GTS Response Paper Kathleen Laundy, Theatre

This is the email I sent to all of my administrators to thank them for the GTS. It expresses succinctly the best part of the whole experience for me:

Thank you all so much for allowing all of us to attend this wonderful conference.  I was getting pretty burned out these last couple of years and wasn't sure if there was anything I could do about it.  After hearing Kelly Parker talk about his experience last year, I had high hopes for GTS and even then it exceeded all of my expectations.  It was such a helpful, enlightening, supportive and nurturing environment to be in.  The rigid, open structure was a perfect way to get the maximum amount of input from as diverse a group as possible. I am so excited to go back to school tomorrow and start implementing all the suggestions in my courses.  Allowing me to have this time away from both my students and my family enabled me to focus on my teaching in a way that I could never have done as deeply if the seminar had been held in Waco.   I befriended five special women that I never even knew existed on our campus before meeting them at GTS.   So much of good teaching is just keeping your creative spirit filled up with the support and friendship of other like-minded individuals and I now have five new best friends to help me do that. If you are ever in any doubt that this program is worth the money, believe me when I say that it is worth whatever you are paying for it and more.

**Things I learned from other teachers’ innovations that I will incorporate into my classes:**

1. From Stacy Fancher: The Feedback Sandwich. Like Stacy, I have had the same two-fold problem with students’ presentations. Part one of the problem is the presentations themselves. They are not as good as they should be, or done half-heartedly, or the students cut themselves down while talking about their work. Part two of the problem is that the other students’ feedback on the presentation is lame and the presenting student learns nothing: polite applause, that was awesome, no questions or comments and so I move on to the next student. Or the opposite problem: the feedback was too harsh and then the students take it too personally and get too emotional about it. In theatre it is very important that students learn to talk about their creative work in an exciting and positive way as well as be able to give and take constructive criticism without taking it personally. All theatre is a group project and if each member of the team isn’t working to their full potential and/or the team isn’t communicating, the production will surely fail. So Stacy’s innovation is the feedback sandwich. Not only are the students graded on their own presentation, they are also graded on their feedback of the other students’ presentations as well as how they respond to the feedback on their own presentation. Stacy gives them both instructions on the presentation, and instructions on how to provide appropriate feedback. They begin and end by saying something positive about the content, the format in which it was delivered, and/or the delivery style of the presenter. The middle of the feedback are things that the presenter could improve on related to either the content, the format or the delivery style. To eliminate a lot of overlap, she assigns just three feedbacks per presentation, so each presenter gets to hear 3 other students’ feedback and each student is only responsible for providing feedback for three other students. I can’t wait to try this in both of my classes this semester and see how it works.
2. From Dick Gimble: Commitment Module. Dick had a problem with retention in commercial music so he stole the commitment module from LEAP. He assigns advisors to each major, has them fill out a questionnaire that includes their honest answers to things like: their stressors, are they married, do they have kids, are they working? He makes them meet with him one on one to discuss their answers so he gets to know them better. He has them write and sign a commitment paragraph that they turn in at the beginning of the semester and then they review it at a one on one meeting mid-semester. He has them write a paper called *Me and the Music* in which they describe their relationship with music, their hopes and goals etc...
3. From Heather Mattingly: Two-Day orientation. Heather had a problem with entitlement. Because her program has extensive admission requirements and all of the successful candidates are admitted with 4.0 GPAs, they feel that once in the program they are then entitled to sit back and not do any work. Her students are required to do a two day orientation in the summer in which the program requirements are thoroughly explained as well as the concept that no late work is accepted, tests may only be taken once, and if you fail even one class you are kicked out of the program. We have the same problem with the theatre majors: even though there are no admission requirements, we will take anybody, they feel that their acting talent allows them to not do any work backstage or in class, as long as they are brilliant on stage, they can be no-shows off stage. Also because they seem to come out of high school with the idea that they can re-take a test multiple times until they pass or turn in assignments late. We used to have summer orientation for our theatre majors but haven’t since orientation is now online and self-done. We also used to assign each student an advisor but we don’t anymore. And we used to have exit interviews before each student left our program. There were problems with all of these things in the past which is why we discontinued the practices, however, looking at how other departments run their orientations and advising, etc... I think maybe with some changes we should reinstate these practices.
4. From the Tips and Tricks segment: *I am Human* Bingo: In order to get the know the students and have them motivated to get to know each other the instructor makes up Bingo cards with each students’ name on a square as well as the instructor. In order to get BINGO the students have to find something in common with each other in order to put the marker on the space. It has to be something specific to that person’s personality or background rather than something superficial like clothing, gender, hair or eye color. Once all markers are on all spaces, the game is over. This is similar to the sorting game we played as a group which let us find out much more personal stuff about each other than we would have in the course of normal class-related conversation. I think this could work really well at a beginning of the school year majors’ meeting with all of our students rather than the isolated 10 or so that are in my freshman class. By the time they are sophomores they already know too much about each other. Plus it would allow the freshman and sophomores to get to know each other better and hopefully eliminate the very split attitude we have going on right now between the two classes.

**Solutions to my specific problem of getting the students to take personal responsibility for their work.** Here’s the myriad suggestions I got:

1. When the students fail to make the costumes allow the actor to be naked on stage.
2. Grades are based on whether the costume is finished rather than if they’ve done their hours.
3. Get the director to not cast them again if they don’t come to lab hours.
4. Get the director to fire them from the show if they are not coming to lab hours.
5. Publish a list of who supposed to be working on which actors’ costume. Make it public.
6. Make the actor responsible for checking in on the progress being made on his costume.
7. Give them smaller weekly deadlines and grade appropriately if they are not met.
8. Make them journal their progress daily.
9. Publish a blacklist in the program of students who didn’t do their work.
10. Have a mid-semester evaluation with each student on their work so far.
11. Make them sign a commitment paper. Then have them give reasons why they might not be able to do it, then have them figure out how they will succeed despite the reasons.
12. Change the lab times from TBA to specific times so that when they register it’s in their head that their lab only meets on MW 2-4 and so attendance is required at that time rather than some nebulous 48 hours that sneaks up on them before they know it. Plus it would allow me to use Blackboard to track that attendance rather than having them sign in on a piece of paper and have them keep a running total of their hours or have me pull out a calculator to add up all their hours at the end of each semester.
13. Make them make their own semester calendar with all of the commitments on it-- not just school but family, work, social obligations too. Then have them figure out when they are going to schedule time to meet their school obligations with due dates from all classes.
14. Assign each student a specific costume.
15. Remind them about deadlines early and often.
16. Put deadlines in the syllabus on BB, in printed out form, and tell them verbally.

Of course I can’t implement some of these things that have consequences outside of my classroom without an OK from my program director. At least one other suggestion would involve my division director. I’m pretty sure that Dr. McKown would not be OK with naked actors onstage. I plan on presenting these options to my co-workers at our next faculty meeting so that I can get some feedback about implementing at least some of these changes.

**Profile of one of my Great Teachers: Michael Pacciorini, costume shop manager at CSULB**

1. Modeled professional behavior at all times; taught by example
2. Dressed professionally: slacks, dress shirt, tie. If he was going to be getting dirty that day he put on a smock or apron rather than show up in “paint clothes”.
3. Didn’t use nicknames, called me Kathleen rather than K.C. as I was being called by the other students. Made me feel special. More adult, more professional.
4. Meetings: short and to the point and over lunch once a week.
5. Reminded us of self-care but in a funny way: “Eat, eat, no one likes a skinny Santa!” was frequently heard every day at lunchtime. Wouldn’t let you work through lunch.
6. Had pithy sayings that reminded us of the procedures: “Pin to Win”, “Press for Success”, “Sew or Go! Don’t be a Pinhead”
7. Had comics that illuminated important concepts like the Far Side comic about deadlines:

Photo of a firing squad with the caption “A Deadline is a deadline”.

1. Was chatty and concerned about your personal life without getting over-involved and turning the costume shop into the gossip shop.
2. Taught me how to treat actors’ with respect in order to care for their fragile egos during measurements and fittings.
3. Taught me to always give the actor or director three choices. Show them your favorite costume first, then the other two.
4. Taught me that everything that goes onstage is a choice and it was my responsibility to make good choices, even down to the smallest detail like trim or buttons.
5. Set limits: we worked 8-5, no nights, no weekends. No working through lunch. No taking stuff home with you. Your evening was your time to do your homework, eat, and sleep, NOT worry about the show.

I have always tried to emulate him in these ways. I don’t dress as professionally as he does and I will often wear paint clothes instead of aprons or smocks. I tried that but seemed to ruin my good clothes regardless, so I gave up. I guess I’m just not as neat. I’m still a big fan of short meetings that feature food but I don’t actually get to run any meetings in my department. I would love to have meetings with the students like we used to do at CSULB but since it’s not grad school and I don’t own the students from 8-5, there’s no one day and time that I can get everyone who works in the shop together. That’s unfortunate, because it would really help our work flow if we could do that.

I always remind students to eat and drink water, and esp. for our students to eat real food that doesn’t come out of a vending machine at least once a day. I used to have signs that had his pithy sayings on them hanging around the shop but the tape eventually gave out and they were thrown out. I never made replacement ones, but I will now. I use funny comics all the time I just post them on BB instead of taping them to the wall. Nothing really sticks to the cinder blocks in the shop anyway. I am always concerned about the students’ personal lives especially when bad things happen which they frequently do. When gossip rears its ugly head, which it often does, I try to shut it down immediately. I wasn’t very good at this early in my career, but now that I have three kids of my own at home, that skill has come much more naturally to me.

Every time I teach measurements I approach it from Michael’s lesson on how to talk about an actors’ body in a respectful way. And then I also tell the students that this is a very hands-on field and that if costume shop staff talking about your body or measuring your body or fitting clothes on your body is too embarrassing or too much up in your personal space, then acting is probably not the field for you. The same is true of how the actors feel about their costumes. Many actors have a thing about what they wear that is a real barrier to their success in this business. They have a very rigid idea about what kinds of clothes they look good in and don’t want to wear a costume that makes them feel like they look fat or stupid. I hear that ALL THE TIME from actors. Which is why you always give them three choices, but even then that may not do the trick. Many young actors are inexperienced in period costuming and mistake a period silhouette for “fat” or “stupid” looking. That just requires more patience on my part to educate them on correct foundation garments or what was the ideal of beauty at the time. It’s a difficult thing to navigate an actors’ fragile ego, but Michael was an expert. I hope that I am getting better with that every year.

Everything that goes onstage is a choice is a lesson I learned and took to heart in grad school and it’s perhaps the one that’s been the hardest to teach to my students. Yes, we are under budget restrictions and there’s only so much money we can spend on any one thing. Yes, we are also limited by what the director is having the actor do onstage. Frequently directors will have actors doing things (like rolling around on the floor in a 1960’s business suit/skirt in the middle of the day in their own high profile executive boss’ office in front of their boss) that a person in real life would never do wearing the clothes he/she is wearing. And yes, we are also limited by the talent of the students who are doing all the work. I can’t design a vest with welt pockets if I don’t have any students who can sew a welt pocket. But this is even more important to get across when it’s just a student designed project where there are no limitations of budget, talent, or time. When the sky is the limit it’s hard to make them think about what they put on paper. Why did you choose that color, neckline, pattern, hairstyle? What does your choice say about that character or their relationship to the other characters? Getting the students to think critically about their own work was a common concern at GTS.

I am the best at setting limits for the students. We do not work past 5, we do not work on the weekends, or if we do, it’s a paid work call for the work study students and done by volunteers. They are never allowed to take work home with them. They have too many other things they need to be doing with their nights and weekends so no one stays up at the shop till midnight, not even me.

As I said in my introductory paragraph, the best, most intangible benefit of the seminar was meeting new people that I wasn’t even aware of before and being able to spend so much time with them gave me the opportunity to make new friends which is becoming a reason to be excited to come into work once more. I bought them gifts (books) and went around after work like a sneaky secret Santa hunting down their unfamiliar buildings (I used a campus map) and then having to hunt down their mailboxes (I had to ask people for help to find them just like a student). I learned that three of my new friends have tiny offices and NO mailboxes. It made me grateful for my huge office and properly labeled mail box. So I did that and then today I sent them emails personally inviting them to our show. I figured they may not even know that they get free tickets, so I thought I’d make it easy for them to come and see what I do. Everyone can use a little free entertainment in their lives.