7-31-1989

Monitor Newsletter July 31, 1989

Bowling Green State University

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A unique teaching method improves comprehension

All professors hope that what they are teaching is being comprehended by their students. But that is not an easy task, especially when teaching difficult or complicated material to large classes.

Dr. Donald Scherer and Dr. James Stuart, both of philosophy, teach "Introduction to Logic," at the University. Knowing that many of the concepts are abstract and difficult to understand, they worked about how much of the material was actually sinking into the students' heads.

So the two professors decided to shun the conventional way of teaching the course and devised their own method—and statistics show the new method is working. Data has been collected from the course's test scores during fall 1988 and spring 1989. During that period, grades rose more than six percent or about six-tenths of a letter grade. If the results hold up in the 1989 fall semester, Scherer and Stuart believe it will strongly indicate that the goal of ensuring quality instruction for the logic class has been achieved.

The professors say the key to their classroom success is instruction through multiple modes of presentation. Students who take the introductory logic course will hear lectures from graduate students; watch video presentations that include explanatory skills; follow a comprehensive outline of the course to which they add their own notes; and supplement and test their understanding with computer programs based on work done in class.

Scherer said the idea for conducting the class in such a manner came in part of his knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of computer and television technology for teaching and knowing how good Stuart's lectures are. "To me, these clues indicated it would work," Scherer said. "The course operates on the hypothesis that video presentations and a good computer program will reinforce each other in introductory logic. Our experience from 1976-88 had convinced us that student learning improves with regular, computerized feedback."

Stuart said the class also was designed to replace the large lecture hall situation. The classes are broken into smaller groups for more individualized attention.

The class is conducted like this: Five graduate students taught more than 300 students spring semester 1989. Every Monday and Wednesday each graduate assistant would meet with two groups of 36 students. During those meetings, the students watched prepared programs on the television for 25 minutes, after which they discussed what they had seen.

The television programs included portions of lectures and terminology voiceovers by Stuart, diagrams and skits. Scherer said since video presentations are conducted faster than live lectures, the students were given a prepared outline called "Logical Thoughts" to use to which they could add their own comments. The skills in the videos were used to illustrate difficult logic concepts. For example, Scherer said it is sometimes hard for students to understand certain conditional statements (an if/then statement). This logic concept was illustrated with a skill of a student who is in a fraternity who wants to ask a woman for a date. He reasons that if he asks her to a rock concert, rather than a fraternity function, then she will accept.

Nineteen skits were written to be used in the class by Karen Gygli, a doctoral student in theatre. She assembled casts of undergraduate and graduate students from the theatre department, and Stuart and Scherer approved the final rehearsals to make sure the right concept was being conveyed. The programs were produced by Paul Lopez, WBGU-TV.

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Officers attend narcotic school

Fifty-nine law enforcement officers from Ohio, Michigan and Indiana spent the past two weeks on campus in narcotics investigation school sponsored by the University police department and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The program was held for police officers who will be working in narcotics units.

The classes were held from July 17-28 in the Commons and officers who did not commute stayed in residence halls on campus or in local hotels.

Alan Rose, training coordinator from the DEA, said he conducts three of the school sessions each year in various locations among the three states. Bowling Green was chosen this year after it was suggested by Tim James, a University patrolman. James, who had previously taken a class from Rose, was aware of the DEA schools and thought the campus

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Scherer, from the front

Later in the week, the graduate assistants met with their students in groups of 2 at computer terminals. On the screens the students would read material relating to that week's classwork and they would have to choose arguments and logical properties that they had learned.

"Testing them on the computer like that provided them with immediate feedback, which is a condition of improved learning," Scherer said. "Basically the computer was showing them what they needed to know for their exams. It was up to them how much they wanted to learn.

"We think the video presentation has some advantages over live lectures," Stuart said. "We can show more stylized graphics in these presentations. The videos also break up the monotony of a lecture, it allows us to vary the picture more."

He has determined this method improves comprehension of class material for several reasons. Students are able to see concrete points; they are receiving very clear presentations of concepts; and the computer helps them decide if they have an understanding of the lesson. If not, they seek more personalized help.

Students also could talk with Stuart and Scherer for explanations of difficult material. Scherer said the two professors used the computer in their classroom for their office hours because they thought it encouraged more students to seek them for help in a more familiar setting. In addition, they met weekly with the graduate assistants to prepare for the next week's classes.

Feedback from the students who have taken the course has been good, and Scherer thinks the teaching style can be adapted to some other classes on campus. Other universities also have heard about the program, which have made some inquiries. The Philosophy Documentation Center, which publishes the computer program used in the class, is preparing to test market some of the videos.

The course will be taught both fall and spring semester of the next academic year.

Drug class, from the front

would make a good location.

During the two-week period the officers attended sessions on drug identification and pharmacology, the psychology of law enforcement interviewing, informant development and control, control, raid planning, undercover operations and departmental procedures.

Upon completion of the program the participants were certified by the DEA for drug investigations. Officers from small towns and large cities alike attended the school.

Rose said the DEA has been conducting the school for 18 years. He does not think the drug problem in the United States is getting worse, but said the drug of choice has changed making the problem more difficult to handle.

In the '60s and '70s the drug of choice was heroin. It mellowed people and made them forget their worries, "he said. "The drug of choice today is cocaine. It gives people a pleasant feeling that they'll never be able to match except with more cocaine. It also provokes much more violent behavior than heroin ever did and officers have to learn how to deal with violent people and what to expect from people using this drug.

"Cocaine attracts a wider audience. I think fewer young people are using drugs these days than 10 or 20 years ago, but if and when they start, it's usually with the sniffing of cocaine. And it's so addictive that once they've tried it, most of them will keep coming back for more."

He said the people attending the school at Bowling Green are experimental drug users who are experiencing the same problems as their colleagues. They will supplement their training with several two to three day drug seminars each year. Officers new to the force or narcotics unit must undergo 14 weeks of training at a police academy.