Our Radical Shift in Teaching Strategy
A Tale of Two Criminal Justice Professors Who Cured Rampant Student Apathy
Shawn Bushway, Janet Stamatel, and Bill Roberson

What happens when the course you're teaching is just not working? Is it really possible that your students are all that unmotivated and unwilling to learn? Do you feel as though you're facing a choice between dumbing down your classes or accepting a lifetime of "below average" teaching evaluations? If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. This is the story of two professors of Criminal Justice, Shawn Bushway (University at Albany) and Janet Stamatel (now at University of Kentucky), who made the bold move to radically overhaul their teaching. The outcomes of these efforts surprised even the most skeptical among us. *(The authors will present a two-part workshop on their experiences—and the method used—during the upcoming ASC conference. See the postscript at the end of this article for details.)*

One journey to substantive change
We'll start our story with Shawn, who hit the wall with his teaching when he first arrived at UAlbany from the University of Maryland.

> I taught an upper level undergraduate class for 20 juniors and seniors on economics and crime in my first semester at UAlbany, and I had an abysmal overall teaching evaluation for the course (a 2 out of 5). At the end of my second year, my dean suggested I delay my promotion case because of poor teaching. I was more than a little frustrated.   I had an excellent research portfolio, and I had figured out over time how to be successful in the classroom at my previous university. But what worked at Maryland didn't work at Albany, even though I was well prepared and my class content met the approval of my colleagues. I simply couldn't get the majority of my students to engage. My classes were intellectually demanding, which I liked, but tense and unpleasant, which I didn't.

In summer of 2008 Shawn turned to UAlbany's teaching center for some new ideas. Through a review of his course evaluations and a conversation with Bill Roberson, the center's director, here's what he came to realize: 1) The difficulty of the course content was not the problem. The way in which students experienced the content was more important for student engagement than the nature of the content, itself. 2) Shawn's "teaching personality" was not an issue. He did not need special "teaching DNA" to be an effective teacher; what he needed was a more focused method. 3) Shawn's students admired him from a respectful distance, and saw the course as an abstract, academic exercise rather than as a concrete opportunity to act in ways that mattered to them. 4) Shawn's students would never be able to achieve his demanding intellectual goals unless he could get them to prepare for class.

The consultant then handed Shawn a copy of a book called *Team-Based Learning*, by Larry Michaelsen: "Not everybody is ready for this," he said, "but I think YOU are." The author, Shawn later learned, is a professor of organizational psychology who spent years trying to solve the problem of how to engage and challenge students more meaningfully. Shawn was immediately suspicious of the title. It echoed those warm fuzzies that make all left-brained professors uncomfortable. Seeing the cloud over Shawn's face, the consultant waved him

off, "Don't worry, it's not what you think. It's really about changing the goal of the course. Instead of memorizing content your students need to start using that content to make concrete decisions."

Shawn liked the sound of that—he had already tried "clicker" techniques in classes before, asking students to apply course concepts to assess new situations. He also liked that there was a book, with evaluations, describing the technique. He read the book in one night and was hooked on the idea. We'll get to a description of the method in a bit...but first let's check in with Janet on how she came to the same point in her thinking.

A Different Journey
Janet's teaching evaluations were consistently high—so, as a pre-tenure faculty member, why bother to change? She taught in a lecture-discussion format, was inventive in her efforts to get her students to participate, and was acknowledged by colleagues to be a highly effective teacher. But for Janet there was something missing. Overall performance of her students was disappointing, and her high expectations were continually frustrated by student indifference. She needed to shake things up, even if she risked losing some shine from her reputation.

> I was growing increasingly unhappy with my classes. My students were bored. The course evaluation item "stimulated your interest in course material" consistently ranked the lowest of all of my evaluation items. This was frustrating because I was teaching material that I found extremely interesting; but I had to admit that I was getting bored as well. To make matters worse, students were unprepared for class and the discussions were becoming painful. I found myself lecturing just to fill the time, and I was reluctant to use quizzes to make them read. But then I would get final exam essays that were so completely off topic that I wondered what class these students had taken. Finally, only two-thirds to three-fourths of enrolled students ever attended class. At first I wasn't concerned, since these were adults who should be responsible for their own learning; however, many students who had sporadic attendance still passed the course. I began to question the value of what was happening in class.

Originally Janet had no plans to radically change her teaching, but she started attending workshops at the UAlbany's teaching center, looking for ideas on how to alleviate her frustrations. In one workshop she encountered the "Team-Based Learning" model mentioned above and, like Shawn, she was attracted to what it seemed to promise. In 2009 she decided to experiment with one of her courses.

What is Team-Based Learning?
Team-Based Learning (TBL) as conceived by Larry Michaelsen (2004) is rooted in what actually motivates adult learners. Rather than coercing students to "do what good students do" (come to class, pay attention, take notes, etc.), TBL structures student work around specific, visible, concrete, public decisions. The quality of those decisions depends on how well students have processed course content. Reading and studying are no longer empty behaviors or abstract exercises: they are a means to an immediate end. A permanent team structure gives students time to learn to make decisions together, an essential condition for requiring them to perform at higher cognitive levels. The key to an effective TBL course is

task design in the form of a decision. The main driver of the method is frequent, immediate feedback on everything students decide—whether as individuals or in teams.

The Team-Based Learning Sequence

A Team-Based Learning course will have 4-7 instructional units. For each unit, here is the sequence over 2-4 class meetings:

    1) A substantial reading assignment (outside of class)

    2) Readiness Assurance Process to assess basic student grasp of main ideas (in class)

    3) Clarification of lingering confusion (in class)

    4) Team applications using the material to delve more deeply into complex ideas (in class)

    5) Assessment of learning (individual and/or team assignments) (in or outside of class)

    6) Debrief/summary (in class)

The Role of Readiness Assurance

The Readiness Assurance Process (RAP) is the first step in team development. Early in each unit students take an individual, multiple choice, Readiness Assessment Test (RAT) to measure their understanding of the assigned content. Immediately afterward the Team takes the same test for a team score. Both components factor into students' grades. The RATs ensure that students get immediate feedback on their initial understanding, to correct any errors. This process has a double psychological function. First, the Individual RAT ensures that students do not use their teams to cover over individual failure to prepare. Second, the Team RAT requires the team to practice its decision-making from the very beginning of the course.

First Reaction: Janet

Janet's initial adaptation of the method was overwhelmingly positive. She recalls being surprised by how quickly the changes affected student behavior.

> The problem with attendance disappeared immediately. My students actually wanted to come to class, not just because of the RAP, but because the course was engaging. The high energy from TBL was genuinely fun for both the students and me. They were too busy thinking and discussing to play on their smart phones or watch the clock. The time went by so quickly that they never thought about how hard they were working.

An even greater surprise was the new level of student preparation. Janet found that nearly all students prepared for every class. This was due in part to the RAP, but also to positive peer pressure. Students did not want to be their team's weakest link. It was OK, they learned, not to score well if they were prepared, but it was _not_ OK to weigh the team down by being unprepared. "After the first day of class," Janet recalls, "I never had to cajole students to do the reading." Students had learned to hold themselves and each other accountable.

Janet indicated one more unexpected but welcome outcome: "visible learning." "You can see the students thinking! The team discussions allow you to watch everyone wrestle with

the material, and then you can incorporate their struggles into your lectures and activities. It's enlightening to learn very specifically about what they find easy or difficult to understand."

A final pay-off for Janet was how her TBL course introduced skill development in a way that balanced with the coverage of content. Her TBL students were reading, writing, and speaking much more often than in her traditional classes. And in addition to developing critical thinking skills, they were practicing their interpersonal skills—cooperation, negotiation, decision-making, persuasion, inclusion, mediation, etc.—on a daily basis.

First Reaction: Shawn
Shawn observed during the TBL implementation how hard students began to work in his undergraduate course. Students self-reported that they were spending on average 4-5 hours a week outside of class, against a campus undergraduate average of 2-3. The RAP was providing incentives for students to prepare and the Team RAT especially helped them deepen their understanding of important concepts. Once the students got the basic concepts, they moved into advanced discussions and could read more challenging articles. The difficult content was no longer a stumbling block:

> The course included micro-economics. I actually got these non-economics majors(!) to read and understand real academic papers by real economists. Best of all, they got excited about it. The first half of the course concentrated on illegal markets (primarily drug markets) and the second half focused on the economic perspective on organized crime. By the end of the course most of these undergraduate criminology students were able to apply the concepts of microeconomics to drug markets and the mafia in astute and creative ways.

The students were no longer simply becoming familiar with a few economic concepts; they could now use those concepts to analyze and assess new situations. The final exam asked students to conduct an economic analysis of a scene from the movie *Untouchables*, in which Al Capone kills one of the mobsters at dinner with a baseball bat. To Shawn's amazement, the majority of students were able to analyze the development of the mob during Prohibition with precision and insight, and to reach sophisticated conclusions about how the film's portrayal fit within the framework of a specific economic model.

Incidentally, by the end of this first implementation Shawn saw his teaching evaluations jump to 4+ (out of 5). Since adopting TBL his overall scores for his undergraduate course have never fallen below 4, and recently his students rated him a rare 5 overall, the highest possible score for a professor. The effect of TBL on Shawn's graduate courses has been developing more slowly, but those ratings, too, are steadily climbing as he continues to refine the method for different types of students.

Shawn and Janet's Final Report: The Journey Continues
We don't want to leave you with the impression that it was all easy. This is a work in progress, and we face a variety of ongoing challenges. Teaching with TBL requires considerably more up-front planning and organization. You can't just wing it and expect it to work. Creating effective application tasks is labor intensive—and these do not always go

as planned. There is also more assessment to manage and more grades to track. Writing good multiple choice questions is especially difficult and time-consuming at first, but these, as well as the application tasks, can be recycled in future iterations of the course.

Another challenge is being prepared for those students who will not respond well (especially at first) to this approach. TBL pushes students outside of their comfort zones. Many students—and often it's the "A" students— are still what William Perry calls "dualists" who think in terms of "right" and "wrong," and who think that their goal is just to write down and memorize what the professors says (1970). When this is not possible because the professor does not lecture much, some of them will express their displeasure, and complain that you are "not teaching." It's important to have clear support from your chair and dean, particularly if you are untenured—Shawn and Janet both had the explicit support of their dean in this endeavor. It is also helpful to do this with colleagues. Once students experience TBL, they prefer the approach, and become enthusiastic supporters in other classes.

Aside from these challenges, we have to state unequivocally that TBL has been a success for both of us, and provides clear responses to those two frustrating questions at the beginning of the article. *Is it really possible that your students are all that unmotivated and unwilling to learn?* It turns out that our students (and we're working with the same population as before) are highly motivated. We had no idea how engaged and willing they could be. *Do you feel as though you're facing a choice between dumbing down your classes or accepting a lifetime of "below average" teaching evaluations?* This question, we have learned, poses a false dilemma. Our courses are much harder now than they were before. Our students are performing at a higher level than we ever believed possible. And both of us are getting consistently high teaching evaluations. We're sold. And we invite our colleagues across the country to join us on this exciting journey!!

Join us for a workshop at the 2011 ASC Meeting
All 3 authors will be facilitating a two-part session on the Michaelsen method of Team-Based Learning in Washington, November 16-19. We invite interested members to join us to experience first-hand what a TBL class looks and feels like.

Shaking up the Criminal Justice Classroom with Team-Based Learning
Ever been frustrated by passive students who do not master the major concepts you are teaching? Team-Based Learning (TBL) is an innovative, theoretically-informed instructional method developed by organizational psychology professor Larry K. Michaelsen to improve critical thinking and encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning. The method has been shown to improve learning outcomes at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and in classes as small as 5 and as large as 200+. Plus, it makes teaching more fun and rewarding!
Part One: An Example of Team-Based Learning
Part Two: Key Components of Team-Based Learning

Michaelsen, L. K., Knight, A.B., Fink, L.D. (2004). *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups in College Teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Perry, W. G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

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