Integrating Theory and Practice in FYS

A girl feels a hand grabbing her shirt from behind. She reaches back, grabs the offending arm, and locks it in her elbow. If this was a real life situation, Chelsea would be prepared to break Amy’s arm. Fortunately this is just a class. Instructor Skip Rackmill nods approvingly as his students return to their seats. This experiential aspect of Rackmill’s First Year Seminar “Eastern Asian Martial Arts in Context” helps students integrate class content while having fun and developing deeper peer connections. As student Amy Vue explains, “I think one of the best things we did as a class was going to an Aikido dojo and learning some self-defense and breathing techniques. The breathing technique helped me through this tough semester.”

Rackmill designed his students’ hands-on experience of Aikido to compliment the more traditional academic aspects of the course. In his section of First Year Seminar, the students learn how to read and write critically through multiple papers, culminating in a research project addressing how the historical and cultural backdrop of Eastern Asian countries helped to create, influence and drive the martial arts.

To help students recognize the connections between the course’s topic and their lives, Rackmill uses many Zen parables to generate discussion and reflection. One of these stories speaks of a Zen master pouring water into a young monk’s cup. The monk thinks he already knows everything. As the cup begins to overflow, the young monk yells, “Stop! The cup is overfull, no more will go in.” The master responds, “Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions. How can I teach you anything unless you first empty your cup?”

Judging by the warm and jovial manner in which the students interact with Rackmill, it is clear that they welcome the philosophical, academic, and physical challenges he has set for them this semester. Freshman Garion Smith says, “This is how a college class should feel.” Chelsea Thrasher adds that she is delighted to be able to learn about a subject that interests her while making friends with classmates who share her interest in Eastern Asian culture: “It's proof that there’s a UCO 1200 class for everyone. The UCO experience gives you an opportunity to get acquainted with college coursework and styles of learning while meeting others who share your interests. It's a great way to dive into college.”
The Physics of Sustainability

Most students in Carla Ramsdell’s course PHY 1830 “The Physical Science of Energy and Sustainability” come into the class with no prior understanding of physics, only a growing curiosity about basic physics and how it relates to our everyday lives. By the end of the semester, students understand the science behind solar, wind, magnetic, hydroelectric, and other sources of energy as well as other sustainable technologies. Ramsdell believes that this class adds an important perspective to the Sustainability and Global Change theme, grounding students in the science of sustainability and demystifying a subject that many find intimidating or abstract.

To ensure that students receive a comprehensive understanding of basic physics, Ramsdell combines lecture and demonstration as she moves from one sustainability topic to another, from energy production to cooking to lighting. Students learn the science behind their personal choices, such as which cooking methods are most energy efficient: gas, electric, induction or convection? (The answer is induction or convection!) After learning about a variety of sustainability topics, students are given the freedom to research an area of interest and present their findings to their class. Through the presentations, students are exposed to a wide range of current issues in sustainability while gaining greater confidence in their ability to communicate information to their peers.

Once students have a good grasp of basic concepts related to physics and sustainability, they work together in small groups to come up with an idea that could be proposed to the Renewable Energy Initiative (REI) as a financially- and sustainably-sound project. The REI is a student-run committee responsible for allocating money towards the implementation of renewable energy on ASU campus, funded solely by a $5-per-semester student fee that was approved by a resounding 92% of the voting student body in 2007. Students in Ramsdell’s class are empowered by the opportunity to apply their new knowledge in a way that benefits their campus.

While her class focuses on the science and data of physics rather than opinions, Ramsdell enjoys the active discussions students engage in as they become more deeply invested in sustainability issues. As Earth’s nonrenewable energy resources dwindle, it is important that students be aware of and involved in the move towards sustainable technologies. Ramsdell’s class helps them ground their actions in solid scientific knowledge.

Funding for Student Learning Enhancement

During the 2011-2012 academic year, the General Education Program has provided funding for numerous faculty initiatives designed to enhance student learning in general education Perspectives themes. The program has provided funding or partial funding for:

- Guest speakers for six different themes
- Guest artists for an on-campus arts event related to multiple themes
- Transportation for two theme-related student field experiences
- Classroom and laboratory materials for three courses
- Books on pedagogy for the faculty teaching in one theme
- Conference registration fees for two faculty who will present papers about their general education courses at international conferences this summer

The mission of the Office of General Education is: "To support teaching and learning in the General Education Program." In order to fulfill this mission during this time of diminished resources, the office plans to continue prioritizing such projects as those listed above when making budget allocations in the coming years.

“...grounding students in the science of sustainability...”
Beginning with the End in Mind: Course Redesign

Course design is not an easy task. When designing a course, professors usually start by creating a syllabus and schedule, then spend the semester trying to “fit in” as much content and skill development as possible. But there is another, more holistic and intentional, way to approach course design. In a recent workshop co-sponsored by the Hubbard Center and General Education and inspired by last year’s Hubbard Center Course (Re)Design Retreat, Appalachian faculty Chris Bartel (Philosophy and Religion), Mark Freed (Appalachian Studies/Music), and Lillian Goudas (Art) demonstrated how to utilize “backward” design concepts to effectively construct a college course addressing learning goals in a more cohesive and powerful way.

To start the process of designing or redesigning your course, Bartel, Freed and Goudas recommend “beginning with the end in mind” by asking: What do I want students to retain five years from now? Curiosity? Integrity? Resourcefulness? Confidence? What are my long-term learning objectives for these students? In the March 23 Hubbard Center workshop, they asked participants to brainstorm and come up with a few things from the course they want their students to remember or be applying in their lives in five years. Then participants formed small groups and came up with creative ideas for ways to achieve these goals—including innovative course structures, classroom methods, and assignments.

The course design process that Bartel, Freed and Goudas were drawing upon was created by L. Dee Fink (http://www.deefink-andassociates.com/index.php/resources/). Fink refers to this process as “backward” because it inverts the order in which faculty usually design courses. With backward design concepts, you determine learning goals, then feedback and assessment procedures, before you design course assignments and activities. Backward course design forces you to think about what students would have to do in order to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning goal.

When Mark Freed attended the Course (Re)Design Retreat in May 2011, he had to explicitly write out goals for his class. Using these goals to direct his content drastically altered his course — for the better, he says. Freed, Bartel and Goudas all used what they learned in that retreat to redesign aspects of their courses in fall 2011 and unanimously agree that their courses improved as a result. The three were so impressed with the potential of this process that they agreed to share their knowledge of it through workshops.

Beginning with the end in mind might be an unusual concept, but it is one that is catching fire across the country’s colleges. Backward design concepts provide more direction to course design, allowing for greater control and responsibility for course outcomes and improving student results.
Online Wellness Module in PE Courses

Students enrolled in General Education Physical Education courses receive expert instruction in a physical activity of their choice; they also learn how to make healthy life choices through custom-designed online modules. Rather than taking the place of course instruction, these online modules supplement the Physical Education Basic Instruction Program’s multi-faceted approach to wellness.

Students who choose P.E. courses to fulfill the Wellness Literacy component of their General Education requirements must complete all six online modules in tandem with their physical education classes. These six modules include: Introduction to Health and Wellness, Components of Health-related Fitness, Nutrition, Health and Wellness Review, Obesity and Weight Management, and Stress Management. Within each module, students complete pre- and post-tests designed to evaluate their knowledge of key concepts and also apply the content through an individual lab-based experience that they are responsible for completing before recording their results online.

Mr. Edgar Peck, Director of the ASU PE Basic Instruction Program and Dr. Scott Townsend, Dr. Paul Gaskill, and Dr. Derek Mohr, editors of the Wellness Literacy online resource, are excited to provide Appalachian students with an innovative approach to physical education. The addition of online wellness modules has two significant advantages for both faculty and students: instructors are able to focus on motor skill acquisition and fitness development during class time while remaining confident that their students are learning about their overall personal health and wellness; and the information students are receiving is updated regularly. Dr. Derek Mohr refers to the online wellness module as a “21st century textbook,” meaning that the module content provides immediate current information without the delay of printing new textbook editions.

Spring Faculty & Staff Appreciation Reception

The General Education Program is holding a Faculty & Staff Appreciation Reception on Wednesday, May 2nd, 2012 in the Plemmons Student Union Solarium. The reception is from 5:00-6:30 pm and will include the presentation of the Wayne D. Duncan Appalachian State University Faculty Enrichment and Teaching Fellowship, the Rennie W. Brantz Award for Outstanding Teaching in the First Year Seminar and the Non Tenure Track Faculty Award for Excellence in General Education Teaching. For more information contact Paulette Marty at martypjw@appstate.edu.

Wildcard Policy for Transfer Students Extended

On March 23, the General Education Council approved a one-year extension of the transfer credit "wildcard." The wildcard enables transfer students to combine courses from two different themes to complete their required 9 s.h. Perspectives theme, rather than taking the place of course instruction, these online modules supplement the Physical Education Basic Instruction Program’s multi-faceted approach to wellness.

While universities across the country are cutting back on their physical education courses, Appalachian State University has retained a 2 s.h. general education requirement and expanded its scope to encompass not just physical activity, but also personal wellness. As the university has grown, the Department of Health, Leisure, and Exercise Science has expanded its P.E. activity course offerings and remains highly committed to developing and maintaining the online wellness modules. The students who complete these courses and modules understand the value of lifelong fitness and are given the tools to develop a plan for personal wellness during their college career and beyond.

…provide Appalachian students with an innovative approach to physical education…“