Reflection on Teaching: Updates to courses in Fall 2014

In the animation department, we touch base regularly to discuss how students are performing, how class policies are working, and so on. These discussions, along with other developments, have led to my making a number of policy and course changes starting this quarter. Here are the highlights:

1. Better partnership between courses and the Student Employment Advisor (SEA)

    After attending a faculty development breakout session on ways to integrate student employment topics into the classroom, I have partnered with the SEA in scheduling five workshops in my Intermediate 3D Modeling course. Pairing the workshops with this particular course should work well for a number of reasons, including it being a 7th-level course (the SEA wants to target 7th-9th level students) and the fact that both animation and visual effects students take the course – so two programs are exposed to the information.

2. Required involvement in industry events off-campus

    To reinforce the importance of industry networking, I will start requiring that students attend two off-campus industry events each quarter. Industry involvement is typically low among students, so it seems it needs to become a course requirement. Students will need to write a brief reflection statement and provide evidence of attendance for each event. This new requirement will spark discussion of the variety of industry events that take place in the Twin Cities area and will expose students to the work, the language, and the makers of the creative industry around them.

3. Using the scientific method in problem-solving

    This idea was sparked by my son's work in his 7th-grade science class. I will review the scientific method with my students and apply the requisite steps in a case study to solve a technical problem they may encounter in class. I will have the students apply this method to their own problems, helping them to develop a formal structure for resolving production issues.

4. Participation worth 20% of course grade

    This is a new requirement at the campus level, so all faculty are tasked with defining how it applies to their own classes. I will use a mixture of short discussion topics at the beginning of class (as an advance organizer), industry-related trivia and vocabulary questions, small-group critiques, and other active learning strategies to encourage on-time attendance and in-class participation.

5. Project/time estimation and tracking

    I have created an Excel spreadsheet that students will use to estimate how long it will take them to complete tasks, and then record the actual time spent. The spreadsheet calculates the differences between estimated and actual time and color codes the data to make it easy for students to see how accurate their estimates were. The worksheet will be required, but accuracy will not factor into the project grade – I want this to be a no-risk activity to encourage honesty. This is a tool to help students gradually make more accurate estimates of how long it will take them to complete tasks, an invaluable skill as a working professional – especially when taking on freelance work.

	Task				Est. hours	Act. hours	Difference	Notes/analysis		
								Project Time Estimate Worksheet		
	Student name: Sample							**Course:** Sample		
	Project: Sample							**Due date:** Sample		
	Task				Est. hours	Act. hours	Difference	Notes/analysis		
Task 1					6	10	4	Technical difficulty		
Task 2					4	3	-1			
Task 3					2	2	0			
Task 4					7	4	-3	Learned more efficient technique		
Task 5					1	4	3	Instructor feedback drove changes		
	TOTALS				Est. hours	Act. hours	Difference	Notes/analysis		
					20	23	3			

Time estimation and tracking worksheet v1.0

6. Forming pods

   Borrowing from another department instructor, I will have students form "pods" in my Intermediate 3D Modeling course this quarter. These small groups will rely on each other as a first point of contact for problem-solving and critique. As the course has two projects, I will put the students in different pods for each project.

As always, I will evaluate the efficacy of these changes moving forward and make adjustments as called for. My hope is that each of these will help lead to graduates more ready to enter the workforce.