Themed Learning Communities
Faculty Handbook

Northern Illinois University

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Welcome! This faculty handbook was created to provide you with information about the Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) at Northern Illinois University. We believe the rationale, expectations, integrated learning, college readiness, assessment and logistics information and resources will assist you in creating a rewarding TLC experience both for you and your students.

I am thankful for your participation as a TLC faculty member and for your willingness to guide our newest Huskies through their first semester on campus. You and your TLC instructors have the unique opportunity to share various perspectives on a common theme. Your collaboration is vital to the success of the TLC program. I encourage us to keep the big picture in mind. Through your learning community, we are intentionally developing meaningful relationships with students, other faculty, and campus offices that will provide support to students. In addition, you are helping to ignite a passion for learning. Our efforts will help students transition successfully to college, gain a better appreciation of specific programs or academic departments, and remain engaged as they matriculate through their major coursework.

TLCs help us to think about ways to apply knowledge learned in one class to skills or knowledge learned in another. The end goal is to provide the students with a richer learning experience. Through your hands-on, integrated assignments, you will show students relevant and meaningful ways they can use their coursework to understand larger societal issues and problems. As a university, now more than ever, we must teach our students to have an interdisciplinary understanding to navigate our ever-changing, complex, global society. I believe TLCs offer students their first glimpse at why integrated knowledge is so important to achieving their own personal, academic, and professional aspirations.
What are Themed Learning Communities?

Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) are a group of two to four courses taken during the same semester and consisting of the same small group of students. A TLC focuses on a common theme across several different classes and disciplines, such as humanities and sciences. Faculty members create assignments that require students to draw on concepts from the other TLC class(es) for an enhanced, integrative learning experience. By focusing on one theme across multiple classes and incorporating integrated assignments, TLCs provide students with the opportunity to:

- Engage deeply with a theme (e.g., Business ethics);
- Connect learning across courses in collaborative and active ways;
- Develop relationships with peers, faculty, and a peer mentor; and
- Ease the transition into college.

Rationale for Themed Learning Communities

Through the use of thematically linked curricula and co-curricular experiences, TLCs provide enriched learning experiences for students. National research has shown TLCs to increase GPA, retention rates, and overall student success. In addition, TLCs also offer a rewarding experience for instructors, who enjoy the opportunity for curricular integration, increased student/faculty interaction, and co-curricular activities.

Themed Learning Communities at NIU

As a large, public, research institution, TLCs offer students the chance for increased interaction with peers and faculty given the small sizes of these communities. In addition, with the university encouraging students to participate in engaged learning opportunities, the Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning (OSEEL) believes it is increasingly important to ensure a sense of connection between students and faculty at NIU. Themed Learning Communities not only facilitate these connections, but develop a structure for students to continually feel engaged in their campus and community.

TLCs came into existence at NIU as a result of the May 2008 strategic plan set forth by the Presidential Task Force on Curricular Innovation, at which point the Office of the Vice Provost began accepting proposals from NIU faculty to create Themed Learning Communities (TLC) for incoming freshmen. In collaboration with the Office of the Vice Provost, and with guidance and direction from Dr. Julia Spears, TLCs were introduced to NIU in fall 2010. TLCs were created to offer incoming freshman a unique opportunity to engage deeply with the course theme, connect learning across the linked courses in collaborative and active ways, develop relationships with peers and faculty, and ease the transition to college. In the sixth year of TLCs, we are entering the fall 2015 semester with 19 TLCs that provide courses to students from all 6 undergraduate colleges.
TLC Instructor Expectations
With such high potential for increasing student success, it is important that TLC instructors are purposeful and calculated in their teachings, assignments, and student interactions. For these reasons and more, it is expected that TLC instructors will observe the following Best Practices. Thus, TLC instructors are expected to:

- Actively seek out connections among the instructional team, students, theme, student learning outcomes (SLOs), and course material;
- Develop integrative assignments that draw not only on the theme of the TLC but also on the concepts being studied in the other TLC courses;
- Maintain regular and open communication with team members regarding teachings, assignments, and co-curricular activities (e.g., bimonthly);
- Maintain regular communication with the Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning (OSEEL), specifically Stephanie Zobac, the Assistant Director;
- Participate in the TLC Faculty Institute in May and attend the fall TLC Faculty meeting (Date TBA);
- Assist in gathering assessment data from students and faculty and returning such data to OSEEL;
- Submit syllabus by August 14, 2015;
- Submit two Integrative Assignments by July 20, 2015;
- Submit funding proposals by July 20, 2015 as well;
- Select one (1) TLC instructor to administer the National Learning Community Survey during the final week of class (computer lab preferable); and
- Ensure that all students are enrolled in all other courses associated with TLC.

TLC Essential Course Elements
The TLCs offered at NIU have a strong focus on integrated course elements. The following are course elements that are required by OSEEL as they are essential for a success:

- Clearly articulate the theme of your TLC;
- Design two integrative assignments that have:
  - Clear Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs);
  - At least one SLO tied to one of the 3 C's (communication, critical thinking, creativity);
  - A rubric for assessing students' work and determining whether students achieve SLOs;
  - An assessment plan;
- Support of the whole student (both academic and social learning emphasized);
- Awareness of best practices in working with freshmen and first-year students (see resources online at [http://www.niu.edu/engagedlearning/themed_learning/resources.shtml](http://www.niu.edu/engagedlearning/themed_learning/resources.shtml)); and
- Mention of the TLC in your syllabus.
Policies
OSEEL continuously develops policies and procedures for the purpose of ensuring the long-term success of the Themed Learning Community program and NIU. With the end goal of increasing student success (e.g., GPA, retention, graduation rates), the following policies are currently in place at NIU:

Effective May 15, 2012

Themed Learning Communities Policy

1. Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) consist of a minimum of two (preferably three) classes that are coordinated around a common theme. The majority of courses that comprise the TLC must satisfy Core Competency or Distributed Studies (humanities, STEM, social science, or interdisciplinary) requirements, thus fulfilling General Education requirements.

2. All TLCs are required to create at least two integrated assignments (i.e., assignments that require students to integrate content and/or skills from two or more disciplines) throughout each semester taught.

3. All faculty teaching in a TLC will have the opportunity to proposals to request additional materials or funds for additional learning experiences for their TLC students (creative projects, webinars, etc.). No proposal is guaranteed funding and there are limitations as to what can be funded.

4. Faculty will be compensated by the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning for teaching the TLC, attending the Faculty Institute, and for their time and collaboration in the development of the integrated assignments. All TLC faculty are expected to communicate regularly with their partner instructors.

5. Themed Learning Communities are a University initiative that require support and collaboration from colleges and departments on campus. While OSEEL can provide stipends for instructors and co-curricular experiences, overall funding of courses must be provided by the college or department in which the course is housed.

Payment Policy

You will be compensated by the Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning for developing and teaching your TLC, and for full collaboration with your TLC instructors and courses.

You will receive the stipend amount specified in your memorandum of understanding for teaching your TLC course. So long as all paperwork is approved and processed by HR prior to the semester’s start, the stipend will be distributed in eight equal parts during the fall semester.

Compensation is provided for:

- Working (on your own schedule) with your partner TLC instructors before fall semester to prepare your TLC;
- Accepting occasional invitations to meet freshmen or their parents at periodic orientations in the summer (subject to your availability);
• Attending professional development opportunities that enhance student engagement in classroom;
• Designing at least two integrated assignments and associated student learning outcomes;
• Working with your TLC instructors during fall semester to coordinate your classes. Regular meetings with your teaching partners are expected (e.g. bi-monthly);
• Teaching your course during fall semester; and,
• Occasionally attending the linked class in your TLC, and accommodating your linked instructor’s attendance at your course.
• No payment will be provided unless the TLC section moves forward. This makes it very important that instructors take a vested interest in assisting with filling these courses.

**Overload Policy**

OSEEL will not overload students into TLC courses. Our goal is to keep these classes small and focused for the benefit of students and instructors. If instructors are aware of students who are interested in signing up for a TLC that is currently closed, a waiting list may be created. Accordingly, if space opens up (an enrolled student drops out of a TLC), the next student on the waitlist will be added to the TLC.

**Enrollment Policy**

Students who enroll in a TLC must remain in all courses associated with that TLC throughout the semester. If a student wants to drop a class, they must drop all courses linked to the TLC.

**Planning Your TLC**

**The TLC Instructional Team**

Instructional teams are comprised of two to four faculty members. Communication between team members is vital to the success of each TLC. It is important that the instructional team works collaboratively throughout the development and execution of the TLC. For this reason, TLC instructors will be asked to collaborate with their “linked” instructors starting with the Faculty Institute and continuing throughout the semester.

The instructional team also works together to create integrative assignments for the TLC. Faculty may use the week-by-week planning worksheet (See Appendix) to develop assignments built around the theme of their TLC while being intentional about the timing and depth of each assignment or activity.

**Communicating with “Linked” Instructors**

Much of the success of TLCs at NIU relies on clear, open and honest communication between instructors of “linked” courses. This ranges from instructors clearly communicating course goals to “linked” instructors to the team developing clear integrative assignments for each course. It also requires that instructors establish preferences and Best Practices for communication throughout the semester to ensure the theme and integrative assignments remain the focus of the TLC.

The following are tips for improving communication between “linked” instructors:
• Ensure that all “linked” instructors have contact information and understand each other’s preferred method of communication (e.g., email, phone);
• Schedule time to meet before and during the semester (e.g., bimonthly) as a team to:
  o Ensure successful completion of integrative assignments;
  o Discuss the progress of each “linked” course;
  o Communicate about co-curricular learning opportunities the TLC is attending;
• Clearly articulate the goals for your course and course outcomes you wish to “link” to other courses. Likewise, identify areas through which you can “link” the other courses into your course;
• Establish a method for providing and receiving honest feedback to continue improving the TLC throughout the semester;
• Balance listening and speaking as both are necessary for successful communication; and
• Stay positive! Themed Learning Communities are a learning experience for the instructors as well as student.

Questions to consider discussing with “linked” instructors might include:

• How will each course incorporate the theme of the TLC?
• How will the courses differ from other courses that are not in a TLC?
• What types of integration are appropriate (e.g., speech, out-of-class experience)?
• How will the TLC advance the curricular theme?
• How are lessons on academic skills grounded in the TLC curricula?
• To what extent will all team members contribute to the first-year experience?

**Twelve Tips for Team Building**

We encourage our TLC instructors to thoughtfully consider how to establish and continuously improve their team to ensure positive experiences for faculty, students, and Peer Leaders. Team building strategies are key to creating successful learning communities.

According to About.com, effective teams incorporate the following twelve Cs into their daily habits:

1. *Clear expectations* – “linked” instructors have clearly communicated and understood all expectations for the TLC;
2. *Context* – “linked” instructors understand why they are participating in the TLC;
3. *Commitment* – all “linked” instructors are committed to the creation of a successful TLC, including the creation of two integrative assignments;
4. *Competence* – “linked” instructors have the knowledge, skill, and ability to successfully facilitate a TLC;
5. *Charter* – “linked” instructors have developed their own mission, vision, and strategies for creating their TLC;
6. *Control* – “linked” instructors recognize they have freedom to take ownership of the TLC, and are accountable for its success;
7. *Collaboration* – “linked” instructors work together effectively and understand their individual roles in the team;
8. *Communication* – is open and clear among “linked” instructors, including openly providing and receiving feedback;
9. *Creative innovation* – “linked” instructors search for creative, unique, and new ideas to bring the theme alive in their “linked” courses;
10. *Consequences* – responsible and accountable to other “linked” instructors on the TLC team;
11. *Coordination* – “linked” instructors remain in communication with OSEEL throughout semester to ensure successful experience for all; and
12. *Cultural change* – “linked” instructors have the ability and power to create cultural change through their courses and co-curricular experiences.

**TLC Opportunities to Consider**
- Funding for out-of-class activities (Please submit TLC Funding Proposal);
- Career/internship workshop tailored to my TLC;
- Service learning component (Contact Nancy Castle – Center for NGO Leadership and Development);
- Short-term service projects (Please see the online resources including the ENGAGE! Database and Student Involvement & Leadership Development);
- Co-curricular campus events and educational opportunities in the community;
- First Year Success Services (Orientation, First & Second Year Experience);
- Common Reading Experience; and
- Presentations on research opportunities at NIU (Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning)

**DEVELOPING INTEGRATIVE ASSIGNMENTS**

**Integrative Assignments (IAs)**

One of the unique features of all NIU TLCs is the requirement of two integrative assignments. By requiring students to apply information from one course within the context of another, integrative assignments encourage students to increase their understanding of course material as well as their ability to apply material in other contexts.

**Integrative Assignment (IA)** – an assignment that requires students to integrate content and/or skills from two or more disciplines in order to address an issue or problem

The benefits of integrative learning are plentiful. By collaborating with “linked” instructors, you can:

- Intentionally plan for “connect-the-dot” learning;
- Foster interdisciplinary linkages;
- Increase recognition of applicability;
- Create a strong foundation of interdisciplinary approaches to relevant issues; and
- Reduce conflicts in assignment scheduling.
When designing integrative assignments, keep in mind "What is the overarching question or the context for this assignment?" or **key course outcome**.

**Key course outcome** – an understanding of a core concept; an ability to solve problems or use particular methods; a recognition of how to use what students are learning in a variety of circumstances; an ability to present understanding in appropriate forms

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**Integrative assignment goal:** create an assignment that requires students to integrate at least one key course outcome from each course in order to address a relevant topic in way that demonstrates understanding. Consider:

1. What are the most critical outcomes from your course?
2. Of those outcomes, which resonate with the outcomes identified by your partner?
3. What topic or question provides a relevant context for an assignment that asks students to integrate these outcomes in order to demonstrate understanding?

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**Designing Integrative Assignments**

For many instructors, integrative assignments are a relatively new concept. This section provides step-by-step instructions for designing a successful integrative assignment. When considering the following steps, take into account the “linked” courses in your TLC.

**Designing an Integrative Assignment**

Modified from the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education

Emily Lardner & Gillies Malnarich, Co-Directors

1. Start by working individually, setting your syllabi aside at first. What do you most want students to learn from your course (or discipline)? Write each outcome on a separate sticky note. Then, prioritize. First, identify what are the most enduring understandings you want students to gain from your course; second, determine what is important for them to know and be able to do; and third, determine what is simply worth their being familiar with.

2. Next, share your goals with your learning community team and lay out your sticky notes on a table. Try to form groupings of similarly-themed outcomes.

3. What is the public issue or question? How will students apply what they are learning to actual problems or questions in the world? Working together, arrange and rearrange your notes, drawing out key ideas and meaningful connections. Using this material, identify one or more provocative questions, or overriding theme(s), that might engage students’ interest and help focus the inquiry and learning in your learning community. Be sure to select someone to take notes.

Here are a few examples:

   How do photography, television, film and video affect how we feel and act?

   How might we minimize the impact of corporate greed and fraud?

   What does it mean to be an American in our highly diverse and multicultural society?

   Whose responsibility is the cleanup of toxic waste?

4. Based on the questions and activities you have developed, now create ideas for an integrative assignment

   a. What are students being asked to integrate from each course? (What specific "big ideas," key practices, or intellectual traits are being brought together for this assignment?)

   b. What will each teacher do within their own course to help students develop the idea, practice, or intellectual trait they identified as important? What will be done to reinforce students’ learning of what the other teachers identified?

   c. What co-curricular resources can you use?

   d. How might you invite students to reflect on their work?

**Timeline for Integrative Assignments**

Purposeful planning will make the integrated assignments more impactful on TLC participants. “Linked” instructors should consider at what points in the academic calendar might they collect information regarding students’ ability to demonstrate integrative learning, and how this information will be collected.

Using the week-by-week calendar tool provided at the Faculty Institute (or available in the Appendix), “linked” instructors should work together to determine:
- Key dates for collecting evidence of students’ ability to demonstrate integrative learning (e.g., assignments);
- Key dates for integrative activities that support or provide context for integrative learning (e.g., co-curricular opportunities);
- Disciplinary assignments or activities that support integrative learning outcomes (to be completed at a later date);
- Opportunities to gather & provide student feedback formally or informally; and
- The level of team communication & collaboration necessary to support this work (e.g., meetings, phone v email, amount time to spend together).

**Example of Integrative Assignments**
The following is an example of one TLC that integrated their assignments in a very purposeful way:

*How Green is Your Paw Print? Reducing Your Carbon Foot Print.*

**GEOG 253, COMS 100, UNIV 101**

**Integrative Assignments**

- UNIV 101 requires a brief 2-minute introduction assignment to prepare students for their introductory speeches in COMS 100. Introductory speeches in COMS 100 will include information on sustainability/the environment studied in GEOG 253.
- UNIV 101 will take students to the library so they are familiar with ways to research information and locate credible sources. The students will then discuss ways to identify credible sources in the COMS 100 course. Finally, they will write a research based paper in GEOG 253 with credible sources on an environmental topic.
- Students will cover content in COMS 100 on speaking to persuade. The students will then listen to or read about a debate based on an environmental issue. Students will write a paper for GEOG 253 on the debate. The students will then give a persuasive speech in COMS 100 on an environmental issue they learned about in GEOG 253.
- Students in COMS 100 will learn about critical listening skills. They will then attend an out of class event, focused on sustainability, and write a paper on the speaker's abilities. Students will go to two out-of-class events, one focused on sustainability, and write reflection papers about the experience as a new college student.
- The final capstone project will take content from all three areas and put it together in student group presentations, as outlined below.

**Student Group Presentations**

- Students will be put together for group presentations, and will decide on an environmental theme from one of their papers in GEOG 253. Based on the theme of this paper students will work together to learn more about how that issue plays out on NIU’s campus. The project will be to research the environmental topic, find out what it looks like at NIU, and make recommendations on how to improve our practices. The recommendations should be student-driven initiatives that have relevance to the campus and could be applied in the immediate future. The presentation is framed as if given to NIU’s Green Team, the task
force on the sustainable campus climate. Students will use their presenting and speaking skills utilized in Coms 100 as a group. The group will work together to create a written.

**Integrated Assignment Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration and Application of Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Conveys a thorough understanding that psychological concepts and theories can be applied in multiple contexts. Connections of psychological concepts to real life scenarios are communicated. Detailed examples and implications of connections are provided. <strong>TLC Students</strong> Material from all three TLC courses is integrated and applied accurately.</td>
<td>Displays an understanding that the psychological concepts can be applied in multiple contexts. Connections to real life scenarios are provided but not fully explained. <strong>TLC Students</strong> Material from all three TLC courses is partially integrated and not applied accurately.</td>
<td>Demonstrates a limited understanding that psychological concepts can be applied to real life scenarios. Examples of applications are not provided. <strong>TLC Students</strong> Material from all three TLC courses is not integrated and not applied accurately.</td>
<td>Conveys a lack of understanding of how psychology concepts can be applied to real life scenarios. Examples of applications are not provided. <strong>TLC Students</strong> Material from all three TLC courses is not integrated and not applied accurately.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessing Integrative Assignments**

There are many questions that instructors can ask about the success of their TLC (i.e., the level which students have integrated materials from "linked" courses). These evaluation questions can be reflected in integrative assignment rubrics or general course assessment tools (mid- and end-of-semester questionnaires, etc).

- Are students integrating their learning experiences and making connections between courses?
- Are students learning content?
- Are students engaged by the Unifying Questions (of the TLC)?
- Are students becoming intentional learners?
- Are students able to assess their own strengths?
- Do students find the feedback on their learning helpful?
Do you as a “linked” instructor have the information necessary to improve teaching and learning?

Which approaches (e.g., assignments, activities) produce the most learning for which students?

(Adapted from “Thinking About the Bundle Program” by IUPUI)

Assessing TLCs at NIU

Assessment of TLCs at NIU is directly aligned with the strategic goal of increasing engaged learning opportunities and experiences for students. TLCs are assessed throughout the semester. Instructors will allow time during one of the TLC courses for students to complete mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluations. In doing so, we achieve a higher participation rate, resulting in more accurate and insightful data to assess. OSEEL also collects additional information from students and faculty such as anecdotal evaluations gathered via email or small groups.

The assessment we conduct is used to produce a program evaluation for the university. By benchmarking the information collected from NIU against the National Survey and Student Engagement (NSSE) data we can gain a better understanding of our program’s strengths and areas for continued growth. We also utilize enrollment data (grades, retention, etc) in order to see how TLC participants compare to students not participating in TLCs at NIU.

This information is shared with faculty, instructors, and other stakeholders at trainings and through communications. OSEEL also uses this data to continue improving our support of TLCs at NIU.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Peer Leaders

Each TLC has the opportunity to have one peer leader assigned to their TLC. TLC team members should strongly consider encouraging a previous TLC student or competent student in their major/department/college to apply to be the Peer Leader for their TLC.

Peer leaders assist TLCs in a variety of ways. Peer leaders:

- Attend a TLC class (one course per week);  
- Coordinate & host study sessions which meet once a week;  
- Follow-up with students: phone calls and/or e-mails – as requested by TLC Instructional Team;  
- Assist with logistics of field trips;  
- Assist with gathering assessment (MAP-Works); and  
- Document field trips (if applicable for TLC) & some classroom settings with provided media (cameras & video cameras).

This is a paid position for an undergraduate student who is interested in working with TLCs. The peer leader will allot 5-7 hours per week for this position and meet with the TLC faculty as needed.
**Expectations for Faculty Working with Peer Leaders**

- Peer leaders are not to be utilized for grading assignments
- Should any issues arise with a peer leader the TLC Instructional Team should be notified as soon as possible
- Maintain communication with your peer leader on a weekly basis outside of class time; email, phone calls, or meetings are acceptable forms of communication

**Funding Requests**

OSEEL coordinates funding proposals for all TLCs interested in additional experiences for students inside or outside the classroom**. A list of proposed activities, proposed budgets, and rationale for the activity is required. The funding request form can be found at [www.tlc.niu.edu](http://www.tlc.niu.edu) under the resources tab. Activities include, but are not limited to, speakers, artistic projects, etc. OSEEL will be available to assist in planning the logistics of out-of-classroom activities, meals, ordering materials, etc.

When filling out the funding request, your TLC team will be asked to answer the following:

- Please indicate how this activity will enhance student engagement in the theme of your learning community.
- What are the intended learning outcomes of this activity for students in your learning community?
- What type of support will you need from the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning to plan this activity?

Please contact Marilyn Lorch (753-8158 or mlorch1@niu.edu) or Patty Lee (753-8154 or patlee@niu.edu) for assistance.

**Please note: Due to budget cuts and the current travel ban, some activities and material costs will be subject to approval by the Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning. Funding is NOT guaranteed.**

**First-Year Success Series**

The First-Year Success Series provides a relatively comprehensive list of all events, speakers, presentations, and additional resources that are available to the NIU campus in the coming year. TLC team members are encouraged to utilize this list when selecting co-curricular experiences for their TLC.


**Classroom Assessment Techniques**

*CATs are spot checks for student understanding that are quick, easy, and effective. Students benefit from the opportunity to check their own comprehension and reorganize their ideas if necessary. These activities are appropriate for initiating, clarifying, and summarizing information at any point in a given class session. TLC team members are encouraged to use any of the following CATs to “check-in” with their TLC students:*

**Assessment of Prior Knowledge, Recall, and Understanding**

*Minute Paper: Assign a Minute Paper during the first or last few minutes of class (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Have students write a paragraph about their understanding of a particular topic or an assignment.*
1. Stop class two or three minutes early and ask students the following two questions (or some variation of them): “What was the most important thing you learned during this class?” and/or “What important question remains unanswered?”

2. Students write their responses on index cards or half-sheets of scrap paper and hand them in.

3. Faculty can quickly find out what students see as the most significant things they are learning and what other questions they have and can then decide whether any changes or adjustment in instruction are needed.

Muddiest Point: Have students describe the Muddiest Point in a lecture, discussion, homework assignment, or field experience in a course that emphasizes integrating, synthesizing, and evaluating information (Angelo & Cross, 1993). This technique will help faculty determine which particular aspects of the course content are most difficult for students to learn.

1. Ask student to jot down a quick response to one question: “What was the muddiest point in__________?”

2. The question could be asked about a homework assignment, a video, a lecture, or some other component of the course.

Focused Listing: Have students identify a web of concepts connected to one point in a Focused Listing (Angelo & Cross, 1993). This listing can help students focus attention on the significant aspects of one theory, person, or concept. This technique will help faculty identify what students think are the most important points related to a given topic and can be given before, during, or after addressing the topic.

1. Identify a single concept, term, name, or principle that you expect students to understand.

2. Have students quickly make a list of related terms that are important for understanding that topic.

3. Give them a time limit or a limit on the number of items they should write – usually two or three minutes or five to ten items are appropriate.

Empty Outlines: To assess how well students have learned course content, give students a partially completed outline on a topic and have them fill in the blank spaces. This will help faculty determine how well students have learned the important aspects of a topic and will help students become more aware of the organization of the main points of the material.

Assessing Higher Order Thinking Skills
(analyses, synthesis, problem solving, application)

Pro and Con Grid: Provide a prompt eliciting thoughtful advantages and disadvantages in relation to an issue or dilemma. Then assign a Pro and Con Grid that allows students to analyze the costs and benefits of an issue (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Concept Map: Have students create a Concept Map that analyzes and synthesizes ideas from readings or discussions (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Afterwards, ask students to post their maps (electronically or physically) for peer feedback. Students can organize their map around one idea or
question. Using this technique will give faculty a visual representation of the associations that students have formed between different concepts.

1. Select a concept that is both important for students to understand and that has a fair number of connections to other concepts.

2. Have students begin by brainstorming a list of terms, phrases, or concepts related to the target concept.

3. Then have students make a drawing or diagram that show the connections between the target concept and other concepts that they have learned.

4. The concept map might look like a wheel with spokes, a geographical map, a flowchart, or some other form of representation.

5. Having a simple example of a concept map using a different concept may be helpful for students who are unfamiliar with the idea of concept mapping.

One-Sentence Summary: This technique involves having students answer the question “Who does what to whom, when, where, how and why?” (WDWWWWH) about a given topic. They must do this in one informative and grammatical sentence (usually a long one). This technique will help faculty find out how well students can concisely and appropriately summarize information on a selected topic.

1. Select an important topic that you expect your students to be able to summarize.

2. Try to answer the WDWWWWH question yourself, as quickly as you can.

3. Give students about twice as much time as it took you to come up with the sentence.

Application Card: Ask students to make an Application Card that presents one possible, real-world application of a principle, theory, or procedure (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Encourage creativity instead of reliance on textbook and lecture examples. This technique will help faculty determine how well students understand specific ideas and will encourage students to connect the concepts with real-life and their own previous knowledge.

1. Choose a principle, generalization, theory, or procedure that students have been exposed to through reading or lecture.

2. Give students an index card and have them write down a possible real-world application for the concept you chose.


Word Journal: Ask students to summarize the lecture in one word. Once the student has written the one-word summary on a sheet of paper, allow 4-5 minutes for students to write a short paragraph explaining the word selection. You might also have students share their word and explanation with a partner.
Support from OSEEL

The Office of Student Engagement & Experiential Learning creates the framework for each Instructional Team to be successful in planning their unique TLC. The Faculty Institute, which takes place in May, is a two-day introduction and training opportunity for faculty members to gain in-depth knowledge of the Themed Learning Community initiative. It also allows Instructional Teams to work collaboratively in developing their individual syllabi and integrated assignments. OSEEL also coordinates a brief follow-up training in mid-August.

Additional support is always available to Instructional Teams through OSEEL. Contact us at:

OSEEL
Altgeld 100
Phone: 815-753-8154
Email: TLC@niu.edu
## Week-By-Week Planning Calendar

### Week-by-week TLC Planning Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TLC TITLE:</th>
<th>Key Assignments or Experiences</th>
<th>Informal Assessment</th>
<th>Team Collaboration</th>
<th>Course 1</th>
<th>Course 2</th>
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Notes:
- 11/24: Thanksgiving
- 12/8: Finals