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About This Issue

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A Culture of Teaching Excellence

We are excited to introduce the inaugural issue of the *Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence*. This journal is published by Utah State University in connection with its Empowering Teaching Excellence (ETE) faculty development program. The program features an annual faculty conference, a seminar series, training courses, and a digital badging program to help faculty document their teaching efforts. ETE is built around a core belief that quality teachers abound in today's higher education space and that a culture of teaching excellence exists at USU and many other institutions. We believe this culture of excellence can be magnified and perpetuated as dedicated teachers interact and share with each other. The intent of this peer-reviewed journal is to benefit faculty who teach by providing a place where they can share their ideas, practices, and research around teaching. The intended audience for this journal includes faculty and professionals at all institutions who teach, develop instruction, and conduct research related to teaching in higher education.

For our inaugural issue, we reviewed the feedback from our 2016 ETE faculty conference—an event for USU faculty hosted every August on the USU main campus. We identified several of the presenters who received high marks in post-session surveys and invited them to submit a proceedings paper for their presentation. Many responded, and their papers now comprise the majority of this issue. Because most of the articles began as stand-up presentations for a conference, several adopt a first-person narrative style in which the authors share examples of things they have tried in their teaching that have worked. In

the process they reveal key components of their teaching philosophy, often backed with research and literature and always backed with personal experience and student feedback. The disciplines represented range from math and science to business, humanities, social science, and aviation. Articles focus primarily on the *application* of good teaching principles and on measuring results to make improvements.

Themes

The articles in this issue cover a broad range of topics, which can be categorized into three general themes:

- Student engagement
- Design thinking
- Understanding our students

Student Engagement at a one-on-one, highly personalized level, is the primary theme of Benninghoff's (2017) paper, adapted from the keynote presentation she gave at the 2016 ETE conference. In it, she details 10 ways teachers can increase their level of impact on individual students' lives and careers through intentional interaction. Along the way, she provides numerous examples from her own teaching and learning experience to help teachers rethink their approach to office-hours, lab work, and more. Solis and Turner (2017) build upon Benninghoff's prescriptions with three research-identified ways of building positive instructor-student interaction through caring leadership—ideas that directly complement and build upon the 10 principles raised by Benninghoff. Indeed, these concepts in student engagement are supported in the literature on autonomy-supportive learning which advocates for teachers to provide support through taking student perspectives and recognizing both interest and disinterest in students (Reeve, 2002).

One of Solis and Turner's recommendations involves the effective use of technology to maintain student engagement—an idea that articles by Hartwell (2017) and Runge (2017) build upon as they describe lessons learned in their

efforts to implement classroom polling and group interaction in geographically dispersed, real-time classes supported by recent work done by Sun (2014) on polling technologies. Utah State University has long delivered synchronous courses via Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC), providing hundreds of courses each semester to locations across the state of Utah—some of which are rather remote. IVC brings educational opportunities to students who wouldn't otherwise have them, but it presents heightened challenges in student engagement—challenges that are not necessarily unique to the IVC medium but are harder to solve in it. The two articles by Hartwell and Runge give hands-on ideas of how to maintain an engaged, real-time learning environment while separated from many of the learners by TV monitors and hundreds of miles.

Wesemann (2017) visits the concept of student engagement in the fully-online medium as he provides a narrative bridging the enthusiasm one can feel at a rocket launch to the level of engagement a teacher can build into an online course using best practices in course design and delivery. Wesemann, like the authors above, explores the ways student engagement can be achieved through design. Although none of the authors in this issue specifically use the term *design thinking*, in their own way each takes an intentional, design-based approach to addressing engagement challenges. This concept of design thinking has recently been explored in the context of both intentional design and intentional teaching (Cameron, 2009; Linder, et al., 2014). For example, Jenson (2017) provides an additional example of intentionally designed student engagement as she shares an in-class exercise designed to simultaneously teach rhetorical skills, expose students to concepts of diversity, and highlight the need to approach professional practice from a diversity mindset.

Mohr and Mohr (2017) approach the challenge of creating an effective learning environment by helping teachers better *understand their students*. Specifically, they address the generational characteristics exhibited by contemporary students in the literature by Seemiler and Grace (2016) and Elmore (2010) on the nature of generation Y and Z learners. Usefully, their paper identifies how instructors can adapt their teaching and communication approaches to appeal to today's learners and avoid pitfalls. The ideas shared by Mohr and Mohr also support work by Henderson, et al. (2015) that teaching

can be informed by better understanding how students in the digital-age utilize learning technologies.

Lastly, Stewart (2017) delves into the promising rise of data analytics and how it can help educators understand students in ways that were not previously possible. In so doing, he reviews the background and trajectory of learning analytics research, but identifies a gap between emerging theory and practice in higher education. Exploring the underlying causes of the theory/practice gap, he challenges educators and researchers to join forces and find ways to practically apply newly available teaching and learning data to inform practice.

In summary, this inaugural issue puts forth ideas, research, and experiences of real instructors who seek, every day, to increase their effectiveness in helping students learn. These instructors are part of a broader community of like-minded faculty from across the higher education spectrum who have much to share and learn from each other. It is our hope and intent that this journal will become a useful forum through which this broader community can connect.

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