

## PSN Newsletter #4

July 2004



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### The Marking Edition

For a change of pace, this month's edition has a theme – Marking. I've included some items about marking and exams (including one I didn't have to write), the Thought for the Month is about marking, there's a joke about a mark, it's pretty much all marking this month. And it's two pages - you'll have to print double sided this time.

### Grading of students

By Haley Jones from ANU (Hooray! Contributions from others – Ed)

Having just completed mid-year exams, the issue of assessment is a topic of hot conversation around my Faculty at the moment. We run on a system of 50/60/70/80 for P/C/D/HD, respectively. Many (including myself) are of the opinion that 80 is too low for an HD. I am hoping that there may be an enlightened push for us to move back to the 50/65/75/85 system. For example, instead of 42% HDs (very top-heavy) with the 80% cut-off, with the 85% cut-off, I would have had only 12.5% HDs - a much more "acceptable" figure.

The issue of assessment has been one that I have grappled with since beginning my teaching a couple of years ago. There is one mode of thought which says that grades should match a certain distribution (the infamous Bell-curve) and another mode which says that we should let the grades fall where they land. Particularly in small classes, there is a high likelihood of large variations from year to year, depending upon the student cohort. I am not sure that the two modes will ever reach agreement. I am definitely in the latter mode...

### AAEE2004 Workshop

Initial feedback from the organisers of this year's AAEE conference in Toowoomba is that we've got a workshop session on the Monday afternoon to discuss issues relevant to us new academics. Not only is this a fine opportunity to share ideas and concerns, it also makes it much easier for us to all group together to go out for dinner on Monday night. If you're going to be at the conference, put the Monday dinner in your diary, and if you're not, think of the question you'd like discussed in your absence.

And some sneak info on next year's conference, so you can plan and budget: most likely it will be in Sydney, but you didn't hear it from me.

### Exam Response Competition

I don't know how you guys did, but I actually had a couple of really funny things appear in exams that I marked. Some were intentional, others weren't, but they all made me laugh – and we all know we need a laugh while we're marking.

So in honour of this, I'm announcing the first ever PSN competition – the Funniest Exam Response Competition. Send your humorous exam responses to the organisers by August 1<sup>st</sup>, and you're in the running. As well as the glory involved, the winner will be bought a drink or two at the PSN dinner at AAEE, or equivalent for those that don't drink / aren't attending / etc.

## Guru of the Month #1 Online

Okay, so those of you who are on our email list would know this, but for the rest of our readers out there, our first Guru of the Month went online at our website (<http://www.aee.com.au/networks/psn/>) in late June. David Lowe from UTS is the Guru in question, and he offers some really good insights, so click on the bookmark in your browser there and take advantage of his wisdom.

We have a couple of other gurus in the pipeline, but if you have anyone you know who would make a good guru, or someone you don't know that you want us to chase anyway, drop us a line and let us know.

## A Joke about a Mark

(This version taken from <http://www.tallrite.com/LightRelief/engineers.htm>)

There was an engineer who had an exceptional gift for fixing all things mechanical. After serving his company loyally for over 30 years, he happily retired. Several years later the company contacted him regarding a seemingly impossible problem they were having with one of their multi-million dollar machines.

They had tried everything and everyone else to get the machine to work but to no avail. In desperation, they called on the retired engineer who had solved so many of their problems in the past.

The engineer reluctantly took the challenge. He spent a day studying the huge machine. At the end of the day, he marked a small "x" in chalk on a particular component of the machine and stated, "This is where your problem is."

The part was replaced and the machine worked perfectly again.

The company received a bill for \$50,000 from the engineer for his service. They demanded an itemized accounting of his charges.

The engineer responded briefly:

One chalk mark \$ 1. Knowing where to put it \$49,999.

It was paid in full and the engineer retired again in peace.

## Thought for the month:

*"You can have the best thermometer in the world, but it won't actually change the temperature."*

- Unknown

Marking is a key focus of teaching. For students it seems to be the primary motivating factor, and it's definitely the case for some of our colleagues too. Formative and summative assessment serve two vastly different purposes, and unless you're really clued about it, an examination really doesn't do much to actually promote learning. So whilst marking is important, don't forget that it's the learning that counts.

## Watchout for the Avalanche

Well, as we all know, we've finished exams, and the ordeal of marking, and there are now four clear weeks before semester two begins. This of course means that we're inundated with an avalanche of things to do in our copious "free time" – because it's not like we have next semester to prepare for, research to actually write up, and maybe – just maybe – a chance to relax and catch our breath. Try not to get buried under during the next month.

Euan Lindsay & Marcin Ziemski  
Organisers