



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Using Dialogues as Writing Assignments

Setting:

First Class cabin, TWA,
heading for Saudi Arabia

Characters:

Machiavelli, an Italian "advisor"
Lao-Tzu, a Chinese diplomat

Machiavelli: I feel we can end the conflict in a sudden, massive, and decisive action.

Lao-Tzu: Oh, hot-headed one! Your ideas are too aggressive. I say to you, take no action. One fire never put out another. Fires are extinguished with water, water seeking quietly its own passive level.

Machiavelli: This is not a time for wasteful words but for action! If we do not act now we will become trapped like a piece of rice between two chopsticks!

This excerpt from an imaginary conversation came from two Freshman Composition students* who collaborated on the following assignment: Write a dialogue which reveals the similarities and/or differences between the political viewpoints of Machiavelli and Lao-Tzu. Using the dialogue as their mode of expression, the students met and, in fact, went quite beyond the objectives of "regular essay" assignments. I have found comparably impressive results in most cases when students use a dialogue form for their writing assignment.

Objectives

- Dialogues as writing assignments require students
- to recast main ideas of an assigned reading into their own imaginative words (different from a mere paraphrase or a summary, but effectively accomplishing the objectives of both);
 - to anticipate and deal with a point of view different from their own; and
 - to resolve or at least synthesize ideas from various viewpoints into a conclusive whole.

*Credit to Students: Lonnie Werth and Stacy Webb

In composition classes, the dialogue is not meant to replace essay forms, but it may provide a supplement to or a break from those other forms. Furthermore, as discussed below in more detail, it may serve as a means of brainstorming material to generate ideas for other essays. Imagine, too, how lively class discussion becomes when material from a reading or a lecture is "acted out" in dialogue form. In classes other than composition, the dialogue is extremely useful as a writing assignment since it requires little more than a few "characters" from the discipline and a specific topic to keep the writing focused. It does not require elaborate settings or stage directions, though some students like to add such. Its length varies, and its evaluation is easy: students cannot "bluff" an understanding of material they need to render into dialogue.

Ultimately, the dialogue asks students to understand ideas central to a discipline and then to express those ideas through the filter of their imaginations. Imagination is a key word here, for imagination changes the expression from forcing ideas down on paper to giving voice to those ideas. I must emphasize here how lively the students, their "characters," their ideas, and their expressions become when presented through dialogue. Indeed, Machiavelli's well-aimed simile of a warning to Lao-Tzu not to get caught "like a piece of rice between two chopsticks" speaks for itself.

Applications

The practical applications of using dialogues as writing assignments are numerous in any discipline. I have used dialogues in English and philosophy courses with tremendous success in getting the students to understand key concepts. In fact, in composition the dialogue is particularly useful as an initial "brainstorming" activity to generate ideas from students as they approach a series of difficult readings; a similar approach is used by "creative" writers all the time—"what would happen if?" By brainstorming via dialogue, students must eventually find and understand the main ideas of the reading, then process those ideas through their own viewpoints into debatable form. Moreover, they must deal with the opposition, with the counter point of view, in an engaging



and imaginative way. Since many times the students will team up on a dialogue, they also benefit from collaborative learning while they sharpen their critical thinking and writing skills.

Examples

A few examples from various classes may illustrate the widespread applicability of using dialogues as writing assignments.

In a literature class we took several characters from several short stories and assigned a thematic topic. Imagine what dialogues we got from an imaginary roundtable discussion with:

- La Folle (Kate Chopin's *Beyond the Bayou*)
- Rainsford (Richard Connell's *Most Dangerous Game*)
- Francis Weed (John Cheever's *Country Husband*)
- Francis Macomber (Ernest Hemingway's *Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*)
- Fortunato (E. A. Poe's *Cask of Amontillado*) on the topic of fear!

One student decided to have Mrs. Macomber and Mrs. Weed come to blows over how to deal with their husbands!

For some classes (history, math, physical or biological sciences, and perhaps some social sciences), students might research major figures in the discipline and then develop dialogues around specific topics. For example: an American history class might find Thoreau and King in a debate on civil disobedience, or Lee and Grant discussing honor.

American history: Thoreau and King in a debate on civil disobedience; Lee and Grant on honor

Physics: Newton and Einstein on God

Psychology: James and Skinner on free will

Economics: Marx and Galbraith on poverty

Geometry: Euclid and Gauss on whether "parallel" lines can meet

The dialogue, then, accomplishes many of the objectives of good writing assignments while at the same time it provides students in any discipline with a new approach to understanding and writing about main ideas. Clearly, the possibilities in any class are limited only by imagination. And as to who won the debate—Machiavelli or Lao-Tzu—Machiavelli pressed for an arm wrestling match while Lao-Tzu requested a less physical mode of deciding which path to follow. The students resolved the impasse with an in-flight (and ongoing) match of Chinese Checkers. After all, what else could symbolize the slow and deliberate crossover moves of diplomacy?

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