Retreating into Comfort Zones

As an English instructor I am frequently told—by students, medical doctors, video store clerks, and ministers—how intimidating English was or is. For some unexplainable reason, although many people know what idea they want to express, they just "can't put it down on paper." Translated, enrolling in an English course usually means writing essays, and writing essays is outside many students' comfort zones. Therefore, if putting it down on paper is always the primary measure of a student's level of comprehension, there is no doubt that the comprehension level is oftentimes inaccurately calculated.

With this in mind—along with a desire to more accurately capture the scope of my students' understanding—I chose the writing assignment which seemed the most difficult for students to approach, and I allowed them to express their understanding of material covered in ways other than just "putting it down on paper."

For the majority of my Introduction to Literature students, poetry was the culprit. Students thought they understood the significance of concepts such as imagery, rhyme schemes, and persona; however, they were not confident that they could convey their understanding in a written essay. And, after five years of reading many not-so-effective essays on poetry, I was inclined to agree. Therefore, I allowed myself to exceed the boundaries of my own comfort zone (evaluating ability according to the quality of written essays) by allowing my students to retreat to *their* individual comfort zones. The results were fascinating.

Instead of having to write an essay on poetry, students were encouraged to present their understanding of a particular poem (subject to my approval) through an artistic medium which most effectively reflected their strengths and talents. At first, some students were skeptical about my seriousness. They could not believe that I was actually willing to allow them to sing, dance, sculpt, present a drama, write a companion poem, paint a picture, or arrange a musical score—just some of the possibilities—to express their understanding of poetry. Furthermore, they could even work collaboratively.

However, after the initial shock subsided, many students began preparing their presentations. I encouraged students to focus on how meaning emerged for them personally, rather than relying upon critical "authorities" to dictate meaning. Furthermore, during the actual presentation, each student was required to justify why he or she selected a particular poem and a particular medium, and why he or she made specific choices as those choices related to the poem being interpreted. Therefore, in addition to determining the significance of imagery and rhyme scheme, the process of selecting a poem and a medium of presentation became crucial.

After approving the selected poems, I observed the class; individual students pored over various lines and stanzas, trying to gain understanding but, more importantly, trying to determine how they could express their understanding via their chosen medium. Groups of students attempted to reach consensus on meaning, explain how it was conveyed, and express their understanding of meaning through musical compositions or dramatic performances. My observations alone reinforced the validity of allowing students to retreat into their comfort zones to express their level of comprehension of material they considered difficult and intimidating.

On the days of the presentations, anticipation and fascination reigned: presenters were eager to show off their talents, and observers were surprisingly awed by the overall quality of many of the performances. It was encouraging and refreshing to listen to students who rarely spoke in class explain how the various colors they used in a painting or papier-maché represented the mood of a specific poem. It was equally refreshing to listen to a musical composition and then hear students discuss how they attempted to express the impact of rhyme schemes on meaning.

Of course, not all students performed. Some students who believed that writing was their greatest strength chose to write an essay, a viable option from the start. But, at least 90% of the students indicated that the assignment forced them to think more critically about poetry and what it means. Additionally, students commented that they became more interested in effectively relating their understanding of that meaning

to others. After all, they were no longer merely doing the assignment for me. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this assignment was that students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to retreat into their comfort zones, to prove what they had learned in a manner comfortable for them.

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Cooperative Learning to Enhance Customer Service

Faculty, support staff, and administrators at Genesee Community College met to analyze specific customer service issues campuswide. Groups of five members each appointed a leader, a speaker, a recorder, and two encouragers. They listed as many customer service issues as they could, discussed and prioritized them, and set priorities for the next workshops. After a full hour on these tasks, the speaker for each group reported results of the discussion.

The success of this session was stunning! There was enough material generated for the next two years, a clear direction about future workshops (e.g., internal communication will be the next subject), and a wealth of recommended solutions.

One might argue that any grouping of concerned people would work and that the need to talk would make the specific roles used in these cooperative learning groups unnecessary. However, unless these groups are structured to maximize everyone's participation, then the usual few will dominate. Further, the sessions will likely deteriorate into gripe sessions. It is all too easy to blame our limited resources (not enough money, not enough equipment, not enough staff, not enough time) for our situation and *leave it at that*. But, for real change to take place, it is important to redirect the negative energy that exists when resources are not only limited but potentially more limited in the upcoming budget year.

The roles assigned in cooperative learning models work. The leader orchestrates the discussion, keeps everyone on task, but is not the speaker. The speaker promotes the work of the group but will only be as clear as the recorder has been in recording the ideas of the group. And, the recorder will only be effective if everyone's ideas have been clearly articulated, understood, discussed, and translated into potential actions, which depends on the encouragers. The encouragers are to make sure everyone is allowed to speak and not become negative. They are supposed to remind group members of some of the good things that are being implemented and not allow anyone to spiral downward into depression over the state of affairs.

For the purposes of campus community building, cooperative learning focuses on carefully designed interactions that emphasize individual responsibility within a framework of person-to-person positive interdependence. Appropriately enough, the motto for our customer service initiative is Genessee Unites to Serve (G.U.S.). Thanks to this cooperative learning experiment, we are well on our way to encouraging healthy interdependence.

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