

# TEACHING & E-LEARNING NEWS

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## SCHOLARLY TEACHING BROUGHT TO THE FOREFRONT AT UNC CHARLOTTE

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) is an international movement in higher education that has been gaining ground in helping university faculty in all disciplines view teaching as a scholarly act. On this campus, too, there have been many exciting developments concerning scholarly teaching, ranging from the interesting work done by the API and CID grant recipients to the collaborations with other UNC schools in working with

retention issues.

Ultimately, what SOTL is all about is to use research methods to examine educational practices and to share and disseminate what is learned, both locally and abroad. Because UNC Charlotte has always recognized teaching as paramount to our mission, and as we move towards becoming a more research oriented institution, a formal Scholarship of Teaching and Learning program will

benefit the campus by offering a bridging perspective, to show that these two aspects of the university work in conjunction. There is a team currently developing a SOTL program with two main goals, to build a research culture around teaching and to serve as a recognition program on campus for this type of scholarly teaching. Stay tuned for more information about how you can get involved.

□ J. Garvey Pyke, FCTeL

## WEB DESIGN FOR DISABILITIES: ACCESS FOR ALL

According to a 2005 American Community Survey, 15% of all Americans age 5 and over suffer from some kind of disability. From that same survey, 14 % of that population between 18 and 34 years of age is enrolled in college or graduate school. Obviously, these figures have implications for our instruction on campus. As more instruction becomes mediated through the Internet, we need to make sure that we design our web pages and materials to guar-

antee they reach all of our students by adhering to commonly accepted web accessibility standards. Furthermore, our own aging eyes and bodies could benefit from adopting these standards as well.

To learn about what you can do to help, FCTeL now has a workshop that looks at common issues that have been known to cause difficulties for people with disabilities when they are using the web. The next two workshops are March 28

(1:00-2:30 pm) and April 6 (9:00-10:30 am). We will discuss what methods and freely available tools are available to assist in developing more accessible web pages. We will also take a brief look at what you can do within UNC Charlotte's course management system, Blackboard, to improve accessibility. As with all our workshops, we also offer this workshop as a one-on-one consultation.

□ Debbie Mowry, FCTeL

## SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- ◆ *Scholarly teaching involves training a researcher's critical eye on the educational and instructional issues we face in the classroom here at UNC Charlotte*
- ◆ *Teaching and research are not at odds: they naturally complement each other*
- ◆ *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning aims for collegiality, for sharing what we learn with our fellow travelers in higher education*

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## PERSONAL RESPONSE SYSTEMS ALLOW STUDENTS TO GIVE, FACULTY TO GET, INSTANT FEEDBACK

THE OFFICE OF CLASSROOM SUPPORT IS PRESENTLY LEADING AN EVALUATION OF ALL OF THE CURRENTLY AVAILABLE SYSTEMS.

Personal Response Systems, perhaps better known as “clickers,” are simple hand-held devices that allow students to electronically respond to questions while in class. These systems work on radio frequency—the same principle as a garage door opener—and can connect with the existing classroom technologies. There has been both a growing interest and an increasing usage of these personal response systems.

Currently, the personal response systems that are used have been offered primarily through textbook publishers, which means there is no sin-

gle, standard device that all can use universally. This has resulted in some students having multiple devices for their various courses—and it also resulted in these students shouldering the associated expense with needing to own multiple devices. Furthermore, the lack of a single device solution has made supporting them very difficult, and integrating these multiple systems with existing campus e-learning and student information systems has been impractical, to say the least.

The Office of Classroom Support is presently leading an evaluation of the currently

available systems with the hope that the university can adopt just one of them for the entire campus. When properly implemented, personal response systems can perform a variety of instructional tasks, including monitoring student learning, engaging students, taking attendance, and conducting surveys.

Look for an announcement coming up in March or April for an open conversation and seminar session about these devices and how they could benefit your teaching.

□ *Mark Sivy, FCTeL*

## ACTIONS BEING TAKEN TO ADDRESS ONGOING BLACKBOARD ISSUES

Since the campus has been experiencing Blackboard Vista issues involving performance, functionality, slow response times, and enrollment, FCTeL wants to update you with relevant information about actions being taken to address the issues.

The off-campus Blackboard Vista server (actually a “cluster” of servers) is hosted and administered centrally at the state level, and these performance issues are affecting several other campuses also. Technical staff and administration at the UNC Charlotte and state level, as well as at Blackboard and SunGard cor-

porations, are aware of and are addressing the issues.

Actions that have been taken include:

- ◆ Implementation of additional performance monitoring methods per Blackboard recommendations
- ◆ Configuration modifications and software upgrades to improve handling of server load
- ◆ Adding hardware (processors, memory, and servers) to existing systems
- ◆ Purchasing robust replacement hardware, to be installed ASAP.

State-level server hosting is a UNC system-level goal but also a new experience for those involved. While much effort has gone into Blackboard Vista’s implementation, it will take time for all systems to function optimally. Meanwhile, we are addressing the issues and researching strategies, for both the present needs and the future.

If you have any concerns about how Blackboard Vista’s recent performance issues may affect you and your students, please [email FCTeL](mailto:email@FCTeL) to let us know.

□ *Lorraine Stanton, FCTeL*



## PEER OBSERVATIONS OF TEACHING

The peer observation of teaching is common at many colleges and universities, including UNC Charlotte. A number of principles can be gleaned from the literature on peer observations. I would like to offer three principles that I feel are critical to conducting effective peer observations.

First, recognize the power of peer observations. Well-constructed peer observations can be a powerful way to document teaching activities and teaching performance. They can be valuable for providing input about teaching and provide needed opportunities for reflection, thus

leading to teacher improvements and greater student learning. Poorly planned peer observations can be damaging to faculty members and destroy confidence in peer observation programs.

A second principle is to develop a valid and reliable peer observations system. A peer observation instrument should focus on observable teacher behaviors and events that reflect the literature on effective teaching. Moreover, the instrument should focus on the essential elements of a particular strategy or approach to instruction. Therefore, a single instrument cannot be used across various

approaches to teaching.

The third principle is to train all peer observers, especially if the results are to be included for summative (tenure/promotion) purposes. It is important that all faculty members involved in peer observations are using the same process and skilled in their role. This required a training session with practice sessions. When faculty members are aware that peer observers have been trained, they are more confident in the process.

□ *Maria Yon, FCTeL & College of Education*



## WHAT IS "SOCIAL SOFTWARE," AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?

The latest innovation that is taking the online world by storm, especially young people, is "social software," a set of online tools that enable individuals to meet "virtually" and communicate with each other using personal computers, regardless of location. The extent of use can range from two people communicating informally to the creation of online communities with specific purposes.

While this type of online communication is not new—it has existed in such forms as listservs, online bulletin

boards, email, and Usenet—today, however, we are seeing a rapid emergence of new, readily available, and highly flexible options, such as text and instant messaging, wikis, blogs, online gaming, and virtual worlds. These are rapidly being adopted in higher education as effective instructional and community building tools. For example, some universities are now using the online virtual community, "Second Life," for advising, office hours, and much more.

We at FCTeL are enthusiastically involved in the process of examining social software for use at UNC Charlotte. We are also joined in this effort by the faculty and staff who comprise the multidisciplinary and multitalented E-Learning Action Team. If you would like to become involved, please email us at [ftel@uncc.edu](mailto:ftel@uncc.edu). For more information on social software, please visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_software](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_software).

□ *Mark Sivy, FCTeL*

MANY KINDS OF SOCIAL SOFTWARE ARE RAPIDLY BEING ADOPTED IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL AND COMMUNITY BUILDING TOOLS.



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WE'RE ON THE WEB!  
[WWW.FCTEL.UNCC.EDU](http://WWW.FCTEL.UNCC.EDU)

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BRIDGING METHODS OF INSTRUCTION  
& EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES.

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## FCTeL LIBRARY: NEARLY 1000 BOOKS (AND COUNTING)

In FCTeL's main office in Atkins 149C, we have amassed nearly 1000 books about faculty development in a variety of topics, from assessment to diversity to e-learning and more!



We also have an electronic database of all of our holdings, which can be found on our [FCTeL website](http://www.fctel.uncc.edu). Of course, please feel free to drop in and check out our selection in person!

## WHAT CAN BLACKBOARD VISTA DO FOR ME?

Did you know there are many benefits to using Blackboard Vista, beyond even what WebCT Campus Edition has to offer? Blackboard Vista can make teaching easier if you utilize some of its great new features:

- ◆ Faculty who use Blackboard Vista often cite the integrated, functional "Student View" tab as a huge improvement over WebCT CE. No more need to log in with a separate student login to test your own quizzes or assignments.
- ◆ The Gradebook has also been enhanced. If you have many columns in your gradebook, you can now scroll from side to side to view all of them easier, while still seeing the student names displayed next to the column.
- ◆ Another great feature of Blackboard Vista is the gradable discussion posts. It's now so much easier for faculty to reward students for their positive contributions in group discussion, helping promote active learning and facilitating a sense of community among students.
- ◆ Blackboard Vista allows more flexibility in where and how faculty can link instances of tools such as Assessments, Discussions and Assignments. They can be placed in folders, learning modules, and many other areas, facilitating learning "in the right place, at the right time", which is often more natural and intuitive for learners.
- ◆ The Selective Release features of Blackboard Vista can allow faculty more choices than ever in setting up progressive learning events based on select groups of students, times, content, and/or requirements, keeping students on task, on time, self-directed and better able to work toward mastery of the material.

Please call the Help Center to ask a FCTeL consultant how you can use the features of Blackboard Vista to help manage course grades, keep students engaged, offer new and flexible ways of learning, and make many teaching tasks easier than ever.

□ Lorraine Stanton, FCTeL

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## WORKSHOPS & EVENTS CALENDAR

FCTeL's calendar of events is always online, where you can see details for the whole semester, including workshop descriptions, dates, times, locations, and so forth: <http://www.fctel.uncc.edu/calendar/index.html>. Though we hold regular workshops and events relating to e-learning and instruction, we can also arrange a special workshop or consultation for departments, groups, or individuals upon request. Just let us know how we can help!