Director’s Welcome
Dr. Josh Eyler, CTE Director & Adjunct Associate Professor of Humanities

This semester has truly been an exciting one! In addition to our well-attended Symposium on Teaching and Learning in January (for more, see page 2), we are now settling into Herring 129, which is currently home to both the CTE and the Program in Writing and Communication. We are working to transform it into an experimental classroom as well as a space for our workshops and other events. Several new programs launched this semester, including the CTE’s first reading group, which focused on How Learning Works by Susan Ambrose, et. al. (Jossey-Bass, 2010). We had a core group of 20 faculty and graduate students participate in this series, and we’ll continue running a new reading group every spring. Finally, we recently made our annual presentation to the CTE’s Advisory Board. In preparation for this meeting, we had the opportunity to analyze all of the data on our programs and services that have amassed since the CTE’s inception in the fall of 2012.

Between September 2012 and March 2015, 34% of all instructors at Rice (28% of tenured/tenure-track faculty and 46% of NTT faculty) have interacted with the CTE at some level.

We are, of course, delighted by that measure of our impact, but it is really a testament to the rich teaching environment at this university and the dedication to students displayed by all of you in your daily work. We thank you for this level of support, and we encourage you to contact us at any time if you want to chat about your courses or just want to stop by to check out our new location. As always, please do not hesitate to email me at jeyler@rice.edu with any questions or comments.

What I’m Reading
Dr. Caleb McDaniel, CTE Faculty Fellow & Assistant Professor of History

Last winter break, while working on a complete redesign of my U.S. history survey course, I had the pleasure of reading the second edition of Understanding by Design, a classic pedagogy text by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. Fondren’s copy, currently on my desk, is now festooned with little pink Post-It notes marking dozens of pages I hope to return to in the future.

Wiggins and McTighe are most famous for advocating what they call “backward design,” the process of designing courses by first deciding on the primary understandings you want students to leave with, and then filling in teaching and assessment activities designed solely with those goals in mind. I was familiar with the term “backward design,” which may look on first reading like simple common sense. But I was not prepared for how radically this approach changed my thinking about course design, assessment, and teaching strategies.

In particular, the book helped me to prioritize my objectives, so that I could fill my schedule with readings and activities that would meet those objectives; instead of planning a course by writing out all the days the class will meet and determining when tests and readings will be. Wiggins and McTighe help you to build a class calendar and syllabus that reflect your goals. Second, the book helped me rethink the purpose of assessment, and it is brimming with ideas for authentic assignments that help students transfer knowledge into unfamiliar settings. Finally, the book raised my awareness of what the authors call the “Expert Blindspot” that often gets in the way of good teaching; because we have been trained by our disciplines to think a certain way, we often forget how foreign these (for us) natural ways of thinking are to our students.

In short, I strongly recommend Understanding by Design to teachers at all levels and in all disciplines. Go ahead and recall it from the library; I will happily remove my many bookmarks and pass this treasure on to you.
Recap: 2015 Symposium on Teaching and Learning

On Friday, January 16th, we hosted our 2nd Annual Symposium on Teaching and Learning at Rice. Like last year, the event included panels of Rice faculty, small group lunch conversations, and a keynote by an outside expert on pedagogy. Unlike last year, however, we also invited undergraduate and graduate students to participate in our panels, and ended the day with teaching demonstrations by Rice faculty.

Though attendees were pleased with all aspects of this year’s event, the consistently effusive praise we received for our keynote speaker, Ed Prather, was notable. As the Executive Director of the Center for Astronomy Education at the University of Arizona and 2011 winner of the American Association of Physics Teachers’ Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Physics Teaching, Ed was able to lead attendees through a 90-minute interactive session about both the results and implications of his research on active pedagogy in large, introductory, general education courses.

He began by introducing attendees to the basic principles of active pedagogy, followed with a brief presentation of the research he has conducted to validate these approaches, and ended with a fully interactive, authentic astronomy lesson.

“I had not anticipated just how much information I would glean from this session and was pleasantly surprised by how much I learned. The speaker lectured for a short time, then dove into examples that immediately required audience participation—in turn demonstrating his powerful methods of teaching.”

“The weekend after the symposium I went to Staples and made copies of the 'ABCD' sheets to use in my class on Monday.”

—Anonymous feedback

“Teaching Matters”

FACULTY-LED FORUMS ON TEACHING AT RICE

After a successful launch in fall 2014, Rice’s “Teaching Matters” program was extended, with great success, into the spring semester. The program creates a space for faculty to join informal, interdisciplinary conversations about teaching at Rice, which has been the most common request the CTE has received from faculty over the past three years.

The CTE hosts faculty for lunch at least twice a semester, inviting two well-respected teachers from across campus to guide the conversation. Join your colleagues next fall for new topics and continued discussion (schedule will be posted to cte.rice.edu).

Teaching Tip: The Last Day of Class

In many ways, the last day you meet with students in your courses is as important as the very first day. The last day offers a chance for students to reflect on the learning that has taken place over the course of the semester, and provides an effective conclusion to the work you have been doing together.

Consider these ideas for your last day of class—all of which are ready to go with minimal prep time.

1. Select several of the learning goals for the course that you laid out in your syllabus and ask students to discuss how they have met these goals.

2. Talk with students about the ways in which the material they have learned in your course will be applicable in other courses, in the discipline as a whole, or in their time after Rice.

3. Ask for informal feedback about the course—this can be done anonymously in low-tech ways (paper & pen) or using methods that engage technology more readily (e.g., polleverywhere.com).

In short, because of the end-of-semester rush, it can be tempting to use the last day as one more opportunity to work with course content, but doing so misses out on the chance to have students reflect on their learning and to place the course in a broader disciplinary context.