



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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I Hate to Read

Research confirms that a central component of breaking through the remedial wall is to get students to read. Without the ability to read, students have no pathway to progress and success. Language is at the core of academic study, and it is not surprising that many poor readers disappear. So when, without a trace of guilt or with an odd sense of pride, a student announces a distaste for reading, I know I have my work cut out for me.

But I relish this instructional challenge. I want to get dedicated non-readers to pick up a book and to develop a long-lasting enthusiasm about language and reading. In my basic communications class, I use a multi-layer program to achieve this objective.

Layer I—Reading Seminar

One class period per week is devoted to the Reading Seminar. In preparation, students must select and read an article, prepare a synopsis, identify three vocabulary words, and be prepared to make a short oral presentation. At first, students are able to select any article from any source. The only requirement is that they cannot be bored by what they have chosen.

On Reading Seminar days, I select three students to give a short oral presentation and discuss their selected vocabulary. I assign two students to be special listeners and develop two questions to ask the presenter. Students cooperatively learn the process of interacting and engaging in communication. Predictably, there are always *People* and *Sports Illustrated* stories; but sometimes students start exploring other publications on their own. After a few weeks, I ask them to read an article from a periodical that is unfamiliar to them—but again they must be interested in the material. This is a gradual way of introducing students to the world of ideas in print, building on students' self-motivation and sense of discovery.

Then, I bring students to the Learning Resource Center to investigate journals and periodicals. Students discover periodicals devoted to career interests, recreation, or—*mirabile dictu*—ideas. Sometimes the most reluctant and “anti-academic” students find their way to the library and even get a library card.

Layer II—The Novel

I believe that students who find themselves in remedial courses have been shortchanged in their imaginative lives, particularly by their lack of experience with fiction. So, I have my students read three novels during the semester. They can choose the first novel, without any judgment from me as to whether or not it is “good literature.”

The second I choose—something manageable with a clear plot line, and we read it as a group. The third novel must be chosen from a list of 40 titles that I supply. Here the choices reflect more challenging literature written by well-regarded authors. By this time, students have read and responded to reading in their writing and oral presentation. They are confident and more open to the reading experience, they feel a great sense of accomplishment, and they see themselves as “real” students rather than as academic castaways.

Layer III—The Special Event

In addition to breaking the reading barrier, I want students to break free of the classroom. So three times during the semester I take my students to a special event—an off-campus experience with Boston's artistic or cultural events. For example, with support from a grant that underwrites students' expenses, my students have attended the Museum of Science, The Museum of Fine Arts, and productions of *Shear Madness*, *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *Dream Girls*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Students are required to attend and can invite friends, parents, partners, and children. It is interesting to meet students' families, and students seem to enjoy introducing them to me and their fellow students.

In preparation for the special event, students conduct research, find articles, and report their findings. They feel special participating in these events; they know from other courses that instructors and students do not customarily spend their after-class free time together. The Special Events establish a powerful sense of community; the students and I enjoy sharing these culturally exciting experiences together.



Layer IV—Writing

One might ask—when do you teach writing? Actually, I teach it all the time. My emphasis is not on teaching writing in a new and different way; the suggestions incorporated in current practice and theory, commonly referred to as the writing process, seem to work. Rather, my energy and effort are directed at giving students something novel, unusual, and imaginative to *write about*. They write about the articles they read for the reading seminar; they write in response to the three novels; they write in response to the special events.

When students are engaged in active learning, when they are making choices, when they are having out-of-

the-ordinary experiences, there can be an explosive reaction. My students no longer find themselves sitting at the back of the educational bus. Rather, they see themselves as students—with the ability to enter educational doors that not only were shut to them before, but that they did not know were even there.

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Thirty-Five Minute Investments

The "Thirty-Five Minute Investment" opens communications between students and teacher on the first day. Students are the center of attention; the teacher begins with a walk-about, shaking hands and welcoming as many students as possible within the first ten minutes.

As the teacher walks about the room, a handout is passed to students. It instructs students to move about and ask questions. It initiates nonverbal forms of communication: smiling, looking at other students, and shaking hands. Students must also write out answers to questions posed on the handout. Questions are need-based and can vary according to discipline. Questions for writing or literature classes, for example, might include: Who can help edit or type essays? Who wants to form study groups? Who enjoys or wants help with reading and writing assignments?

This activity for students is scheduled for 20 minutes, but may not be completed within that time; however, it initiates conversation and responses. Stopping these conversations will be difficult because students enjoy the opportunity to talk with and seek help from other students and the teacher. In the remaining five minutes, students write responses to two questions written on the board: Was this activity meaningful? Why? The written response is their "exit slip" from the class. The "exit slip" provides information about students' personal needs, writing skills, ideas for future lesson plans, and class attendance for the first day. Students have written about how they chose students to talk to, what they said, how they

looked at and listened to others, and how they remembered names.

After this initial investment, students will have identified several resources, in addition to the teacher: study/writing groups, access to computer assistance, and in-class tutors. They have heard that others have concerns about writing and teacher expectations. They have learned about approaching others.

Students and teacher have moved out of their traditional spaces and explored how to communicate orally and in writing. They have experienced collaborative learning, identified new resources, and fueled the desire to return for the next class.

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