



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Empowering Students: Experimenting with Quality Control

End-of-the-semester student evaluations of faculty occur too late to be of any use to students (if faculty members use student suggestions to improve). Using quality control groups composed of student volunteers who meet with the instructor after *each* class eliminates that problem and allows an ongoing feedback system to exist between instructor and students.

In the fall 1996 semester, I taught six classes and used five of them to experiment with this quality control system (the final class ended at 10:10 p.m., not a good time to convince students to stay longer). I announced the concept to each group and invited volunteers to meet after class in my office for five minutes (longer if the *students* chose to remain). Class sizes varied from 12 to 39 students, and from two to eight students volunteered from each class. Female students comprised 50-100% of each group. Three classes were introductory courses in sociology; another dealt with social problems and another with nursing. All were freshman/sophomore-level courses.

To determine whether students actually preferred the idea, I announced reminders during for the first four class sessions only. In every class, the quality control group continued to meet even after my announcements had ended. Once, during an unexpected cold snap, I was detained in the classroom answering student questions. As I walked toward my office I discovered all seven quality control group members shivering in the outside hallway, fully 10 minutes after the class had ended; every member had chosen to wait.

Students frequently complain (correctly) that they are given little or no power in controlling their scholastic destiny. The quality control group provides some of the missing control. Implicit in the system, of course, is the instructor's willingness to address grievances.

During the first three to five sessions, I guided the discussion, asking for student input, discussing student-driven issues, and correcting my behavior and/or changing techniques to improve lesson delivery. We discussed fairness and reasonable behavior from the students as well as improvements for the instructor. Students frequently complained about the behavior of other students. Those complaints were then addressed

and discussed in the classroom. Within two weeks, the quality control group had become the voice of the class, with nonparticipating students contacting members with suggestions or questions.

Each group developed a personality of its own and met its own needs. After the first few sessions, I only had to say, "Talk to me." All major problems would be discussed quickly, and conversation would turn to every topic of imaginable interest to the students, ranging from how to survive the GRE (in a freshman class!) to strategies for choosing a four-year university. One group chose to disband at mid-semester because we had solved all of the problems and the students no longer felt the group was important. The other four continued to meet until the end of the semester.

Although I had promised not to keep the students longer than five minutes, *they* usually extended the discussion to 15 minutes or longer. Students were excited about a chance to control their own destiny. They appreciated an opportunity to express their feelings in a safe, supportive environment.

The experiment was a complete success. The students felt (and were) empowered, the quality of my delivery improved, and a sense of rapport developed and rapidly spread to the other students. I must stress, however, that a key ingredient was my willingness to be open to student complaints and suggestions, to discuss problems frankly and honestly, and to take necessary action to alter my behavior and methods. The result benefited all participants.

Bill Lockhart, *Instructor, Sociology*

For further information, contact the author at New Mexico State University at Alamogordo, P. O. Box 477, Alamogordo, NM 88311.



ESL: A Theatrical Approach

English as a Second Language (ESL) students face several obstacles: the language itself, formation of words, accents, intonations, gestures, and non-verbal interactions in everyday conversations. Vocal Production for the Stage, a theatre course designed in cooperation with our ESL program, addresses these obstacles. In a theatre setting we can teach an American to speak and gesture as someone from another country, a different region of America, or ethnic background, so why not put the process in reverse? The spring 1997 semester is the first offering of this new course, so the process is in evolution; but the approach is novel and holds promise.

At the beginning of class, the students go through the same vocal, facial, and other physical warm-ups that our theatre students do for acting. As a gesture of respect and a spirit of exchange, I ask students to teach me to pronounce their names correctly and to extend a greeting or salutation in their native languages. This role reversal gives students a boost in confidence and an active role in the learning experience. We begin working in slow motion on phonemes and the various mouth and facial positions required to produce them, word and sentence drills, and improvised dialog where they portray English-speaking characters in real-life situations, focusing on accents, gestures, and facial expressions.

I recruit American students to participate in this class because they and the ESL students can benefit from the experience. This cooperative effort is an attempt to expose ESL students to more real-world situations and less laboratory-like ideal interactions. American students get unique opportunities to benefit from the vocal training, embark on an "international journey," and provide leadership in the learning process.

It is clear from our experiences thus far that this course should require a prerequisite of traditional ESL vocabulary and language training, and should be divided into beginning and intermediate levels, with the upper levels focusing on the subtleties of human interaction.

The nature of the course and the togetherness we develop in the classroom will provide several benefits. First, students will develop the confidence to stand before an audience; second, class experiences may help reduce the fear and mistrust between our American and ESL students.

A sequel to the vocal production course has been planned for the fall 1997 semester. This course will be available to the intermediate and advanced students, or

those who have completed the vocal production course. It will focus on developing interpersonal interaction, on learning to read body language and facial expressions, and on analyzing and portraying a character's personality traits based on verbal or written descriptions. It will culminate in a demonstration or mini-production by the ESL students displaying some of the concepts and skills acquired in this course and the vocal production course.

To date, responses from both the ESL and American students have been overwhelmingly positive. We may have transformed a traditionally painful and difficult process into something exciting and fun. Enrollment has been high, and waiting lists are growing daily.

Shirley R. Ewing, *Academic Program Coordinator of Theatre*

For further information, contact the author at Jefferson Community College, 109 E. Broadway, Louisville, KY 40202 e-mail: sretheatre@bellsouth.net