder is to summarize this essay. You may find yourself put off by the language, intimidated by the length, or challenged by the ideas. That's good! As someone who is a bit of an expert on "Gatsby" by this point, you should realize that you can understand academic writing, appreciate it, and grow from the intellectual test that it presents. Good summarizing is a significant undertaking—it requires you to find only what is essential, to synthesize the content, and, finally, to distill it to its essence and rewrite it in your own words (at least 500). You may find yourself reaching for your dictionary more than once. I know that you'll feel that you've "stretched out your arms" at the end of this assignment. I think I see a green light glowing...

5. Encourage students to collaborate in pairs or small groups for some ladders. Online students in particular need and appreciate opportunities to discuss what they read and share their understanding. Frequent use of the discussion board or chat room can

make collaboration easier and more fun.

6. Present the students with the entire ladder from the beginning so that they can preview the tasks and allocate their time wisely. It helps to provide a clear timetable for students to finish one rung at a time rather than requiring them to submit the completed ladder at once. Pacing the instruction allows for deeper introspection and more thoughtful responses, although students can be encouraged to work ahead.
7. For at least half of the rungs, try to offer students options as to which activities they complete. Having choices allows students to feel a sense of ownership and invest more fully in their responses.
8. The grades students earn on literature ladders are generally very good and depend on how thorough their responses are and how much textual support they provide. Write back to students in a different color as you comment on their efforts. It's easy to see how carefully they have read the book, and an added bonus is that it is very difficult for them to plagiarize since the rungs are so specific. You can choose to have students meet a minimum performance standard in order to move on to the next rung, offer a chance to revise, count each rung as a percentage of the entire grade, or have one grade for the ladder as a whole.
9. Finally, it is essential that students make a personal connection with the text. Perhaps the most prominent theme in *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, is the discrepancy between Gatsby's dream and reality. Asking students to reflect on a time when one of their dreams or desires fell short of their expectations invites students to experience the novel

as contemporary and relevant.

Students comment positively about literature ladders. The following observation is typical:

"I've never 'climbed' a literature ladder before, but this new experience allowed me to think and write in ways that I wish I could have in other courses. Their versatility encouraged me to explore a variety of perspectives (something that I haven't been able to do very often throughout my academic career, since traditional classes tend to have you read a text then regurgitate the information). Providing such a diverse collection of activities made for extremely well-rounded learning. The posted assignments really pull resources from the World Wide Web, making this course a truly online experience. The wide range of the assignments makes each rung of the ladder far more interesting than simply reading a book, discussing it for two hours twice a week, and writing a paper about it. I comprehended and will remember the material far better by experiencing literature ladders rather than through traditional assignments."

Literature ladders challenge students to think beyond the text and connect it to their lives and to the society in which they live. Assessing these ladders is far more interesting than grading traditional papers, since students are more engaged in their learning and therefore more insightful and passionate in their responses. The enthusiasm that literature ladders generate can enable students to see reading as an enjoyable, essential activity rather than a chore.

Jan Schmittauer is an associate professor of English at Ohio University–Chillicothe. Contact her at emlin@wowway.com. @

Course and Instructor Evaluation: If It's So Good, Why Does It Feel So Bad?

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

Most of us would agree that continual improvement is a good idea. For example, the manufacturer of my MP3 player needs to make certain options easier. But I'm thrilled that recording a television show using my DVD recorder is easier and more intuitive than recording a television show on my old VCR.

One of the reasons that continual improvement in our jobs doesn't feel as good as continual improvement in the electronics we buy is that improving humans is hard. And it's far too often done in a hurtful way and for the wrong reasons.

Evaluation, simply put, is about measuring value. That sounds straightforward, but it really isn't, because it's often hard to figure out what to measure and how to measure it. For example, when you are getting ready to purchase a new car, what makes it more valuable, less valuable, or not valuable at all? Well, that depends on what is important to the person doing the evaluating.

If evaluation sounds good in theory but feels bad in practice, it may be that you or others are operating under some common misconceptions.

Misconception: Outcomes are the only things worth measuring.

Reality: Outcomes, such as numbers of new courses developed, enrollments, retention, and satisfaction levels, are important and they should be measured. But it's also important to evaluate critical processes, such as support for faculty course development, relationships between course designers and developers and faculty, and student

ability to get help as needed.

The processes that are involved in producing and delivering online courses and instruction should be evaluated alongside the outcomes of these processes so it's possible to see what changes would allow for *better* outcomes.

I recently worked with an institution that had an adversarial relationship between faculty and the online course development team, and both spent time pointing fingers to explain why the results weren't optimal. What they didn't see was that this adversarial relationship created bottlenecks and course development problems. Obvious solution? Build a better process and fix the damage caused by the old one.

If the process of producing and delivering online courses and instruction is problematic, courses and instruction are also likely to be problematic—and these problems are unlikely to improve without improving the process. So, while evaluating outcomes, it's also important to evaluate the processes that impact those outcomes. You will find inefficiencies, poor relationships, rework, contention, and more that are making better outcomes difficult or impossible.

Misconception: Evaluation is a CYA activity to be endured.

Reality: The purpose of evaluation should be to continuously improve, not to check off boxes on a checklist and then breathe a sigh of relief until evaluation needs to be done again.

Most higher education institutions conduct end-of-course evaluations, but this kind of evaluation often doesn't result in significant improvements to courses and cannot impact courses in progress. Hmielski and

Champagne, in an article titled "Plugging in to Course Evaluation" (http://technologysource.org/article/plugging_in_to_course_evaluation/), call this consider-what's-wrong-after-it's-over approach an "autopsy approach" to course evaluation.

Because end-of-course evaluations may be required but often aren't sufficient, some online instructors have begun to implement weekly or bimonthly anonymous evaluations by students so they can make changes to the course and the process in the here and now. For example, I adopted a weekly, anonymous course evaluation technique that my colleague Joni Dunlap at the University of Colorado Denver uses (an explanation of the technique is in *The Online Learning Idea Book*, published by Pfeiffer). This continual improvement process could be implemented using a Web form or an online survey tool such as Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com)

Bottom line? The purpose of evaluating online courses and instruction should be improvement, not pain. And improvement efforts are most successful when they are valuable to all concerned. So analyze whether the misconceptions described in this article apply to your institution—and if some do, consider how to change them for the better.

Patti Shank, PhD, CPT, is a widely recognized information and instructional designer and writer and author who helps others build valuable information and instruction. She can be reached through her website, www.learningpeaks.com. @

Using Personality and Learning Assessments as a Metacognitive Icebreaker Activity in the Online Classroom

Jacqueline A.F.I. Carroll

Paloff and Pratt (1999) and TA Consultants (2003) suggest that a sense of community is built based on a warm, friendly, interactive online environment. Furthermore, when these aspects are present in combination, this will bring about an improved learning environment. Therefore, one of the most important priorities for instructors is to set the tone for a friendly, interactive, and inviting learning community early in the course. This can be accomplished through an effective ice-breaking activity.

Although there are many ice-breaking activities for the traditional classroom, in the online classroom this activity frequently results in the posting of biographical information. This information allows students to assess peers' backgrounds, experiences, and other professional accomplishments; however, it does not foster the building of interpersonal student relationships or allow for in-depth personal insights.

One tool that I have found particularly effective in creating a bridge beyond formal knowledge to more personal knowledge is a personality and learning style online assessment activity during the first week of the course, regardless of course content. During the first week of class, I post the following links and instruction on the bulletin board:

Pre-course Assignment:

The attachment has two links: one to a personality and one to a learning style assessment. These two assessments help us know ourselves as students and as online learners. The assessments will take about 10 minutes each. Following the assess-

ments, introduce yourself and include the assessments' outcomes on the bulletin board. Then tell us a little about what you have learned about yourself through these assessments and the strategies provided to you, and how this information and the recommended strategies may impact the way you will approach online learning in this composition course. Then review other student postings and find a person with a similar learning or personality profile and share one or two good online learning or study tips with that individual in a private email. Copy me on that email, so that you can receive extra credit.

1. Personality Test—click on link and take assessment

www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes1.htm

The results will look similar to this:

Your Type Is: **ENTJ**
 Strength of the preferences %
 Extroverted = 11
 Intuitive = 83
 Thinking = 44
 Judging = 22

2. Learning Styles Inventory—click on link and take assessment

www.berghuis.co.nz/abiator/lsi/lsitest1.html

The results will look something like this:

Based on your responses, you are primarily **a(n): Auditory learner.**

You can keep moving through the site to discover the best ways to maximize your learning based on your learning style.

Learning strategies for auditory learners. (www.berghuis.co.nz/abiator/lsi/lsiaudstra.html)

www.berghuis.co.nz/abiator/lsi/lsivisstra.html)

Learning strategies for visual learners. (www.berghuis.co.nz/abiator/lsi/lsivisstra.html)

Learning strategies for tactile-kinesthetic learners (www.berghuis.co.nz/abiator/lsi/lsitactstra.html)

This opportunity creates immediate communication at several levels: instructor to student, student to student, and student to group; usually the greatest communication increases are evident in student-to-group and student-to-student postings. According to the literature by Durrington and Yu (2004) and Poole (2000), a significant implication of this observation is that communication between peers should be fostered because it helps students become more empowered.

Creating metacognitive opportunities for students, such as the learning and personality style assessments about the online learning experience, at the beginning of the course allows students to begin reflection about their individual strengths and weaknesses and how these may relate to their overall success within the online environment. These strategies are intended to encourage students to be more self-directed.

Because students enjoyed discussing themselves and the realities that they face as online learners, one implication is related to the potential to generalize this self-understanding and learning. This component of self-learning is certainly applicable and valuable to this online composition course, but also it is logical that

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Become a Better Online Instructor in 2008!

By Errol Craig Sull

As online instructors, we should make at least one resolution and do whatever we must to keep it throughout this year: to better ourselves as online instructors—for us, our students, our schools. To not do so means we stagnate and thus so does any course we teach, and the losers, ultimately, will be our students. If you take but one of the following suggestions as your teaching resolution for the year AND stick with it, you will become better as a teacher.

Make certain you are teaching because you enjoy teaching. When you know you teach for the love of teaching, your excitement and motivation transfers to your students; the course comes alive, and the students—and you—have a positive experience. If you can't do this, make the right decision: get out of teaching in 2008.

Do a self-evaluation. Each of us can always find areas to improve upon. No matter how we become aware of these we must act to shore these up. And don't let your ego get in the way: even long-time online teachers can improve.

Take any professional development courses your school offers. More schools with online courses are embracing the value of annual professional development courses for their instructors. If not mandated by the school, mandate it for yourself, and dive into this training with excitement and enthusiasm. This is a rare opportunity to interact and share ideas with colleagues and to gain more insight into the teaching profession.

Approach your courses as shoehorns into the students' world. Understand how your course is important in the much

bigger picture of a student's life and you will become more excited about how to engage the student, how to infuse additional portions of course material that transition beyond the class, and how the material taught can take on a lifelong importance.

Join a professional organization related to your subject area.

By becoming a member of a professional association, you are in contact with colleagues from your field throughout the country and abroad; you have access to current research and writings in your field; you often have a Listserv where important topics in your field are discussed; and there are conferences that offer camaraderie, shared experiences, and new learning that will motivate you.

Learn to better manage time.

We can plan for everything in courses, save for "the unexpecteds," those items that simply pop up: emails, student problems and queries, new school procedures, etc. All have a cumulative effect on our time allotted to teach and our organization of teaching materials, etc. And we must factor into this mix the daily unexpecteds life brings us. This translates into a constant tweaking and updating of our time management and organization approaches.

Collect Useful websites. The Web offers a gaggle of websites that can help us in our teaching! As you come across ones that can be a help to you or your students, bookmark them, use them—each can help make your course more alive, can help you be a better prepared teacher, and can offer students more understanding of why your course is so important to their lives.

Enhance your efforts to engage and motivate students. Take a

course in teaching methods; attend at least one conference related to teaching online or to your subject area(s); write an article for publication; contribute to a professional forum or discussion; help another become a better teacher; read at least one book on your course area or online teaching, while continually reaching out to articles and essays on the same; and create a better approach or strategy or teaching one portion of your course.

Keep track of unexpected and difficult student experiences. The more information you gather, the better teacher you will be—this is obvious. But so many teachers take unplanned student situations, handle them as they come up, and then move on—without seeing each of these as long-term teaching assistance. Jot them down, for they offer lessons that cannot be taught but only learned along the way.

REMEMBER: A new year offers tremendous potential—but the word "potential" will be but nine letters and nothing more if it is not mined for all its worth.

Please let me hear from you, You can always reach me at errolcraig-sull@aol.com. And, as always, with each of my columns I offer a sampling of whatever subject I've discussed. For this column, I'll send you my list of top helpful teaching websites for 2008.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 years. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book—The Student's Complete Guide to Online Learning. @

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the knowledge about self will have application in future online as well as traditional courses.

All three points listed above represent constructivism, which is fostered via the learning and personality-style assessment icebreaker activity. The learning and personality-style activity does provide students with a foundation for understanding their personal learning and personality styles. Both may serve as a foundation to understand how students assimilate information. That is, students' personalities may contribute to identifying what is important to them. Once students have identified what is important to them, the next step is learning and retaining the actual important information. How students view themselves in relation to their personalities and learning styles serves as the foundation for what is considered successful intelligence and, in turn, may foster a heutagogic approach to learning.

Once students are cognizant of what they are doing as it relates to

their own learning, the next step is learning with others. Both of these enhancements create high levels of bulletin board discussion. These online assessments encourage students to understand and evaluate their own learning processes. This contact between students encourages the sharing of online learning tips and other suggestions for success that students of a particular learning style have found helpful. Overall, because the information is coming from peers with the same learning or personality styles, the online tips may be considered more important and, possibly, more effective than if they were just presented in summary form by an instructor.

Shank (2004) noted that "the instructor's role in the success of instruction, including learner retention and achievement, is clearly documented" (p. 1). Using this icebreaker activity is a practice that helps students understand course expectations as well as their own roles and responsibilities in the course.

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course.

• **Make the concepts come to life.** You will need to create additional material that helps students understand the concepts. In a traditional classroom setting, I typically explain a concept verbally, then write the definition on the board, and possibly make a drawing of some sort to help students build a mental model of the new concept. I use Microsoft PowerPoint as the medium in which I mimic this process for students in the online class. Each week's class material is introduced

in approximately 50 PowerPoint slides. Each slide contains text, diagrams, and voice-over. I also use PowerPoint to create animations that provide students with informal mental models of abstract concepts. Students can replay individual slides as many times as they please, or they can pause the lecture at any time.

• **Engage the students.** I provide asynchronous discussion forums for students to test their ideas. In my upper-division courses, most homework problems ask students to prove a given statement. My students begin each assignment with a collective brain-

storming about the possible ways the statement can be proved. Students analyze the statement to be proved, discuss which definitions or theorems could be useful in proving the statement, and critically examine each other's attempts. I believe that the discussion forum allows students to build community and that the collaboration with their peers makes learning effective.

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Consider Learner Characteristics, Learning Conditions in Course Design

In the early days of online learning, text was the primary medium of instruction. Now options abound, but finding the appropriate tools and using them effectively is another matter.

“The problem is that many instructors try to emulate what goes on in the face-to-face classroom without carefully considering learner characteristics or learning conditions,” says Steven Terrell, professor in the Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences at Nova Southeastern University. “Either they’re not aware of the multitude of new tools that are out there that can support different learning styles and course objectives, or they may be aware of them but don’t know how to use them or don’t have the time or money to be able to use them.”

Terrell recommends beginning with the learning objectives before deciding how to support the learners in reaching these objectives. These objectives may very well be identical to those in a comparable face-to-face course, but the way these objectives are addressed needs to suit the nature of the online environment and the learning preferences of a diverse group of students.

“Think of all the tools available first and as you’re developing the course objectives, and say to yourself, ‘Alright, if I’m going to have this objective, how can I present the material to the students so that it supports a given number of learning styles?’” Terrell says.

Learner characteristics are influenced by several factors, including:

- Locus of control—Is the individual student in control of the learning or are there external forces in charge of what the student learns?

- Task orientation—Is the learner able to stay on task without going too far astray?
- Level of motivation—Is the learner intrinsically motivated or extrinsically motivated?

“Successful online learners are intrinsically motivated with an internal locus of control,” Terrell says. “They are task-oriented. They are independent. They are conceptual. Students who are intrinsically motivated are going to be successful most of the time. They are going to try their best because they want to succeed. A successful online learning environment is one that supports students who may not necessarily have those strong characteristics. They may be more extrinsically motivated. For those students who are more extrinsically motivated, you may need to give more feedback.”

Although he expected certain characteristics to have a dramatic effect on student success, Terrell found that there was no single preferred learning style that helped students to succeed in online courses. He speculates that high levels of motivation help dedicated students overcome some of their own shortcomings or those of the design of a course.

However, not all students have high motivation levels, and so the course needs to be designed to support all students and contribute to their developing intrinsic motivation. “The tools we choose should help a student become more task-oriented and more independent,” Terrell says.

Terrell provides several communication options for his students—email, telephone, chat, Skype and blogs.

“Wikis and blogs are very common these days. They’re really easy to set

up and include in a class. They engage the students so they don’t feel divorced from the system. Some research shows that loneliness—the ‘it’s-me-against-the-world’ thing—drives away a lot of online students. Having communication tools readily available helps students. They’re working when you’re not,” Terrell says.

Terrell makes it a point to include a link to a digital library where students do further research. He also includes podcasts and learning objects that students can use and practice over and over as many times as they want.

Contact Steven Terrell at terrell@nova.edu. @

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