

## **Narrative Reflection, Fall 2018**

### **Benjamin V. Holt**

The results of any sustained, long-term effort are met with a mix of anticipation, excitement, and sometimes, a measure of disappointment. As far as I am able to ascertain, my in-class observations went well. It is satisfying and validating to know that, for the most part, my colleagues see my contribution to Southwestern as effective, valuable, and in alignment with the goals of the institution. However, my student evaluations show that, not surprisingly, there is certainly room to improve.

#### **What Went Well**

I may say with a measure of confidence that my courses are very well-organized. Moreover, they put all the necessary tools for success directly into the hands of students at minimal cost. Past evaluations of my teaching have shown (Columbia College 2016) that the significant investment of time in developing course content and materials has paid huge dividends in achieving the above. It was my experience this term, as well as in previous terms, that my materials are easy to find, use, and have made not only the standard for success clear, but have also given students ample opportunity to practice the very standard they will be held to during high-stakes assessments (i.e., exams).

Furthermore, in this term at Southwestern, as well as previous terms at Columbia College, I have tried to maintain a classroom dynamic that is student-centered. Although lectures can be an edifying experience for both myself and my students, my favorite part of the work I do here is interacting individually with students. In observing students at work, and directly helping them learn the material, I am better able to probe their overall knowledge and to make improvements along the way as needed. I take the work I do individually with students as direct evidence that they are improving their overall knowledge of the material.

Finally, my in-class observations conducted by my peer committee and division dean were generally favorable. They speak not only to the principles outlined in the above paragraphs, they also acknowledge the value of the point stated in my teaching philosophy of framing my discipline from the point of view that mathematics is a human endeavor with a rich history.

#### **Where To Improve**

From my student evaluations, there are two areas for improvement which stand out.

The first is that students in my Intermediate Algebra (MTH 95) course were generally undecided when asked if their grade is a reflection of what they have learned in the course. That is, “3=undecided” was the mean, median and mode of responses to this question. While this may not be an indictment of my methods, it certainly stands as a natural place to begin making improvements. Obviously, it would reflect much better on me as an instructor if students were at least in general agreement that their grades are a reflection of their accomplishments. In this regard, it may be that students are overestimating their own abilities, or perhaps I am being too rigorous in my assessments. Perhaps I should take more stock in my knowledge of individual student achievement gained from interaction rather than a grading scheme.

Second, there is some evidence that students in my “Culinary Mathematics” course didn’t feel that the course content was taught in a variety of ways. For the above question (on a scale of “1=Strongly Disagree” to “5=Strongly Agree”) the mean, median, and mode were 3.1, 3, and 2, respectively. That, is students were generally undecided (as indicated by the mean and median), with some doubt as to whether or not I could have made my presentation more varied (as indicated by a mode of 2). When looking back at what we did, it is true that most of our time was spent either in lecture, or working problems and presenting solutions in groups. To address this, I may need to include more hands-on activities which involve the entire class.

Both of the above issues were present in my evaluations of my Algebra I (MTH 60) course. Although I suspect this has as much to do with the nature of course structure itself as it does with me, I have come to the conclusion that when I teach this course again (provided it exists in the same form it does presently), I need to be more communicative with this group of students as they are more at risk of falling behind. This will mean frequent emails to students who are not showing up or who show the tell-tale signs of wavering in their commitment to the course. Other than using a simply a grade as motivation, this group needs more support and encouragement to engage with the material. In the future, I hope that I might help to make fundamental changes to this course that will motivate students to regularly practice the material, and to utilize the resources available to them.

### **What Lies Ahead**

Generally speaking, for all of my courses, and to address some of the issues mentioned above, I would like to start using techniques I have learned about in the “Online Course Development” course I took at Columbia College in Spring 2018. In particular, I would like to include elements which boost collective participation and cohesion such as online discussion forums. Another point in this course which interests me greatly is to use my skills to create an easy-to-use system which will enable students to provide anonymous feedback. In the future, I would like to include this as a feature for all my courses in the my course website. It is my hope that this will also help me to close some of the gaps in mentioned in the above paragraphs.