



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## AFRAID TO GRADE: A FACULTY DEVELOPMENT COURSE

Has text messaging taken a toll on your students' writing? Do you receive e-mails brimming with misspelled words and incoherent phrases? Have your students failed to transfer their English skills to your classes?

With these questions in mind, faculty members at my community college may enroll in a free online course, "Afraid to Grade: Evaluating Student Communication." A product of a Lilly grant, this course has grandiose ambitions, focusing primarily on the needs of adjunct faculty and on welcoming full-time faculty. Its overall goal is to enhance instructors' abilities to evaluate their students' communication skills. "Afraid to Grade" requires instructors to analyze examples of students' informal and formal writing, define expectations for their students' writing and speaking skills, design reasonable rubrics for grading papers and presentations, assess resources for detecting plagiarism, and encourage writing throughout the curriculum—all within six weeks!

So where do we begin? Each module begins with a video, followed by required readings, Flash and/or PowerPoint presentations, a required exercise, and a Discussion Board. I designed the first week's module, "The Humor and Horror of Student Communication," as a general introduction. Participants watch the video "Americans' Bad Grammar Costly," available at <http://rss.msnbc.msn.com/id/10004296>. We share examples of our students' classic e-mail bloopers, malapropisms, and inappropriate use of Internet abbreviations in formal writing. At the same time, some of the readings suggest that we may be overreacting. For example, Geoff Nunberg's article "All Thumbs," compares the telegraph with text messaging and Internet abbreviations/emoticons. Since the telegraph did not destroy our language, should we be concerned about short-cuts that today's students are taking in their writing? Opinions vary, but most instructors remain concerned about the state of the English language.

In the second module, "Preventing Plagiarism," I ask instructors to plagiarize "on purpose"—perhaps with an article copied from Wikipedia or a ProQuest database. Then they submit their files to Safe Assignment, the plagiarism detection software available in Blackboard. We await the results! After awarding "kudos" to those with 100% plagiarism scores, I present non-conventional methods of prevention and detection.

The third module, "Scoring Without a Scantron," allows instructors to view other instructors' rubrics, create an original rubric through Rubistar (<http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>), and grade short student submissions, according to an established rubric. One of the submissions is plagiarized—an added problem! In contrast to our structured rubrics, I discuss one of my college professor's unique methods of grading. In his living room, he had five cardboard boxes, marked A through F. As he would read, he would throw each paper in the appropriate box. He would return lengthy essays with a grade and one short comment. In those days, we never questioned his wisdom or demanded to see his rubric!

As I designed Module Four, I was concerned that participants would think that "standard" English is permanent, rather than evolving. In this module we explore language debates. I mention that a debate still rages between the prescriptionists, grammarians who prefer to enforce the rules of English, and the descriptionists—grammarians who prefer to describe the changing state and context of the English language. I ask participants to explore current debates. Can sentences can ever begin with "but"? Is splitting an infinitive still a sin? We explore punctuation debates, including the infamous Oxford comma, the stodgy semicolon, the misunderstood apostrophe, and the disappearing hyphen.

In the last two modules, we explore Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). I ask them about areas of English which should concern all of us. Some instructors who do not teach English, Communications, or Business English argue that they lack the time to teach writing, despite their concerns for students' weak communication skills. Most, however,



are concerned about how the workplace will judge their students' writing and speaking skills. The last module offers several "modest proposals" for unifying us as faculty. We discuss which issues are critical to all of us and which we should emphasize.

I have enjoyed participants' contributions throughout this first year. One faculty member introduced me to the online performances of Taylor Mali, a successful poet and teacher advocate. Instructors love watching "The Impotence of Proofreading," available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OonDPGwAyfQ> and his dramatization of the poem "Totally Like Whatever, You Know?" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4>. Taylor Mali understands some of our students!

As a result of this class, I have learned how other disciplines encourage higher standards in their students' presentations, reports, and essays. Clearly, all participants recognize the effort involved in incorporating writing and speaking skills into a diverse curricula. Despite the challenges, many participants feel more consistent with their expectations and less "afraid to grade."

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**KEYNOTE SESSIONS**

**SUNDAY, MAY 24**  
**Arleen Arnsparger**  
Project Manager  
MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success

**MONDAY, MAY 25**  
**Wright Lassiter**  
Chancellor, Dallas County Community College District (TX)  
2009 Suanne Davis Roueche NISOD Distinguished Lecturer

**TUESDAY, MAY 26**  
**Samuel Cargile**  
Vice President, Grantmaking  
Lumina Foundation for Education  
Recipient of the 2009 Amado M. Peña, Jr. Journey of Excellence Award

**EXCELLENCE AWARDS CELEBRATION**  
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