

Pimp My Pedagogy

By Angie O’Nan ’12

There’s a creative movement taking shape among USI’s faculty; they’re finding imaginative means through which to deepen student knowledge. From purifying water to swimming with sharks, USI’s professors are applying the University’s vision and “*shaping the future through learning and innovation.*”



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Art: Heather Landry



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Photo: Jenna Citrus



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1. Living Literature

Dr. Amy Montz, assistant professor of English, wants to make literature come alive for her students, so in her multi-media project for her Jane Austen class, that’s exactly what happens. Rather than merely reading *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*, Montz transports students back in time to the era of Austen’s novels by having them needlepoint, prepare 200-year-old recipes and build model ships. “This interdisciplinary approach teaches students that literature is a living, breathing object, written by living, breathing people,” Montz said.

2. Assessing the Undead

In a world overrun by zombies, it’s up to Dr. Richard Bennett’s biology students to save humanity. At least that’s the story-world the assistant professor of biology has designed for his basic biology course. Students follow the efforts of two characters working for the International Network to Eliminate Zombies. At the beginning of each semester, Bennett provides a brief prologue providing students with the zombie backstory. As the course progresses, students gain new elements of the story. “Some of the concepts we teach in biology can be a little daunting,” Bennett said. “Instead of simply answering questions about what a Biuret assay is used for, students are given assay results performed on fluids collected from zombies, and asked to answer questions about the results.”

3. The Power of Physics

How often do students get to bust a cinder block on their professor’s head? Every semester, if you’re in Dr. Kent Scheller’s physics class. Demonstrating the concept of mass, Scheller, associate professor of physics, places a 30-pound cinder block on his head and asks a student to break the block by driving a nail through it. The demonstration allows students to see and feel the concept, rather than simply read about it. As for Scheller, he gets a sense of relief when students don’t miss the block.

4. Shark Week

The classroom goes under the sea when Dr. Brent Summers, associate professor of biology, ships his marine biology class to Belize and the Caribbean, where they spend a week snorkeling among nurse sharks, moray eels and sea turtles. Summers believes that his students’ ecological immersion not only provides a lifelong memory, but deepens their knowledge more than text books, lectures or films. “I can describe in detail how a green sea turtle feeds in the wild, but until the students actually swim with and directly observe the feeding behavior, they really cannot know the full extent of the behavior,” he said. The experience builds students’ knowledge and confidence. After all, it takes courage to snorkel at night alongside sharks and eels with only an underwater flashlight. A bonus is that students leave with a deeper understanding of the cultures of Belize and the Caribbean.

5. Housing Art

Rarely has a house served as an art installation for a professional artist — let alone students — but Dr. Hilary Braysmith, associate professor of art history, wanted students to have that opportunity. They transformed a structurally sound, but soon to-be-demolished house into an “art house” infused with bold geometric illusions, live models that “vanished” into striped walls and repurposed wooden pallets that emulated Vincent van Gogh’s “The Starry Night.” The project served to bring a “living work of art” into the community, Braysmith said. “The fun part for me and the students was imagining the possibilities.”

6. Engaging Avatars

Using a program called GoAnimate, Heather Schmuck, clinical assistant professor of radiologic and imaging sciences, teaches her students the art of patient care by having them design avatars. Partnering entry-level students with upper-level students, the duos create short videos featuring avatars to increase confidence when communicating with patients. “The seasoned students challenge new students by creating a dynamic character and clinical history that prods the new students to ask questions, helping them practice their communication skills,” Schmuck said.

7. Engineering Clean Water

Dr. Jason Hill, assistant professor of engineering, noticed his environmental engineering students were more excited in lectures than labs, so he upended things by tossing out the traditional lab experiments and replacing them with real-life, problem-based issues. “I challenged students to design a system that made Ohio River water drinkable,” he said. Teams collected river water and created competing treatment systems to produce the purest water. The approach reinforces lecture material while increasing students’ enthusiasm in the labs.

8. Budgeting Battles

Balancing the national budget isn’t fun unless you’re a student in Dr. Nicholas LaRowe’s political science class, where the assistant professor has found a way to make the task entertaining. “Budgeting doesn’t draw the immediate interest or attention as, say, gun policy or same-sex marriage, yet it’s a quintessential example of what politics is,” he said. Role-playing Congress, students barter, haggle and cajole to find a way to fit their programs into the national budget. “This gives them an appreciation that limited resources means tough choices and tradeoffs, and an understanding for the messy, give-and-take nature of legislating.”