

NEWSLETTER

Joke: What should you wear on February 2?

Punchline: A tutu*



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A Letter from the Editors

February 2 is a big day this year: Beyond being “tu-tu” day (for those who speak English and know about the tulle skirts), it is also Groundhogs day (for those who care about Punxsutawney Phil), setsubun (節分, for those celebrating the Japanese holiday marking the end of winter), and Candelmas (for those commemorating the presentation of Jesus to the temple).

See, you can learn some fun things from our newsletter! Actually, this month we also have some interesting, poignant, and noteworthy things to share with you. In our main article (p. 2), we recap a recent *Teaching Professor* article from our 2024 Pedagogy Matters speaker, Stephen Chew, about the “not particularly useful” educational buzzword: Active Learning. Then we work through a 1980 short story about tenure position interviews that feels like it could have been written last week (p. 3). Our monthly teaching challenge (p. 4) dares you to ask learners questions when you don’t know even know the answers, and Lindsey shares her top tab tricks (p. 5). Not even sure what that means? Turn to page five! Finally, like always, we conclude this month’s newsletter with our upcoming events and programs (pp. 6-7). We hope to see you soon!

Lindsey  Wells

A Different Take On Active Learning

Original Source:
Stephen Chew
(CBB's 2024 Pedagogy Matters Keynote)
[January 20, 2025 Article Linked Here](#)

What is Active Learning?

Well, according to Stephen Chew, cognitive psychologist at Samford, it's a "meaningless, educational buzzword" that "lacks any useful definition and is holding back progress on teaching."

Moving beyond that, Chew notes how scholarship includes the following descriptions:

- any activity other than a lecture that improves learning
- a variety of activities ranging from in-class discussions to flipped classrooms to promote learning
- individual (e.g., using practice exams) and whole-class activities (e.g., interteaching) that lead to learning

Chew Challenges "Active Learning"

Stephen Chew really doesn't seem to be on the "active learning is amazing" train. But his problems with the approach do not seem rooted in its associated pedagogical practices, but rather in our quick, uncritical alignment with a poorly defined, incredibly nuanced idea.

Below, I lay out some of Chew's largest challenges with active learning.

- **Active learning has a circular definition:** Chew writes that "[scholars] want to show that active learning improves learning, but then they define active learning as any teaching method that improves learning. If a teaching method doesn't improve learning, then it doesn't qualify as active learning. With such a circular definition, active learning will always work and its effectiveness cannot be disproven."
- **There is a lack of incentive to adapt:** Chew notes that "as long as a teacher is having students do something other than listen to lectures, they can claim to be using active learning, regardless of whether it actually works. There is no incentive to adapt one's teaching practices to the academic context to optimize student learning."
 - **Active learning contains a spectrum of activities:** He adds that "it is likely that some forms of active learning are more effective than others."
 - **Also, context matters:** And states that "there is no single best teaching method for all subjects and all students, and any method can be implemented well or poorly."
 - Meaning **active learning can be done poorly** and **lecture can be done well.**
- **We need to interrogate the scholarship:** Chew writes that "it is virtually impossible to carry out masked studies in which the teacher is unaware of whether they are in the active learning or control condition." Additionally, he notes that "it often isn't clear whether the active learning condition is good for learning or the control condition is bad." When we see scholarship that argues active learning is great, we need to question the methods.

So, what does this mean for us?

When you google "active learning teaching strategies," the suggestions include great practices that work in certain contexts: think, pair, share; case studies; minute papers; polls. Just like there's a time, place, and community for a piping hot, 10-layer, sausage lasagna (not for breakfast on the hottest day of the year, when the eaters are vegans about to do zumba), there's a time, place, and community (of learners) for each of these strategies. We also agree with Chew that just doing things because they are "active learning" and uncritically aligning with the idea "active learning is good" should be examined. And pitting active learning against lecture is also problematic. Here at CITL, we would love to help you intentionally and meaningfully integrate both lecture and activities into your teaching.



What's on our desks?

In the Garden of the North American Martyrs

by Tobias Wolff

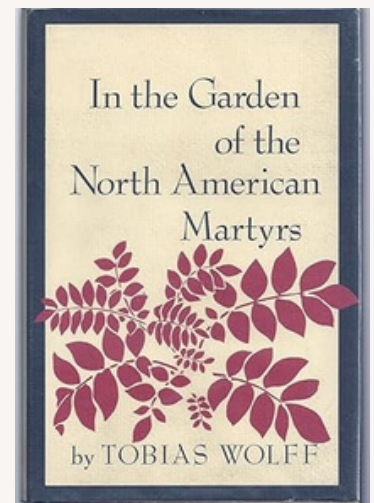
Lindsey joined an educator book group that meets monthly to discuss "Fictional Classrooms." The group reads literature and analyzes its themes, characterization of, and relevance to modern higher education. Last month's selection, Tobias Wolff's "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," so intrigued Lindsey that she immediately dropped a copy on Wells' desk and encouraged them to read the concise 8.5-page story. Want to read it too? Here's a [link](#).

This 1976 piece follows Mary, a shy and accommodating history professor, on her journey from Oregon to upstate New York for an interview at a prestigious college. Our book club discussion revealed how remarkably current the story feels, capturing academic anxieties that persist today: the forced pleasantries, performative job talks, and institutional pressures that can erode one's authentic voice. While hiring politics provided rich territory for discussion, our conversation centered on moral compromise and self-betrayal. Mary's final act of defiance, though professionally suicidal, prompts uncomfortable questions about the compromises we make for career advancement. In today's era of contingent faculty and increasing conformity pressures, the story resonates more than ever with many of us, as a reminder that our most important scholarly work may be how we choose to use our voice when it matters most.

The story's physical setting emerged as a fascinating metaphor in our discussion. The college, with its manicured grounds and reconstructed colonial buildings, is powered by a hydroelectric dam—something cold and mechanical humming beneath the surface. This artificial atmosphere mirrors Mary's rehearsed interview responses, while the dam's constant presence reminds us what truly drives the institution: not the pursuit of knowledge, but raw power and efficiency. As one colleague noted, it's "a metaphor for how many modern institutions of higher learning operate: a veneer of academic tradition masking what has essentially become a power-generating machine."

There's much more to explore in this rich text! We'd love to chat more about it so stop by CITL anytime to discuss with us.

Next month, our "Fictional Classrooms" book club will discuss the play "Wit" by American playwright Margaret Edson. If you're interested in joining these conversations, just let Lindsey know!



Wolff, T. "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs." (1980). In T. Wolff, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (Reprint edition, pp. 123–136). Ecco Press.

Do these topics interest you too? Do you know similar pieces or pieces in dialogues with these? Please reach out or stop by our office to offer your thoughts or to recommend what might be "on our desks" next month.

Monthly Teaching Challenge

February
2025

CITL offers a monthly teaching challenge—and that challenge might sound different or difficult, but we encourage you to try it out and see if it works for you, your course, and your students.

In addition, we would love to hear from you during the month. What has it been like to incorporate **this** teaching challenge into your current course? Write us or stop by Dana to share.

Ask your learners a question, the answer to which, you don't know

A trial lawyer might advise: Never ask questions to which you don't know the answer. But we aren't trial lawyers when teaching at Bates. Instead, our challenge to you this month: Pose a question to your learners that you haven't yet "figured out" and figure it out with them.

What this might look like:

- "While planning for this lesson, I was thinking about [topic] and wondering [question]. Let's pair up (can I be paired with you, [name]?) and share out in 10 minutes with what each pair is thinking."
- "Thank you, [student], for sharing that. That makes me think of [topic]. Actually, can I ask you all a question I have about [topic]? [question]."

Last Month's: Learn and Use Names & Pronouns

One of our readers shared:

My top trick for learning names and pronouns? I often put my students in pairs for small group work and then have each student share out in this format: "I was talking with [name] and [pronoun] shared...."

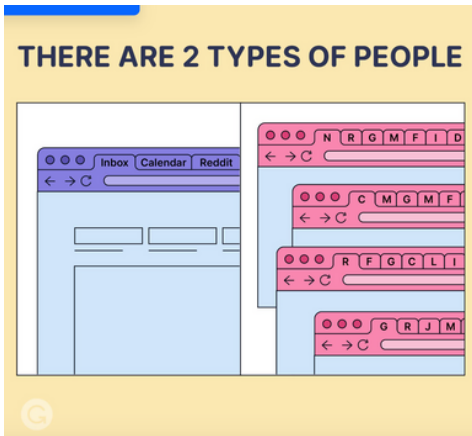
I share with my students that there are reasons why I have them do this:

1. Share-outs are important for my own and their peers' learning
2. We all learn one another's names and pronouns
3. Paraphrasing another's contributions is a helpful skill to practice

Top Tab Tricks:

Lindsey Shares Two Tech Tips for Productivity

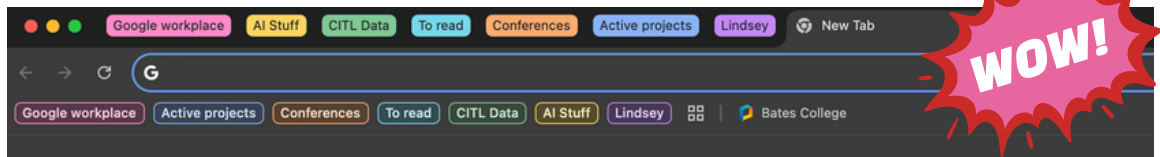
Chrome Tabs



I learned about the life changing group tabs in Chrome this month. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you this 2 minute "hack" has changed how I work. I'm a Type 2 tab person, aka I had 89 tabs open across two browser windows. And yes, all 89 tabs are critical! Wells, a type 1 tab person, couldn't even handle looking at my computer screen chaos. But I learned new ways from a high schooler (shout out to Carrie Diaz Eaton's daughter!).

You can create beautiful color coded Tab Groups now by clicking on the ellipsis menu (the three dots in a line; sometimes called the kebab menu icon or the hamburger menu). I now have all 89 tabs aligned in 7 Tab Groups: Google Workplace, AI Stuff, CITL Data, To Read, Conferences, Active Projects, and Lindsey Music. It's the best of both worlds. I get a calm organized screen on my computer while not losing any of my precious tabs!

Are you a type 2 like me?

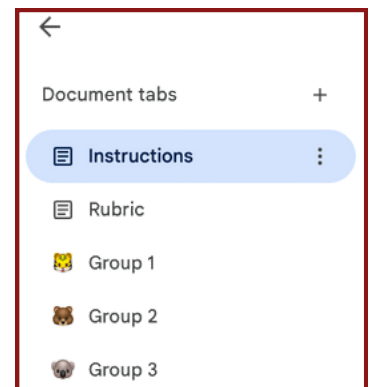


Google Docs Tabs

Have you noticed that Google Docs now has two kinds of tabs? That's right! There's the classic Tab key that indents your content, and now we have notebook-style tabs that help organize your content in a whole new way (think of it like excel tabs). And I've got to tell you—I'm loving them! This update to Google Docs is exactly what educators need to streamline their workflow and keep content organized more efficiently. Instead of creating separate documents for everything, you can simply add tabbed sections. Fewer documents means less clutter and fewer files to manage (which is always a win in my book!). Want to see an example? [Here is our handout for our MLK day session.](#)

Here are some ways you might want to put these tabs to work:

- Lesson Planning: Keep all your unit/topic materials in one place! Create separate tabs for learning objectives, activities, assessments, & resources. It's much easier than jumping between multiple docs.
- Student Portfolios: Make one doc per student with tabs for different writing assignments. Students can showcase their progress and best work all in one organized space.
- Group Projects: Have everyone collaborate on a single doc with tabs for different project sections. This setup really cuts down on those editing conflicts when multiple students are working simultaneously.
- Research Projects: Never lose track of your notes and sources again! Organize everything in tabs as you write, and you can even duplicate tabs to save different drafts. No more hunting through your Drive trying to find all those scattered project pieces!



How might you use tabs?

If you have another great tech productivity hack to share, let us know!

Upcoming Events

WE'D LOVE TO HAVE YOU JOIN

GEN. AI PANEL

Interested in hearing how CBB colleagues are using Generative AI in their teaching spaces?

This panel on Gen. AI might be right for you!

BLURB: Join **Carrie Diaz Eaton** (Bates: Associate Professor of Digital and Computational Studies), **Stacy Doore** (Colby: Assistant Professor of Computer Science), and **John Paul Kanwit** (Bowdoin: Associate Director of the Baldwin Center for Learning and Teaching) to learn how they are using Generative AI in their courses and work with students. Following panelists' open remarks, participants will have the opportunity to ask questions and then move into breakout rooms to discuss the impact of generative AI in the classroom.

DATE, TIME, LOCATION: Thursday February 13
4:00-5:30pm, Zoom, register here ([link](#))

O.E.R. PANEL

Interested in learning about open educational resources as Bates?

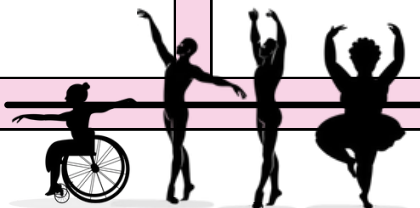
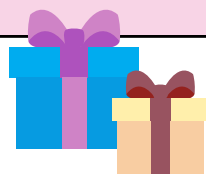
This panel might be right for you!

BLURB: Textbook affordability is a perennial concern for our students, and one that we as instructors have the power to address. Join CITL and Ladd Library in exploring the open textbook landscape, as we:

- review college costs, textbook market trends, and their impact on our students;
- learn about Open Educational Resources (OER) or freely accessible textbooks
- hear from a panel of colleagues about their experiences with OER:
 - **Todd Kahan** (Psychology)
 - **Colleen O'Loughlin** (Chemi & Biochem)
 - **Barry Lawson** (DCS)

DATE, TIME, LOCATION: Friday March 7
12:00 - 1:00pm, Commons 226, register here ([link](#))

GIFT



GIFT might be right for you!

[CLICK HERE](#)

Interested in having CITL do a non-evaluative midterm focus group with your class?

GIFT AT BATES: After requesting a GIFT, CITL meets with you to discuss your course, then CITL visits your course for 20-30 minutes and leads a focus group (and you are asked to leave). Finally, CITL writes up a report with general trends of learner feedback and anonymized learner quotes and discusses it with you. GIFT allows learners to feel heard and allows you to receive constructive suggestions mid-semester. GIFT has been empirically tied to higher learner satisfaction as measured by learners' perception and their motivation towards learning (Mauger, 2010; Gray and DiLoreto, 2016). GIFTs work best for academic courses.

TIME COMMITMENT:

30 min. pre meeting + 20-30 min. of your classtime + 60 min. post meeting + (time to process)

for more information,
see our website's event page: [HERE](#)

ONGOING EVENTS

THERE'S STILL TIME TO JOIN

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE



Staff Educators

1st Tuesdays: 12-1pm, Commons 211

For all staff educators (those who design learning materials or facilitate learning spaces)!



2025 FYS Instructors

2nd & 4th Tuesdays: 9:30-10:30am, Dana 216

Prepare for your fall instruction of the FYS/W1 with this community of practice!



New Faculty

1st Fridays: 12-1pm, Commons 226

Faculty in their first, second, or third year at Bates to share tips and find community.



RPPC Courses

2nd & 4th Fridays: 2:40 - 4:00 pm, Dana 216

For those interested in working thru proposing, designing, and teaching RPPC courses.

JOIN HERE

SPARKSHOPS

How Sparkshops work:

- You select a topic (from menu below) that interests you and your unit
- You arrange a time & date for CITL to come to you and lead that Sparkshop
- CITL visits your unit for a 10 minute mini-workshop and then facilitates discussion
- You leave with a handout and sparked ideas

MENU

- Spark **Action** Topics
 - Entrance & Exit Tickets
 - Exam Wrappers
 - Rubrics (and variations)
 - Think-Pair-Share (and variations)
 - Mid-Semester Feedback
- Spark **Interest** Topics
 - Community Agreements
 - Informal Group Work
 - Learning Objectives
 - Teaching Large Classes

Request here

Reach out: CITL@bates.edu