



**ACE IT!**

**Quality Enhancement Plan: The ACES Project**

The Newsletter for Lamar's Quality Enhancement Plan:  
Active & Collaborative Engagement for Students

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*The Messy and Unpredictable Classroom*

By: Melissa Hudler

How do we make learning messy and unpredictable for our students—and why? I posed this question to the members of the [Teaching Professor group on LinkedIn](#) in July, and a lively and insightful discussion immediately began. This article is based upon the insights shared in the discussion.

learning experiences, while creating situations that require critical and creative thinking and problem-solving. Those with a more spiritual approach to teaching may want to think of it as, what discussion participant Rex Veeder termed, “hectic zen.”

The phrase *messy and unpredictable* (particularly the word *messy*) proved to be quite provocative. To be sure, the wording of the question incited almost as much discussion as did the concept it articulates. The idea of an unprepared and disorganized instructor with no clear learning outcomes was a common misinterpretation. However, my use of *messy and unpredictable* refers to the learning experiences we offer our students and to the ways that we frame and offer those experiences.

What follows are insights from a few of the discussion participants (quoted here with permission):

**Why Should Learning Be Messy?**

“I make the work messy because the world of work is messy (I teach in a job retraining program for adults). Bosses want you to solve your own problems. They do not give clear directions or rubrics for the finished product. Students need the critical thinking, problem solving, and Internet searching skills to find solutions to the real-time messy moments of work.” (Bradley Gangnon, Takoda Institute at American Indian OIC)

First, *messy* suggests a classroom environment that motivates students to dig, to question, to take risks, to fail (and learn something from that failure that they may not have otherwise learned)—in short, to discover. *Unpredictable* seems to be a natural semantic companion to *messy* and further suggests discovery but also promotes adaptability. Together, these words articulate an idea of teaching and learning that renders the classroom experience an archaeological dig, so to speak, that puts the tools in the hands of the students. I embraced the misinterpretation of the phrasing, however, because the resulting comments served to exemplify a desired effect of the messy and unpredictable classroom: diverse interpretations discussed, negotiated, and reconciled. Isn't this the kind of dynamic learning environment we should strive to create?

“However passionately, smartly, perfectly, crystal-clearly we teach, there is messiness in the student's mind in absorbing the ideas. We must adopt strange, sometimes a-student-specific approach to score a ‘hit’ with the ideas.” (Subramanian R., Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning)

“Many respondents commented that intentionally introducing messiness increases the external validity of what students are learning in the course. I agree. There is another, perhaps equally important, reason for intentionally introducing some ambiguity and all the difficulties that attend it into our classrooms: these difficulties may actually increase students' learning and retention of the material. There is a robust literature in cognitive psychology to support the notion that memory is the residue of thinking. Ambiguity, messiness, and disconfirmed expectations are all things that can get students thinking.” (David Porter, Berea College)

Discussion participant Jason Myrowitz effectively clarified my intended meaning for *messy and unpredictable* by rephrasing it as “strategic ambiguity.” This useful rephrasing not only conveys my intended meaning but also reveals the instructor and student positions in such a teaching landscape. It reveals the need for professors to be strategic and organized in their planning and offering of effective

“I teach rhetoric, composition, and medical humanities. In all cases I find that making a mess and doing something unexpected or strange is necessary for progress with interpretation, problem solving, and real explorations of issues real for the students. . . .

# ACES Big Deals

## Ms. Michelle Ozmun (Cohort 3)

Assistant Professor, Theatre & Dance

ACES Cohort 3 member, Michelle Ozmun, recently traveled to Vologda, Russia, to explore setting up an educational exchange of information regarding learning and engagement with several colleges and universities there. She discovered that Russian higher education is starved for interaction with the outside world. Educators were intrigued by online learning and students couldn't get enough of interacting with the team. This city's learning institutions are ripe for an enterprising university like Lamar to initiate collaboration with their teachers and students. The only caveat is that this is still Russia. . .with all the leftover rules, regulations and suspicions from the Iron Curtain era. Navigating political and bureaucratic waters requires patience, skill, and sometimes rubles, as the team discovered. Interested faculty can learn more at the **CTLE Lunch and Learn on November 15**, where Ms. Ozmun will discuss her adventure in more detail.

## Dr. Amy Smith (Cohort 3)

Assistant Professor, English and Modern Languages

## Dr. Mark Mengerink (Cohort 5)

Associate Professor, History

Dr. Amy Smith and Dr. Mark Mengerink were recently honored with the opportunity to discuss their research at the inaugural Cardinal Conversations Event. Cardinal Conversations was conceived of by First Lady Nancy Evans, who is keen to provide faculty with a venue for sharing their academic work with colleagues in an informal setting. The event highlights the scholarship of two faculty members from different departments and brings together an interdisciplinary audience to participate in the discourse. Each conversation is intended to highlight the connections between the faculty members' research. Mark established the topic of conversation by discussing his research on fascism, and Amy spoke on the politics of myth in Virginia Woolf's novels. A lively and insightful Q&A session followed.

Of the event, Mark says, "Participating in Cardinal Conversations was a turning point in my scholarly career and development. By providing an opportunity to engage in intellectual discourse with colleagues from other disciplines, it has opened new ways of looking at my own research as well as sparked new ideas about collaboration across departments. Amy says, "I appreciated the opportunity to discuss ideas I've been working on alone with colleagues. This event made me feel part of an intellectual community."

## TEACHING TIP: 50-Word Assignment

ACES Fellow Mark Mengerink has had much success with this assignment and explains it below:

"I provide a list of questions, usually 3-4, one week ahead of time. Students are then required to answer each question with one sentence of 50 words or less. The questions are never just "factual" questions. They involve some level of critical thinking. Even though the assignment is low stakes (3 points per week), I have found students complete it in a thoughtful manner. So far, I have found it very effective in accomplishing my main goals: to get students to read the textbook so that we can use class time go deeper into the themes and issues raised in the readings, to help them develop critical thinking, and to help them develop a more sophisticated writing style." ***Thank you, Mark, for sharing this assignment!***

# ACES FELLOWS

at work

Besides learning how to craft a [learning-centered syllabus](#), ACES Cohort 5 has participated in demonstrations of various active and collaborative techniques. Most recently, the Fellows participated in a demonstration of Cooperation Squares led by Dr. Vicky Farrow (Executive Director of Planning and Assessment and SACS Liaison). The activity is designed to teach students how to work effectively in learning groups and teams. No matter how well-planned and effectively structured your group assignments are, *they won't fully succeed* if students don't know how to work cooperatively. Cooperation Squares is a silent group activity in which students must rely on their skills of observation to assist each other in completing their individual squares.



## *The Messy and Unpredictable Classroom* (continued)

By: Melissa Hudler

"In the end, what appears to be messy is actually a process of engaging at a real and significant level for students and teachers alike." (Rex Veeder, St. Cloud State University)

### **How Can We Make Learning More Unpredictable?**

"I give assignments that allow a great deal of room for interpretation. For example, on a certain assignment, I tell students to come up with a creative way to deliver their information instead of making a Power-Point presentation. . . . It requires the students to get out of their comfort zone and to realize that they won't always be able to follow a rubric to arrive at a solution."  
(Jason Myrowitz, Northern Arizona University)

"It seems that having just a skeleton of a lesson plan (and make sure the students are aware of this) is one approach. That way the climate of the class dictates the lecture and skill development."  
(Conrad Maddox, Honolulu Community College.)

Topic "interrogations," as well as evaluation and synthesis tasks are other ways to get messy and unpredictable in the classroom.

The consensus is that creating ambiguity for students to work through is essential to their development of critical and creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Students may want knowledge presented to them in nicely wrapped packages, and we may feel like we are rightly attending to their needs when we offer this. However, the best gift we can give our students is the ability to question, to discover, and to learn to learn. Presenting students with messiness and unpredictability in a pedagogically-sound way can make that happen. Ultimately, what they (and we) need is "a little rattling of the cage."  
(Howard Doughty, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology)

## The Center for Teaching and Learning Enhancement

### CTLE Lunch & Learn

with Michelle Ozmun, Assistant Professor of Dance

#### *"Russian Around"*

My Experiences with Russian Education  
and Engaging in Active and Collaborative Learning

November 15 from 12:00-1:00

Dining Hall Meeting Room

*We'll also continue to offer webinars and speaker events.*

*Keep an eye on your inbox for announcements about this and other CTLE events!*

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