Project MountainRise: Rethinking Teaching and Learning by Design

Laura Cruz, Editor-in-Chief, MountainRise

One of my guilty pleasures is watching the television reality show Project Runway. Watching it one evening, I asked myself why the show appealed to me. As my friends and colleagues would surely attest, I am no fashion plate and my seamstress skills are practically non-existent (I can’t even sew on a button). That being said, I discovered what interested me was not the products—the designs that walked down the final runway—but rather the process that led to their creation. Each successful designer has their own distinctive point of view that they are able to bring to a series of often oblique challenges. To watch them transform their work in response to these challenges while staying true to their own point of view was a balancing act of creativity that I continue to find fascinating. In each of the essays in this issue of MountainRise, the authors follow a similar process. They each take on teaching and learning challenges that inspire them to find ways to creatively redesign their practice while maintaining their own signature pedagogies. You might say that the pages of MountainRise serve as the runway for these pedagogical designs.

First on the catwalk is Kent Divoll, Sandra Browning, and Winona Vesey’s take on redesigning conventional classroom assessment techniques. In a standard application, classroom assessment techniques provide snapshots of student learning, such as what they take away from a particular class session. The authors wanted to know more about long-term retention, or deep learning, and developed an innovative classroom assessment tool, the ticket to retention (TtR). The ticket to retention is based on a slate of specific, targeted questions that students answer in mixed pairs during class. This is a deceptively simple change in focus, but one that the control-based study presented in the article shows to be quite effective in improving the long-term retention of key concepts. Based on their results, the TtR may prove to be a timeless activity that instructors can keep in their closets for years.

In our second showcase, Carmen Huffman provides insight into re-conceptualizing undergraduate research projects by considering common objections to such projects. With careful design, she argues, undergraduate research does not have to benefit just the student or just the faculty member, but rather can contribute to the success of both. She presents a framework that incorporates best
practices into a framework for integrating undergraduate research across the curriculum and for designing research activities that dovetail with the semester (or quarter) time limitations. Her seamless design allows for multiple variations of the same form, ready-to-wear across multiple disciplines.

For our next design, Balser, Harden, Nestor, and Nowacek look at two seemingly incongruous pieces, SOTL and the Humanities, and find ways to bring them together harmoniously. The tension between the social science methodology and humanities perspectives is well known and, in fact, remains a serious issue within the SoTL community. Some have called for the creation of a “larger tent” for SoTL that incorporates theories and methods drawn from the humanities, while others have argued for a “smaller tent” that excludes these approaches. Based on reflections from their own classes, these designers suggest that there are benefits to bringing the techniques of “scientific” SoTL to the humanities and that this can bring benefits both to humanities instructors and the SoTL world. Using intentional strategies designed to bring the unfamiliar to both students and instructors, the designers discovered that they could create products that were smart and sophisticated, perfectly tailored for graduate educators.

The model of supplemental instruction is well known and well studied, but our final two designers, Drake and Foresman, present a daring new twist on an old classic. While keeping the structural integrity of SI, i.e. structured sessions outside of class, they replace student facilitators with faculty mentors. Using peer instructors has been a mainstay of SI, largely because of the perceived benefits to both the students and the peer mentors. Indeed, the authors show that participation in any kind of SI, whether peer or instructor led, brings learning benefits. These designers argue, however, that faculty-led SI edged out its competition. In a comparison study, they demonstrate that faculty-led SI leads to higher student satisfaction rates, increased student confidence, and greater student participation in supplemental instruction versus peer-led variations. Teasing out the reasons why this occurs, though, leads to some tantalizing speculation. On Project Runway, the judges frequently enjoin the contestants to create clothes to which potential customers can make emotional connections and the most successful designers tell a story about their clothes and who would wear them. Similarly, Drake and Foresman suggest that the emotional value of the bonds created through faculty-led supplemental instruction, though perhaps ineffable, may be part of the secret for their success.
Just as fashion designers must keep pace with trends, SoTL scholars are enjoined to consider what we do in an iterative cycle, constantly looking for ways to improve upon our designs and to keep our instructional design fresh and well-tailored for an audience with evolving tastes and needs. This issue of *MountainRise* celebrates this process by showcasing how practitioners can redesign, repurpose, and reflect in order to update old classics, create new forms, and keep teaching and learning relevant to our students. In this case, *MountainRise* is the equivalent of Project Runway’s Bryant Park show (where finalists present their collections), but, unlike the show, there is no winner crowned at the end. Just as viewers like me find creative inspiration from the show, we hope that these examples will encourage our readers to look reflectively at their own practice and debut their own new designs just in time for the new Fall season.