



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN • WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Take a Seat: Take a Stand!

In the traditional "lecture-discussion" approach, the shift from one mode to the other is too seldom evident to more than a handful of students. Most continue to gaze idly as teacher-talk gives way to an interchange between the instructor and a few of their more vocal counterparts.

Why such passivity? Partly, I suppose, because the customary "Any questions?" hardly invites involvement. But more, I believe, because many undergraduates, particularly in community colleges, are afraid to test their ability to defend positions on age-old disputes in the humanities and social sciences.

Clearly this is true of most of the students who have ventured into my sections of Introduction to Philosophy. Heading for the back of the room on the first day of class, they make it clear that they would far prefer quiet notetaking (or snoozing) to active engagement with philosophical issues.

My observations on their choice of chairs, however, suggested a technique I have found useful in getting them more involved. What I have done is simply rearrange student desks and make use of the chalkboards which line the classroom so that *every student takes a stand simply by taking a seat*. Once students have defined a viewpoint, of course, they are quite literally positioned to defend it.



Sample Issue

Science and the Search for Ultimate Truth

Early in the quarter we read excerpts from an essay by American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce. Extolling scientific reasoning over more common ways of settling opinion, like appeals to personal prejudice or the force of authority, Peirce slyly but repeatedly injects digs at religious faith into his argument: "[I]f it be true that death is annihilation, then the man who believes that he will certainly go to heaven when he dies, provided he has fulfilled certain simple observances in this life, has a cheap pleasure which will not be followed by the least disappointment." On no subject do most of my students claim to feel more passionate than

on religion, but Peirce's sarcasm usually passes them by...until I demand they take a stand (or a seat) on it.

A New Classroom Configuration

The day after students have read and reviewed the Peirce selection, my classroom takes on a new look. Chairs are divided into three clusters, each grouped beneath a sign on the chalkboard: (1) Sit up here if you can defend your belief in God on what Peirce would consider scientific grounds. (2) Sit back here if your faith in God rests on what Peirce would consider personal prejudice or appeals to authority. (3) Sit over here if you don't believe in God or doubt that God exists.

Everyone in class has now taken a stand on a crucial issue of modern philosophy: Can scientific reasoning resolve metaphysical questions? Perhaps a third of the students bravely wait under the first banner. Most of the others have settled uneasily under the second. Both groups glower at the few who have chosen option three.

Defending a Stand (Seat)

Having taken their stands, they must now defend them. To maintain universal participation, I preface each phase of the discussion by requiring that defense in writing. The scientific believers have the most obvious task: explain the basis for your faith. Once they present their positions, the skeptics are invited to counterattack. If Peirce is right that science is public truth, "such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same," the scientific believers have a problem.

The group in back is now on edge, and rightly so. The question they must address is this: Peirce calls your crowd ostriches who hide their heads in the sand to avoid facing reality, intellectual slaves who let others think for them, fools who cannot put two and two together for themselves; has he discovered the truth about you?

Chairs (and Minds) Begin to Move

By this time students are not only shifting uneasily in their seats but actively questioning the stands which put them there. Some actually move their desks to



another section of the room. Even more begin to question Peirce's unqualified endorsement of science as the sole method of seeking truth. A simple room rearrangement has brought to life a central issue of epistemology which will occupy the class for much of the quarter.

Hidden Benefits of the Exercise

Raising questions about serious issues which affect students' sense of themselves and their place in the world (and what issue does that more than the question of God's existence?) is necessarily touchy. Ordinarily, those few students willing to voice unpopular opinions suffer for them. But when every student is forced to take a stand, and no stand emerges as the clearly "correct" one, pressure to conform gives way to the challenge of critical thought. In addition, critical thinking is now associated not with tense confrontations but with the fun of shifting chairs, a spirit of levity the instructor can easily reinforce. (I like to close the day's discussion of Peirce by raising the projection screen I've pulled down to conceal the chalkboard annotation behind my own chair: Sit up here if you ARE God.)



Not every classroom at Atlanta Metropolitan College has as many chalkboards as the one in which I prefer to teach philosophy, and I have to fight the math instructors for it. In other classes here, teachers sometimes adapt the technique with hand-lettered posters directing students to particular areas of a classroom, but chalkboard directions are quicker and easier. Still, set-up time is a concern. Ideally, the room should be ready before most students arrive for class, not always an easy task when back-to-back scheduling is the norm. Probably the best room is one with plenty of desks and chalkboards but no class scheduled during the previous hour. I've found that repeatedly leaving my chairs in weird arrangements encourages other instructors—especially the math faculty—to request new room assignments, as far from humanities classes as possible!

Ron Chandonia, *Associate Professor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Atlanta Metropolitan College, 1630 Stewart Avenue, S.W., Atlanta, GA 30310.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

September 20, 1991, Vol. XIII, No. 20
©The University of Texas at Austin, 1991
Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER
institutions for their own personnel.

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms. ISSN 0199-106X.