



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

Reading Aloud

Freshman composition courses abound with supplementary readers and essay compendiums which, ideally, are sample modes of development for neophyte writers to follow. Consequently, composition teachers admonish their students to read more if they want to write better. I am no exception. But no amount of threats, warnings, and tirades ensure that my students will do the reading necessary to improve their writing, especially since lecture preparation, essay production, and then grading and error review seem to take up so much time both in and out of class. Pop quizzes and in-class tests never seem to succeed at getting the students to utilize their readings and instead only seem to show them how to pass the quickie tests. Furthermore, I, along with my colleagues, realize we are dealing with the products of a quarter of a century of electronic media pushers. Nothing seems to get students to do the comprehensive and thorough reading necessary to understand the intimate relationship between organized thought and its translation onto the printed page.

I urgently want my students not only to get the most out of their reading assignments, but to know how to unlock the subtleties, allusions, metaphors, and historical references present in good expository writing. Out of desperation, I resorted to the old primary school standby—reading aloud in class.

My first goal is simply to get students to read aloud samples of their assigned essay examples for development and style. But secretly I longed for them to appreciate the aural beauty of the well-written word. Early in the term I set aside 4 to 6 one-hour class sessions in which we can thoroughly read and discuss each essay. Fortunately, composition classes at Edison are limited to a maximum of 20 students. I divide the class into three groups and assign each essay that can be adequately read in no more than two 50- to 55-minute class periods. I try to pick the most vividly exciting or interesting selections or one that is loaded with adjectives or perhaps controversial issues. The essay contains enough material so that each group member has at least 8 to 10 minutes of uninterrupted performance time. I require that each group member read aloud and that all unfamiliar vocabulary within the selection be

defined prior to presentation. I assign three short-answer summary-type questions following the selection which are to be answered jointly and then presented by a designated speaker who may or may not read the answers.

Hesitant and shy at first, by the second session the students are itching to perform before their peers. As we progress, students start to gain confidence and stop each other (and me) to ask for definitions and clarifications. Throughout all sessions I encourage them to leave their fragile egos at the classroom door, and I constantly assure them that we are all learning to be better readers, which hopefully will continue throughout our lives. And while I will sometimes let a skipped line or mispronunciation pass unnoticed and force myself to bite my tongue while students struggle with sentence structure and vocabulary, I find students quickly correct each other and insist that the slightest mistake not pass uncorrected.

By the end of the last group's presentation, the class has not only become more relaxed and confident with each other, but almost all see reading in a new, more scholarly light—not as some dreaded assigned exercise—but as something alive, informative, and quite possibly fun. The in-class exercise gives me a welcome respite from the daily grind of lecture preparation and background reading, but more importantly, it gives me excellent insight into certain students' learning disabilities or reading problems. I can more confidently recommend that these students get tutors or extra lab assistance.

Most rewarding is the immediate effect that reading aloud has on students' essays. Their writing improves dramatically after this class exercise, especially with regard to content and style. While reading aloud is certainly not a cure-all for mechanical and grammatical faults, it certainly allows the students to practically see that reading is indeed useful and necessary to progress in the real world.

Virginia Harper-Phaneuf, Instructor, Humanities

For further information, contact the author at Edison Community College, College Parkway, Fort Myers, FL 33907.



Literary Still Lives

For the past four years, the director of our art gallery has been supplementing the literary learning environment in our building with a series of unusual visual displays. Using freestanding showcases of various sizes and shapes, and in one instance an entire section of brick wall from floor to ceiling, he combines artifacts relevant to various literary excerpts by juxtaposing the objects with texts printed in large type on pieces of white foam-core board.

Each display features a specific author or a period or movement in literature. They have ranged in composition from the brick wall faced with barn siding to which were attached farm implements and farm administration photographs of rural scenes from the 1930's interspersed with selections from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, to a single-pedestal, hexagonal showcase containing an old Mason jar resting on a swatch of red satin sprinkled with a few brown leaves, and an enlarged reprint of Wallace Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar." One of the most striking of these literary still lifes comprised an array of technical hardware—springs, coils of wire, large bolts, a polished camshaft—strewn over a stark landscape with excerpts from the science fiction of Stanislaw Lem on white foam-core placards suspended in a staggered pattern from the ceiling of the lighted, cylindrical case.

An unexpectedly controversial display was a "Ken and Barbie" tableau that was intended to publicize a course on women in literature. Surrounded by a sea of tiny doll hands thrusting up from a bed of white sand, a bikinied "Barbie" rode on a surf raft towed by "Ken," with a golden chain, harness-fashion, around his neck. In the center was a piece of mirror glass, partially buried, in which the viewer could catch his own reflection as he read a copy of Sylvia Plath's poem "Mirror."

A recent effort, timed to coincide with "Earth Week," consisted of fossilized trilobites, sharks' teeth, and Eocene fish on a raked surface surrounded by copies in large type of James Dickey's "Last Wolverine," O.W. Holmes' "Chambered Nautilus," Robinson Jeffers' "Birds and Fishes," and Robert Lowell's "The Mouth of the Hudson."

In addition to transforming the hallways and lobbies

of our building into some of the most visually interesting venues on campus, these displays have had a profound impact on students and visitors who regularly stop to peruse them. In many instances, they provide viewers with their first contact with a poet, or novelist, or a literary movement. In others, they supplement what was or is being studied in classes, provoking fresh insights by bringing featured works to life with new perspectives. It is also worth noting that the fine arts and literature faculties in Essex have been drawn into a greater collegiality, enriching the curricula in both areas.

These "payoffs" are difficult to measure, but they are nonetheless real and should make the technique worth a try. Besides, it offers a welcome alternative to dreary old bulletin boards!

W. P. Ellis, *Chairman, Division of Humanities & Arts*

For further information, contact the author at Essex Community College, 7201 Rossville Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21237.

Suanne D. Roueche, *Editor*

November 16, 1990, Vol. XII, No. 28
©The University of Texas at Austin, 1990
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), EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for \$40 per year. 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 and once during the summer. ISSN 0199-106X.