



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Into Century Twenty-One: After Writing-Across-The-Curriculum, Then What?

Despite the increasing popularity of across-the-curriculum programs in reading, writing, speaking, and thinking, educators as well as leaders in business and industry seem generally agreed that there is still something of a national literacy crisis. While the educational community tends to see the crisis as a lack of communication skills necessary for academic success, the business community prefers to interpret the crisis as a lack of communication skills required to function successfully in the world of work. This crisis has, therefore, at least two dimensions: a "literary" or academic dimension, and a functional or real-world dimension. Most across-the-curriculum programs, it seems, focus upon the academic dimension.

Here in Tucson, the Community Communication Corps, sponsored by Pima Community College, attempts to reach beyond traditional across-the-curriculum programs in several respects. The Corps tries to address both dimensions of the crisis. The Corps also endeavors to tailor its activities to the specialized (as opposed to the generic) needs of students. Again, while most programs promote literacy as a campus-wide responsibility, the Corps believes that literacy, whether for academic or real-world success, must be accepted as a community responsibility because the literacy crisis has simply grown much too large for schools to remediate alone. We need outside help—now.

Essentially, the Corps is a partnership between business and education that promotes several communication skills across the disciplines, from middle schools through community college. The concept was borrowed in part from the Phoenix-based SWRL Project and is partly an outgrowth of a local, multi-school, writing- and speaking-across-the-curriculum program.

Central to Corps activities is Business Partners in Education (or BPEs), a resource that is creative, stimulating, and effective. BPEs, who receive release time from their place of employment, are not expected to have degrees in English, speech, or reading; they need only a reasonable facility in one or more of the communication skills being promoted: writing, speaking,

reading, listening, and critical thinking. Having met this requirement, BPEs meet in workshops with teachers from courses across the curriculum and with language arts specialists to form T-Teams (teaching teams). These T-Teams develop communication units for classroom presentation. The kinds of units vary from role playing exercises to mock job interviews to written scenarios to oral summaries to impromptu debates.

The following example was a Corps activity prepared for a class in human development at Pima Community College. The class, called "Women in Progress," enrolls re-entry women—typically single parents or displaced homemakers planning to complete programs of study and/or obtain marketable job skills. In fact, many are in desperate need to find at least part-time work to remain in school.

In considering the needs of this group, T-Team members decided that a basic workshop in preparing a resumé, completing application forms, and interviewing would be appropriate. The BPE, who works for Pima County government, supplied job application forms along with a listing of current job openings. During the classroom activities, students were given information about employment opportunities, how to submit a good application and resumé, how to dress for that all-important job interview, and how to handle that interview. As part of the workshop, students were required to "dress up" as though actually applying for the position desired. The T-Team discussed the proper "uniform" for particular job interviews and then critiqued each student's attire. At an appropriate juncture, students were given a homework assignment which required them to prepare an application blank with an attached resumé. The T-Team provided an in-depth critique of each application and required students to re-submit corrected applications.

As a result of this exercise, some students actually obtained employment on a temporary basis. Even those who were less fortunate discovered that their application forms are often the only initial means by which a



prospective employer can form an image about them and make a possible hiring judgment. Because there is so much competition for jobs, these students realized how very important it is to learn to communicate through the writing medium.

Students were not the only beneficiaries for this activity. One important lesson learned by the volunteer teacher was the great need for students to learn basic "survival" skills. As the instructor noted in her report to the Corps, "Many students are seriously lacking in fundamental knowledge about how to even start a successful job-hunting plan. In one of my classes of 24 students, only three turned in applications that the BPE and I considered to be neat and complete enough for a prospective employer to even contemplate employing them. The students themselves were surprised at the number of errors in their applications and then grateful that we had done such an in-depth critique. As one student put it, 'I can understand now why I've had such a hard time even getting called in for an interview.'"

Like the team whose unit was just described, most Corps T-Teams attempt to tailor classroom units to the needs of their students. Most also demonstrate the relationship between communication proficiency and problem solving. Further, most teams try to develop communication skills activities which have discernible relevance to course content and which are grounded in the working world. The functional value of literacy is sometimes particularly enhanced in classes in which BPEs emphasize the real-world necessity of correct spelling and punctuation, effective organization of ideas, clarity, and polish.

What had impressed us about the SWRL project was its success in improving student attitudes about the real-world necessity for communication skills. Our experience in the Corps has been similarly gratifying. For Corps teachers, the old adage "Seeing is believing" is reflected in altered student attitudes—changes which teachers alone have been unable to inspire in years of futile classroom preachments. And we have discovered that when student attitudes about communication skills undergo favorable change, the change is translated into enhanced learning. In a sense, the real value of having the BPE in the classroom lies, not in teaching the teacher's class, but in reshaping student attitudes.

Project evaluations, based on 64 T-Teams working with approximately 1300 students, confirm the beneficial effects of the BPE in the classroom. Virtually every participating faculty and BPE gave enthusiastic approval to the experiment, and 84% of participating

students deemed their Corps learning experience to be substantially worthwhile.

Whether the Corps will survive over the long run is an open question, of course. One thing, however, seems clear. Educators will have to do more than they are currently doing if our students are going to meet the twenty-first century with real-world communication skills. The Corps is our attempt to help students do just that.

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