



PRAXIS

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AT WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Basic “GURS”: Professors go back to school

By Ann Carlson, Office of Undergraduate Education

History Professor Johann Neem and Geology Professor Pete Stelling do what so many Western faculty do on any given day during the quarter: they teach sections of general education courses, or “GURS”.

Once a year, however, Neem and Stelling—along with four other professors—teach their GURS for an unusual group of students: their colleagues.

Welcome to the GUR mini-courses, where a professor from any department or discipline can hone her or his general education foundational knowledge. One

can learn, for starters, how to tell when a volcano is going to blow, why we have the Second Amendment, or gain an overview of microeconomics.



Johann Neem (left) and Pete Stelling, founders of the Faculty GUR Group.



The mini-courses—launched this fall—are the product of the new Faculty GUR Group, which has the goal of encouraging Western faculty to sustain their own general education. In addition to Neem and Stelling, (who founded the group) members include Kendra Douglas (Modern and Classical Languages), Vinit Jagdish (Economics), Julia Sapin (Art History), and Grace Wang (Environmental Studies). Each has developed a “mini-course” that comprises two

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Western Reads

Omnivore’s Dilemma picked as next year’s campus read

Michael Pollan’s acclaimed *Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* was chosen by the Western Reads committee as its pick for the 2009 – ’10 year, according to program director Mary Janell Metzger.

The book will be used widely in English 101 and other courses, and distributed to all new Western students.



Michael Pollan

In his 2006 book, Pollan explores the significance of how we answer the age-old question, “What’s for dinner?” As Pollan argues, “What’s at stake in our eating choices is not only our own and our children’s health, but the health of the environment that sustains life on earth.”

Philosophy Professor Hud Hudson, who advocated for the book as the Western Reads pick, believes it “is a terrific choice” for the program, one that is “certain to surprise, entertain, provoke, and instruct.”

“Michael Pollan’s beautifully written book will provide members of the university community with several opportunities to consider, evaluate, and discuss the wide-ranging consequences of our eating choices and the political, social, environmental, and moral implications of our means of producing those choices,” Hudson explained. Free copies of *Omnivore’s Dilemma* will be available to all interested faculty. For more information about the program or to participate in planning programs associated with the book, please contact Metzger via email at: Mary.Metzger@wwu.edu or at x/3238.

Western Reads on the web: <http://westernreads.wwu.edu>

Michael Pollan’s website: <http://www.michaelpollan.com/>

Turning Points Lecture Series:
“Seeing the forest for (more than) the trees: mushrooms, berries and other non-timber resources”

Grace Wang, *Environmental Studies*

Wed., March 4, 5:15 – 6:15 pm
CF 110, free

In her talk, environmental studies associate professor Grace Wang will discuss non-timber forest products and how different groups of people have gathered them throughout history. Wang’s research addresses the motivations and socio-cultural implications of why people gather non-timber forest products.

Information: Fran.Maas@wwu.edu

Faculty GUR Group “mini-course”:
Why do we have the Second Amendment?

Johann Neem, *History*

Tues., April 14, 3-4:30 pm (part 1),
Thurs., April 16, 3-4:30 pm, (part 2)

Location TBD

This general education “mini-course” is open to all faculty and staff. Come to one part, or attend both.

For full schedule and updates go to: <http://www.wwu.edu/facultygur/minicourses.shtml>

► **INSIDE:**

Innovative Teaching Showcase, Writing Fellows & much more



From the VPUE's Desk

By Steven VanderStaay, Interim Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education

Esteemed colleagues,

I write to welcome you to *Praxis*, 2009. A newsletter of professional resources, events, and faculty achievements, *Praxis* showcases some of the many forms of instructional

support found at Western. We've made a special effort in this edition to highlight opportunities for faculty to participate in ongoing professional development initiatives, such as the Faculty GUR Group.

Future editions of *Praxis* will include information on my central initiative for this year: the establishment of a general education assessment plan. Informed by the concerns of Deans and Chairs, as well as our accreditation commission, I have worked with ACC Chair Roger Thompson and the Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing to review plans successful at other universities.

We will present three such plans to the campus through the ACC and

DAC meetings in April, inviting response and feedback. In order to ensure as broad a discussion as possible, the plans will also be posted on the campus community forum.

My principle goal as VPUE is to better match the undergraduate education support programs with the needs of faculty and departments. To this end, I have been visiting with Deans, Chairs, faculty and staff, requesting feedback on how our programs can better serve you. If you have feedback or ideas, please contact me at Steven.Vanderstaay@wwu.edu. Include your office hours and I'll be glad to stop by. —Steve VanderStaay, Interim VPUE

The VPUE Office is committed to supporting excellence in undergraduate education at Western. Programs reporting to the VPUE are the Center for Instructional Innovation, Center for Service Learning, Fellowships Office, First-Year Interest Group (FIG) Program, Honors, Teaching-Learning Academy, Writing Instruction Support, University Catalog, Writing Center, and Women Studies. To learn more, go to: <http://www.wwu.edu/depts/vpue/>

The Basic "GURs," continued from pg. 1

sessions of one-and-a-half-hours each. Two different mini-courses are offered each quarter and are open to all faculty and staff.

"Faculty GUR offers faculty from various disciplines an opportunity to improve their own

"From watching my colleagues, I have gained not only new knowledge and ways of thinking, but new ideas about how to teach."

—History Professor Johann Neem, one of the founders of the Faculty GUR Group

general education by learning from their peers, strengthening Western's commitment to a broad, liberal education," Neem explained. "From watching my colleagues, I have gained not only new knowledge and ways of thinking, but new ideas about how to teach."

Neem and Stelling got the idea for the GUR group last spring.

"Johann and I were lamenting the fact that, as faculty in a liberal arts institution and teachers of core courses that are part of the liberal arts mission, we weren't actively participating in that mission because we were so neatly tucked away in the depth of our academic niches," Stelling said.

"We wanted to create a group where we could do the same things we ask all Western students to do: actively integrate information from a wide variety of disciplines to broaden our perspectives and deepen our own understanding of the world."

They approached Ron Kleinknecht, then-Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, who liked the idea. He connected Neem and Stelling with Karen Casto, Director of the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII).

"They were developing a faculty learning community," Casto said. "They just didn't realize it."

Casto worked with the group to help members develop the group's objective and scope, learn about best practices for building and sustaining a learning community, and promote the mini-courses. Casto and Neem also worked with the Office of Survey Research to develop an assessment plan for the group, and were also able to secure a small amount of funding from the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education.

New Direction for Faculty Development

Casto notes that the Faculty GUR Group, in addition to its more obvious role of promoting interconnectedness among general education offerings for both faculty and their students, has great potential as way to support those faculty who teach the GURs.

"The group promises to provide a new direction for faculty development on this campus, away from the one-shot workshop model, and toward a deeper engagement by faculty around teaching and learning," she added.

Stelling agrees that participation in the group and attending the mini-courses has revitalized his approach to how he teaches his GUR.

"It's invigorating to take a class again! It simultaneously presents the breadth of the GUR curriculum as well as a wealth of teaching techniques. I've already been adding new ideas into my Geology 101 course about how economics, sustainability, and even sociolinguistics applies to geology."

The Faculty GUR Group members are optimistic that their model of collaboration and mini-courses will continue next academic year and beyond. Attendance at sessions is growing as word about them has spread.

"Perhaps one of the most exciting things is the chance to observe another teacher in action, and also the chance to be reminded what it's like to be a student," Neem said.

—To learn more about the Faculty GUR Group and how to get involved, contact Karen.Casto@wwu.edu. To learn more about faculty learning communities, and see all the "mini-courses," go to: <http://www.wwu.edu/facultygur/>

Teaching Showcase 2009 honors faculty learning communities

By Justina Brown, Center for Instructional Innovation

The Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) will highlight three unique and highly collaborative faculty groups in its upcoming *Innovative Teaching Showcase*, to be published online in June 2009.

This year's Showcase theme, "Faculty Learning Communities," honors members of Western's and other local communities who are working together, across disciplines, to share and expand their scholarship. A core characteristic of faculty learning communities is a desire to work together for improved teaching and learning. This is often done without compensation, but with the reward of creating a better learning environment for students by increasing engagement, critical thinking skills, learning technologies, and teamwork skills.

This year's nominees are:

Faculty GUR Group, formed to bring to-

gether faculty from different departments across the university to enhance participants' general education (*see full story, pg. 1*)

North Cascades and Olympic Science Partnership, led by George "Pinky" Nelson (SMATE). This partnership involves the close interaction of Western faculty, several local community colleges, and 26 school districts to reform science education through teacher professional development, implementation of new curriculum materials, development and support of learning communities in the schools, increasing diversity of new teachers, and improving the science teacher preparation program in higher education institutions.

Center for Education, Equity and Diversity (CEED), led by Kristen French.

CEED supports the Woodring College of Education's mission in its commitment to an education that promotes cultural understanding and



SMATE Director George "Pinky" Nelson, leader of the North Cascades and Olympic Science Partnership



Kristen French, Director of Woodring's Center for Education, Equity and Diversity

social justice in a pluralistic, democratic society.

In addition to multimedia presentations of the respective work of the groups, this year's Showcase publication will include detailed assessment plans, which are necessary tools to measure each group's goals and outcomes.

The Innovative Teaching Showcase will be published and celebrated on June 2, 2009 at the "Showcase Learning Event". For more information, please contact the CII at x7210.

—To see past Showcases, go to:

<http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/cii/showcase/default.asp>

Smile: You're on Faculty Focus

If not yet, you might soon be profiled for the new video series, which highlights Western faculty and their research or programs, and will be televised soon.



Faculty Focus was created by Lisa Spicer, (who formerly worked for KCTS in Seattle, and now works part-time for the Vice Provost for Information Technology and is a graduate student), and English Professor John Purdy, with support from faculty governance. Their first effort is a 10-minute video entitled "Faculty Serving Washington," which will be shown to the State Legislature, and—

if more funds can be found— will serve as a pilot for future *Faculty Focus* profiles. *Faculty Focus* will air on Western's Cable Channel 16, Bellingham's Channel BTW 10, possibly statewide on TVW, and also on the Western website. For more information, contact John.Purdy@wwu.edu, or Lisa.Spicer@wwu.edu

Photo: Lisa Spicer interviews Vehicle Research Institute Director Eric Leonhardt (far left) for Faculty Focus. Video Services Manager Robert Clark (far right) is the Faculty Focus camera man.

Mark your calendars for ASSESSMENT WEEK

April 20 – 24

Are your students learning what you want them to in your courses? Are you teaching a large class for the first time, or do you wish to revise an existing course?

Yes? Then plan to attend the workshops or presentations during **Assessment Week**, slated for April 20 -24. Judith Frey, Director of the Instructional Improvement Center at Renton Technical College, will do a workshop on "Small Group Instructional Diagnosis." Other presenters are our own Western assessment experts, including John Krieg, Director of Survey Research, and Western faculty.

Stay tuned for more details! Assessment Week is sponsored by the Center for Instructional Innovation, Office of Institutional Assessment, Research and Testing, with support from the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. For more information, contact Karen.Casto@wwu.edu

PRAXIS is published quarterly throughout the academic year by the Office of the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education. Created as a forum for faculty and student support professionals on Western's campus, PRAXIS promotes the exchange of ideas and provides information on upcoming events and topical issues in teaching and learning at the undergraduate level.

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TLA studies teaching and learning connections between sustainability and diversity

By Jesse Nelson, TLA student support staff

With news of the economic crisis fresh on their minds, this fall's Teaching-Learning Academy (TLA) participants developed an intriguing and timely study question for this year: *How can WE live out our Mission and create a sustainable future at Western that saves money and builds on diversity?*

The TLA conversation this winter has ranged from the small things people could do to save money for better learning to pointed suggestions that would sustain both teachers and learners. Many participants have also shared these recommendations directly with Bruce Shepard via the online campus forum, *Viking Village*. The spirited dialogue and influx of ideas at each dialogue session has demonstrated a strong col-

lective desire to sustain Western's current excellence in teaching and learning despite budget cuts. At the same time, participants have expressed a clear interest in understanding our differences better so we can make the most of our human resources in the face of limited means.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO JOIN TLA!

Meetings are bi-weekly in Canada House, and remaining winter quarter meeting times are: Wednesdays, Feb. 25, and March 11 at noon, 2, and 4 pm, and Thursdays, Feb. 26 and March 12, at noon. For more information, email Megan.Otis@wwu.edu. Learn more at the TLA website: <http://www.wwu.edu/depts/tla>

Faculty - Student Writing Research Fellows investigate scholarly teaching of writing

By Carmen Werder, Director, Writing Instruction Support

Five faculty-student teams are part of a research group studying specific writing instruction practices. They will also present project results during the May 2009 Scholars Week.

The Writing Instruction Support (WIS) Program offers these fellowships, with endorsement from the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education, in an effort to recognize the scholarly teaching of writing that is already happening at Western and to inform others engaged with this complex work.

Writing teams are:

—**Bidisha Biswas (faculty), Rosa Jiminez and Jessica Pemble (students) in Political Science:** "Developing writing assignments that address the role of



English Professor Suzanne Paola is one of five Western faculty who are working with students this year as Writing Research Fellows.

prior knowledge and selective perception."

—**Paul Chen (faculty) and Steve Walker (student) in Political Science:** "Use of in-class revision exercises to enhance writing skills."

—**Suzanne Paola (faculty) and Lori Brack (graduate student) in English:** "Efficacy of nontraditional writing media and unfamiliar work environments in disrupting entrenched habits of writing that shut down fluency."

—**Margi Fox (faculty) and Jeanne Killgore (student) in English:** "Examining the impact of written comments on student writing using a rhetorical framework from professional and technical writing."

—**Jennifer Karchmer (faculty) and Kate Bauer (student) in Communication:** "Use of reflective journal writing in promoting a sense of professional identity."

Want to be a Writing Research Fellow next year? Want to know about writing instruction support? Contact Carmen Werder at x/7329, Carmen.Werder@wwu.edu

PRAXIS to go paperless

This is the last paper printing of PRAXIS. Beginning with the '09 spring issue, PRAXIS will still cover teaching and learning issues, but be available as a sustainable and economical web publication, located at:

<http://www.wwu.edu/depts/vpue/Praxis/>