



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Personally Speaking: Students Voicing Their Opinions

The freshman year experience is an important part of the total college program designed to provide opportunities for social as well as interpersonal growth and development. STD 100-Orientation is a one-credit, 16-week course that is required for the full-time student who seeks to earn a degree or certificate. Each class meets for one session a week. Objectives of the course are for students to become aware of the various college services available, provide opportunities for adjustment to and survival in college, improve study habits, clarify educational and vocational goals, increase their personal understanding, and have them accept the responsibility for learning. Aside from class attendance, participation in out-of-class workshops, seminars, or presentations is also required. Structured exercises to meet the objective of increasing personal understanding—such as, values clarification—are made available during the sessions.

Another activity that sets ground rules, but is basically free-flowing, is "Personally Speaking (PS)"—a series of sessions devoted to the discussion of topics relevant to students. Two class sessions into the semester, students are requested to list topics of interest that they would like to discuss. Imaginations may run wild at this point because there is no limit to the number of suggestions a student can submit. For example, my class of 24 students submitted a total of 36 topics ranging from devil worship to snake-handling, churches to television evangelists.

After this initial compilation, the list is read to the class. The students are required to write down only *one* topic they feel they would like to talk about. From this, the list is narrowed to 12 topics or so because similar choices are categorized as a single item. Then what? The final listing is presented to the class and rank-ordered. Some time during the next 14 weeks could be scheduled for PS (assuming part of the first two sessions were devoted to compiling the list).

What would the initial structure be like? Prior to the beginning of PS, the instructor mentions that there are no right or wrong answers—also, that each student's

comments, however ludicrous or far-fetched, need to be respected. In other words, students are not to make fun of others' statements. And, the instructor may intercede to enforce these rules of order. [There are instances in which the discussants become very emotional. For example, one issue—gender equity in work—rapidly escalated into "women who join the military can only serve in a support capacity because they can't do half the physical work that men can do." One of the students had completed basic training for the marines, and she told the group that the top recruit to graduate was a woman! You can imagine the response of a former marine who voiced the first statement. Calm and rational thinking prevailed, however. Needless to say, the students voiced their opinions; and it was one session that neither I nor they will ever forget.] At times, the instructor needs to prod students by asking questions that are relevant to the topic. If the issue is "devil worship," you may ask if it exists in the various high schools that students attended or if they saw the Geraldo Rivera special. Aside from acting as enforcer, the instructor encourages participation and feedback.

Early in the semester the group may not be comfortable enough to start speaking out in PS sessions. Therefore, later in the semester may be ideal because an element of familiarity, trust, and support has evolved. Class composition is a plus as the older, more mature students provide opinions obtained from life experiences. Discretion for the scheduling of PS is a combination of instinct and interest. Ask the students when they would like to have a PS session.

What are the outcomes? Students feel more confident speaking their minds in front of a group of people, and the sessions create a learning climate that is primarily student-initiated. For first-year students, this reinforces the attitude that learning is the responsibility of the individual and that ideas of other people are respected in the work world.

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Teaching—What a Joke!

Maintaining a Sense of Humor in the Learning Process

People who display a sense of humor are healthier, more fun to be around, and live longer than those who do not. It is easy for an educator caught up in the seriousness of the job to accidentally create a humorless environment. Many of us believe that a humorless environment is a humanless environment. Smiling or laughing, especially at one's own folly, is a uniquely human characteristic.

I propose that not only can learning be more fun with the use of humor, but that learning is actually enhanced. Encouraging students to display their sense of humor is important. Humor, being creative in nature, tends to be left-brained—whereas much subject matter, especially in business, mathematics, and science, tends to be right-brained. Research has shown that learning is enhanced when left- and right-brained activities are co-mingled. It appears that *what one jokes about, one tends to remember!* For example, students should be encouraged to tell funny stories that are related to the subject at hand.

I only know two jokes about accounting—a particularly humorless discipline. One is that in determining the value to place on your inventory, you may use the LIFO (last-in first-out method), FIFO (first-in, first-out method) or FISH (first-in still-there method). Buyers may not particularly like this joke! The other is about the accountant who looked in his bottom drawer a half dozen times a day for 25 years. After he retired his fellow employees rushed to the drawer, which he always kept locked, curiously waiting to see what he looked at so frequently. They got the key, opened the drawer, and on the bottom of the empty drawer was taped a sign which read "Debits left, Credits right."

This joke should be told at an appropriate time. Students who have been introduced to basic debit/credit theory and are struggling with the concept of the meaning of the words will benefit from this joke and will probably always remember "debit left, credit right."

It is important to make it all right to make a mistake—to have little failures—in a classroom setting. If students can feel comfortable laughing at their own shortcomings, the whole atmosphere can improve. A friendly smile and an atmosphere where a student can "simply try again" is an improvement over a punitive environment based on fear or threats.

Why we continue to struggle to teach and students continue to struggle to learn is a question we ask ourselves from time to time. It reminds me of the joke about the guy who went to the psychiatrist and said that he had a brother who thinks he is a chicken. The psychiatrist said to bring him in right away. The guy said, "Well, I would, but we need the eggs."

Speaking of eggs, did you hear about the chicken who....

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