



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A Writing Assignment for the Tech Classroom

When I first started teaching in the technologies after more than a decade in the humanities, I was worried that there would be little opportunity for writing assignments. I felt that my computer students should be doing more writing than responding to the occasional short-answer questions on tests. Thanks to the efforts of our local WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) group, I've discovered that writing assignments can have an important place in the technology curriculum. Now, I use a variety of writing activities in my tech classes.



One simple exercise has worked particularly well. I tell my students to read an assigned chapter and then write five questions based on their reading. However, these questions must not be questions that the text answers; rather, they should be questions that someone who has read the chapter carefully might not be able to answer from having completed the reading assignment only.

I also give the students examples of appropriate and inappropriate questions. For instance, if the chapter is on programming languages, a poor question would be: "What are the names of the major computer languages?" This would be a poor question because the book provides the answers. A better question would be, "Why are there so many different programming languages?"—a topic not directly addressed by the book.

No matter how well I explain the assignment the first time I give it, typically over half of the initial group of questions are simple factual questions, and the answers are obvious from a simple reading. *The students, it appears, are not accustomed to questioning what they read.* But with encouragement they are soon producing questions that are thoughtful and provocative. Some questions students asked after reading one chapter last semester were: "In foreign countries do they use BASIC and COBOL as we do, or do they need their own pro-

gramming languages?" "How is Apple BASIC different from IBM BASIC?"

I admit I first devised this assignment out of desperation. Too many students were coming to class without having completed the assigned reading. This exercise not only serves as a check that students have read the material in advance of the discussion, but it also helps ensure that they have read it carefully. Moreover, their questions alert me to what might be problem areas in the reading for the day.

I unabashedly steal as many of the students' questions as I can and use them during class. As a result, discussions have become much more interesting, with many more students participating spontaneously. I closed last semester by discussing for an entire hour one student's question: "On the whole, will computers do more harm to society or more good?" This controversial question led to one of the rowdiest yet most informative discussions I've ever had the pleasure to lead.

The student who wrote that question was being an active reader; instead of passively taking for granted everything the text said, she talked back to the book by asking a question to which neither she nor I have the answer.



It's said that an educated person is one who knows what questions to ask. Writing Across the Curriculum has inspired me to get my tech students to ask the tough questions—and to put them in writing.

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Philosophy in a New Key (With Bells and Whistles)

In my Introduction to Philosophy course, I use a "problems approach," discussing such perennial issues as ultimate reality, free will, knowledge, morality, political obligation, and the existence of God. In so doing, I have always treated philosophers without regard to any historical sequence of their lives or works. Even though I may have mentioned that Descartes lived in the seventeenth century or that Socrates died in 399 B.C., I found students had no concept of what these times were like. I decided to attempt a solution to this problem.

I reproduced 12" x 17" photographs of various philosophers. As I discussed a particular thinker, I put the photograph on an easel in the front of the room. I reproduced some great paintings of philosophers—Chartran's *Descartes in the Streets of Paris*, Jacques David's *The Death of Socrates*, and Rembrandt's *Aristotle With a Bust of Homer*. But, more frequently, I have used photographs of contemporary thinkers, such as Russell, Wittgenstein, and Sartre; pictures of busts and statues of the ancients; and photographs of paintings of philosophers who lived before the invention of photography.

In addition, before and after the class, I play music of the period from which that particular day's philosopher came. The intricate logic of Leibniz is communicated well by a Bach fugue; John Cage captures well the disjointed, absurd, God-abandoned world Sartre described. Mozart captures the spirit of Kantian formalism; and Strauss, in his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, makes a fine musical focus for a discussion of Nietzsche. When discussing out-and-out egoistic hedonism, a picture of a bust of Aristippus is before me and a copy of *Playboy* magazine is in my hand, and I play Janis Joplin's "Lord, Won't You Buy Me a Mercedes Benz?" Country-and-western singer Gene Watson's "14 Carat Mind" provides a fine entree to a discussion of J. S. Mill's notion of qualitative differences in pleasures.

Philosophy students, quite on their own, came to see similarities between the philosophy being discussed and the costumes and hair styles of the pictured philosopher. They commented on how similar the pictures of Descartes and Leibniz were and how different they were from the pictures of Berkeley and Hume. Thus, grouping philosophers became easier for the students, as they saw the similarities and differences in the photographs. I sometimes used other sorts of

pictures. For example, students can see similarities between Cartesian philosophy and the precisely-trimmed hedges of Versailles or between a Miro painting and the philosophy, say, of Albert Camus.

The music and photographs set the tone for the day's lecture and allow the students to participate non-cognitively in the *Zeitgeist*. Students are very responsive to the pictures and music and like to speculate about what will be said in that day's discussion and lecture. At first, I was afraid that a picture of the bust of one Greek philosopher would look to the students very much like all other pictures of busts of Greek philosophers. But, in fact, many students were able to distinguish, on their own and without invitation or prompting, pictures of the bust of Aristotle from that of Plato and that of Socrates.

On occasion, a few minutes before class began, I would place the easel with the photograph outside the classroom. With the door open and the music playing, we often drew quite a crowd of the curious. Several students who were not enrolled in the class often would decide to visit for that day, just to see what was going on. These students added a new dimension to class discussion, and the strategy proved to be an excellent recruitment device for philosophy classes.

In addition to the music and photographs (a collection which has grown with numerous student contributions), I have insisted on the immediate availability of maps. I find my students are quite geographically illiterate. When I mention Socrates' Athens or Kant's Königsberg or Hegel's Vienna, I point to that city on a map in a very casual and offhand way, but the pointing seemed to increase the students' geographical awareness.

It is my belief that philosophy may be learned other than through reason. It is also my belief that to gain full appreciation of a philosophy, students must have some sense of the time and place of its development. Through the bells and whistles—the pictures, music, and maps—I have played my philosophic tunes in a new key this year. It was a key which, hopefully, expanded students' historical, aesthetic, geographic, as well as philosophic, horizons.

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