



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Take a Course/Drop a Course or "What Did You Learn in School Today?"

During the fall, the members of the English and Foreign Languages Department volunteered for a heavy dose of role reversal. Using a pool of administrative support time, the department head offered to give one course of release time to any member of the department who would take a course from another member. Half of the members jumped at the chance to become students in their colleagues' classes, a few more wanted to but could not because of other obligations, and there were some who became teachers of colleagues but not students. In our department, it is not surprising to find teachers ready to try something new. However, considering the autonomy of the classroom, it was gratifying to find this many willing to open themselves up as teachers and learners.

Probably one reason for the number of participants is the fact that, as a group, they are among the best teachers in the college. Although they give about three times as many C's as A's, which is opposite the general college ratio, they consistently score higher on student evaluations than the rest of the college. On the average, these teachers have been reading student compositions, or teaching language classes, for about 19 years. For the English teachers this has usually meant five courses each quarter with 25 students in each class. A course off, then, was an attractive offer; and taking a course from a colleague seemed just strange enough to be fun.

The rules for the project were simple. First, the course had to be taught in the department. After all, if we were going to share teaching and learning, why not share it with each other? Second, the teachers had to actually register for the course and stay in attendance until the end. Third, they could audit, but they had to complete, and submit for grading, all assignments. For this, they would be released from one teaching assignment.

The first hurdle was registration. According to the computer, English teachers do not meet the prerequisites for their courses. One of the composition teachers who was blocked from registering for a composition course said it was like having your credit card refused

by Ivey's when there are 20 people in line behind you. She, like the other students, had to go to a special desk in the registration center, operated by another member of the department, and have the block electronically removed. Another instructor called from out of town, using our new telephone registration system. We found that it takes an average of four telephone calls to get the prerequisite block removed and complete the registration. Two who waited until final registration found the sections they wanted full and had to get a "green form" from the department head to take back to registration before being allowed into the class. Although all of us in the department assist students over these hurdles during registration, we had not anticipated having to do it ourselves. Consequently, we all learned something about embarrassment, frustration, and the shortest route from Sloan Building to Registration to Terrell Building.

The second major phase was entry into the class. For the teachers who found colleagues in their classes, there was predictable anxiety. But the teachers/students expressed equal anxiety in anticipation of having their writing and other work actually graded. This was the phase where humor became the driving force.

As students again, we all learned things about "studenting" that we had forgotten. The other students quickly accepted us as "one of them" and wanted to talk about assignments, tests, and to share grades. We experienced the dread of being called on and the tightening of the stomach as the teacher hands back tests or compositions. We also admit to glancing at the clock near the end of the period and praying the teacher would forget to give the next assignment. Teachers, we found out, rarely forget; and many of us became reacquainted with "midnight oil." Then, on a Monday morning about a third of the way through the term, several of us were standing around the coffee pot and realized we were discussing our weekend homework.

We also learned some important lessons about being "adult" students. On more than one occasion, a teacher/student shared his frustration at not having



enough time to really do the assignment well. One of the participants had what amounted to a shift change in some very important volunteer work she was doing in the afternoons and had to miss one day of class each week. The ones with families felt in a double bind. If they spent time with their families, they had to stay up late, alone to complete their work. If they got their work out of the way first, there was not enough time for family. One participant had a death in the family and almost had to drop the course. Several, naturally, missed days because of illness; and one missed because his car broke down. Community college teachers are very familiar with these excuses for missing class. But for most of us, these were not things that happened to us "back when we were in school." Consequently, we had come to view these as things that happen to "our" students. Now we know that these things are simply part of being an adult student today.

We also learned some things about our own classes. One teacher/student announced that she was going to ban yellow hi-liters from her classes forever. As a teacher she had always been pleased to see the hi-liters moving briskly as she asked probing questions about select passages in a story, taking this as a sign of attentiveness. In her role as a student, however, she learned that the students were hi-liteing instead of thinking. Everyone also began to look at syllabi, objectives, test questions and handouts from a different perspective. But the same is true for teaching styles. One person commented that this teacher was very punctual and that he had not realized how much he appreciated knowing that the class would start and end exactly on time. Another teacher/student appreciated his teacher's detailed organization of class time, while another liked her teacher's laid-back, open discussion technique.

This experience supports the idea that there is not one best teaching style. However, it is clear that we all need to continually examine our own to ensure that the one we are using is *our* best, if not the best. Perhaps most important, though, is that after working together longer than many families live together, we still learned a thing or two about each other. One teacher/student said about her teacher, "You know, all this time I thought she was easy. Now I think she's just good." Another said, "What he is doing is not what I would call English. But in Composition II, it works, and I think it is as important as what I do."

Almost all of the participants have asked for a chance to do this again, even though they all say they worked harder in the course they took than they would

have teaching another course. Also, several of the ones who could not take a course want to take one in the future. Perhaps the greatest success in the experience is that *we had fun together*. We laughed at ourselves and at how easily we became like our students. We watched each other do what we do best: *Teach*. And we came away from the experience with, hopefully, a little more pride in ourselves and with a little more respect for each other. And all it takes is a little creative scheduling, a genuine respect for the people who teach, and a well-developed, ready sense of humor.

Macy Creek, Instructor, English & Foreign Languages Department

Joe Barwick, Department Head, English & Foreign Languages Department

For further information, contact the authors at Central Piedmont Community College, P.O. Box 35009, Charlotte, NC 28235.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

August 25, 1989, Vol. XI, No. 17
© The University of Texas at Austin, 1989
Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER institutions for their own personnel.

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for \$40 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and once during the summer. ISSN 0199-106X.