LEAP for Instructors: Using AAC&U Resources for Effective Course Design
Case Study 1: Rebecca Dolinsky

Dr. Rebecca Dolinsky worked as a non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty member on a per-course contract teaching sociology at a private institution in the mid-Atlantic region from 2011 to 2013. The only professional development made readily available to her in this position was a workshop for other adjuncts (known as “affiliates”). The workshop briefly introduced available student services and basic IT references. Dolinsky reflects that issues of pedagogy, teaching, and learning were presented through “what-if” scenarios in this workshop—where attendees participated in group work, addressing classroom scenarios that felt familiar, yet not terribly challenging. Although additional faculty development opportunities were occasionally open to adjunct professors at this institution, they were often scheduled in the middle of the typical work day, which made it impossible for her to attend due to her full-time, off-campus position, and never included additional compensation. Dolinsky found initially that beyond basic syllabi preparation, course prep, and grading, her energy as an adjunct was given to things like classroom technology malfunctions and commuting to campus, with little time left over to consider alignment between her curriculum, her students’ needs, and her course outcomes. Further, she spent a lot of time answering student emails, which generally served as her “office hours.” Dolinsky also participated in co-curricular activities led by students—a wonderful set of experiences that were typically unacknowledged by the institution.

While her department chair was kind, she did not take an active role in addressing the difficulties surrounding the adjunct experience. There was also little space for discussion about problems within the department or how to align, develop, and deliver the curriculum. Upon inheriting one of her courses, Dolinsky discovered that her predecessor had actually designed the course around service learning, a High-Impact Practice. However, Dolinsky had no prior experience or training with service learning communities. Although there was a well-developed service learning tradition at this institution, Dolinsky did not find readily available resources and support surrounding this work, nor did she have the time or connections to identify valid and appropriate service opportunities in a new community. As a result, Dolinsky chose to take a more manageable, but equally high-impact route in which her students would be challenged to think critically, reflect on their own diversity, genders, and sexual identities in a larger context, and develop their skills as writers.

Despite a lack of connectedness to other faculty work or institutional learning outcomes, Dolinsky opted at this point to leverage her connection and knowledge of AAC&U’s work to guide and improve her teaching. Dolinsky proceeded to design her class as a writing intensive course focused on two Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs), measured through the application of selected VALUE rubrics.
to students’ written work. Unlike in the past, she chose to completely forgo the use of multiple choice exams as irrelevant to her identified learning outcomes: written communication and critical thinking.

From this point on, Dolinsky used a backward design approach* to design her courses. She started with the selection of 2-3 ELOs that would be the central features of her course. These outcomes determined the structure of students’ writing assignments. She then tailored the relevant VALUE rubrics to each assignment, adding them to both the syllabus and the expectations portion of each course assignment. Dolinsky found that structuring her courses this way helped to identify gaps in student work and pushed them to sharpen their critical thinking and writing skills. One of her most gratifying moments occurred in her final class, when a student approached her and told her how this course, more than any other she had taken at any institution, had made her a better writer.

Dolinsky’s advice to other adjuncts is straightforward: use resources like the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, VALUE rubrics, and the list of High-Impact Practices to make your work easier and to improve your teaching and your students’ learning. Consider what you would like students to get out of your course and what is manageable (with the resources at hand, your current course load/workload, etc.). Decide which VALUE rubrics speak to your course outcomes and what learning level seems appropriate for your course, and extract the VALUE language you think would best fit into your syllabus. You can simply copy, paste, and modify. These resources can serve as a guide for course design, and it can be done in a short amount of time, while offering value for your students. You may not receive support from the department you’re teaching in or the institution you’re working for, but you can still deeply affect the level of student learning in your courses.

* For more information on using a backward design approach, see http://www.deefinkandassociates.com/GuidetoCourseDesignAug05.pdf