



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Building Community Through Research Projects

Our new interdisciplinary honors course, "Quest for World Community," was approved as a world literature class and scheduled for launch in the fall of 1989. As the instructional team we were enthusiastic, experienced instructors, but none of us were experts in the vast field of global literature. That summer, after only a few brainstorming sessions to create a syllabus for the course, we recognized the scope of the research we faced. Through our preliminary search to develop a syllabus for the class, we realized that the process of research would afford an invaluable experience for the students and result in one of the liveliest, most stimulating courses any of us had ever taught.

We discovered that, when given the challenge of working in small research groups in order to develop a reading list for the last two-thirds of the course, students accomplished a complex research assignment with genuine outcomes, gained first-hand experience in community building (the theme of the class), and invested intellectually and emotionally in the course of their own creation. Motivation and performance soared. What follows is an account of what strategy we used, along with observations of how this approach might be adapted to any course.



In order to build the foundation for a successful small group research project, we decided to set aside the first week of the semester for getting to know one another through name games and introductions. Students were asked to share their first thoughts, prejudices, and preconceptions about world community. We also administered the Kolb learning style assessment, a simple instrument around which we based some small group activities and which helped us to recognize and celebrate the diversity within our own class. These familiarity exercises paved the way for the second week, during which we introduced the research assignment. Assuming that our enrollment would be around 20 students, we divided the globe into six rather arbitrary geographical areas. This would ensure geographical diversity, even if some areas would include several major cultures. We settled on six areas so that research groups would be no larger than four, and more

likely three, students, fearing that larger groups would present difficulties in coordination. Also, larger groups might encourage some students to slither from the limelight of accountability. (This might be overcome by more specific accountability procedures established by the instructor.)

At the beginning of week two, we laid out six placards on the floor around the room. On each placard was the name of a continent or geographical region: Central and South America there, Africa here, Asia over in the corner, Eastern Europe there, and so on. We issued simple instructions: "Divide yourselves into groups of at least three and sign your names to the placards of your choice." Then we left the room. In five minutes the groups were born. Two students were unable to get their first choices, so this procedure launched the process of compromise and conflict resolution—two important community-building skills. [We recognize that group division could have been accomplished with more deliberate control by instructors. We might have used the Kolb instrument or the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory. Instead, we opted for student choice.]

Once the research groups were formed, we distributed a handout that stated the objectives, criteria, strategies, and expected outcomes of the assignment. We explained that the reading for the first four weeks of the course was developed by the faculty team, using the same guidelines spelled out for them on the handout. [We might mention that the faculty team was offered as a model for research groups.] Our selections were diverse, including a novel, a play, a short story, a speech, and two films—all addressed or related to the theme of the course. Each was a work that offered insight into a particular culture by a native of that culture. They were readily available, were of readable length (we intentionally left this vague), and were deemed significant works of literature by knowledgeable commentators on the art of that culture. We expected their choices to reflect the same six criteria.

Each research group was responsible for offering three selections of literature and/or film from its chosen region for consideration by the class. These three



works, along with arguments and evidence supporting their selections, were to be presented to the class orally in the fifth week of the semester. We limited presentations to 15 minutes each and suggested that students consider their presentations as persuasive speeches. In addition to the oral presentation, we required each student to maintain a research log: "a detailed but readable account of how the research proceeded, who completed what tasks, what discoveries and frustrations were experienced, and how final decisions were made." We required that it also include documentation of works cited and people interviewed.

Over the next two weeks we allowed the groups a few minutes of class time to meet and organize. The students assumed responsibility for most of the meetings on their own time outside of class. We also arranged two "potluck" dinners for the class on weekends in order to view films we had chosen and, more importantly, to give students a chance to relax and get to know one another. Even these informal occasions were used by the research groups to swap ideas, discoveries, and frustrations.

At this point, we realized a hidden virtue of this kind of research project. The students were building relationships and community even as they worked on a demanding academic task. Further, the groups all faced conflicts and frustrations, not only with the immensity of their tasks, but with each other as well. There was a struggle and compromise. Some groups functioned more smoothly than others. A couple of groups didn't function at all; members worked independently, perplexed by the seeming impossibility of meeting regularly in the face of busy lives and overbooked personal schedules. Most of these conflicts found voice in the research logs, and we learned of them only after the projects were completed. Even then the experience of struggle became rich experiential compost for the community garden. But the most exciting outcome of this research assignment was not to reveal itself until later, and it took us by pleasant surprise.

On the day research results were presented, the students bristled with excitement. Fifteen minutes proved much too short to contain the information each group eagerly offered the class. These were *their* selections, and the students resembled dedicated instructors expounding the virtues and significance of their selections. Supporting evidence sometimes spilled over into personal anecdotes of interesting people interviewed and surprises experienced. In the two class periods we devoted to the presentations, a

major shift occurred: The mantle of responsibility and the authority for the class was lifted from the shoulders of the instructors and settled comfortably onto the shoulders of the students.

For the next 10 weeks this was their course, and they knew it. Nobody said it, we didn't plan it, but there it was. We shared the students' enthusiasm. Thanks to their efforts, we all looked forward to a reading list that was fresh to us all. Our job at this point was to narrow the readings to a manageable number and to place the readings into some kind of sensible order, allowing for length of selections and dates when we could obtain some of the materials. Co-learning would be a reality.

And so it was. We read and pondered these works alongside the students. We read works chosen by a particular group; members of that group would volunteer background information and help us over humps in understanding. As instructors we felt the kind of investment they had in the readings; we experienced it every time we walked into a classroom. For most, if not all, of the students, it was their first taste of really caring deeply about their academic work.



Many of the outcomes of this student-centered research project, intended and otherwise, met the thematic concerns of our course by converting the class itself into a microcosmic community. The pedagogy underlying it, however, invites adaptability to most other courses, in short, by structuring assignments and activities in ways which: engage students and help to build community in the classroom, reward students for working collaboratively, develop in students feelings of responsibility for and caring about the assignments, and help faculty and students become active co-learners in the classroom. We believe such an approach enables students to participate genuinely in the process and content of their learning and offers some means of bringing the students' minds and spirits into our classrooms.

Luke Barber, *Professor, English/Philosophy*

John Barrett, *Professor, English*

Jackie Claunch, *Dean of Instruction*

For further information, contact the authors at Richard College, 12800 Abrams Road, Dallas, TX 75243-2199.

Suanna D. Roueche, Editor

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