



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## "He's the Dude Who Makes Salad Dressing": Relating to Students

In a literature-based writing class, I introduced "A Rose for Emily" (William Faulkner) and discovered that most students have a difficult time putting events into sequence and struggle to understand the meaning of the story. Homer Barron, Miss Emily's ill-suited suitor, is an interesting character and always the subject of questions. Consequently, I spend time explaining Faulkner's use of symbolism, using Homer as an example. A student asked why Miss Emily found the rugged man from the north so attractive. I had the class "in the palm of my hand," enthralled, listening to every word. In explaining the woman's attraction to the man, I said, "It's like how I would feel if Paul Newman walked in the door!" I immediately saw that I had put a damper on the discussion; my class wilted before my eyes! There was an awkward silence which finally was broken by two talkative, uninhibited young men sitting in the first row. One looked bewildered, turned to the other, and whispered in a voice that could be heard by everyone: "Why does she get the 'hots' for someone who makes salad dressing?"

### The Problem

This was my epiphany! I saw that I had become one of those archaic, distant professors I had complained about throughout my undergraduate and graduate days. I remember thinking that this segment of academia had their own clubs and rituals based in the middle ages. They spoke a language that had little meaning to my world and were incapable of understanding my youthful culture. Now, standing in front of the class, I could not conceive of the idea that the students knew Paul Newman only because he made salad dressing and spaghetti sauce. How could they not know he was the idyllic, blue-eyed sex symbol of not long ago! I knew it was time to update my material and make a concerted effort to relate to my students—peppering my before-class banter, in-class lectures, and one-on-one instruction with more contemporary ideas. I knew this would not be an easy task, but the thought of joining the ranks of the crusty, unapproachable and archaic academics before I was 45 was disturbing.

### The Solution

I have discovered several successful steps to becoming a more relevant and contemporary instructor, perhaps adding to my ability to reach the students and motivate them to learn the subject matter that I find stimulating and exciting.

**Step 1.** Let the students know you are *human*. You had problems finding a parking spot, had a hectic morning, are having problems with your car, and so on. In short, let them know that you are dealing with many of the same problems they are facing. But, be careful not to become the proverbial bore who does nothing but talk about himself or herself and family.

**Step 2.** Teach *accountability with empathy!* Let students know you have dealt with many of the same problems they are now facing. Academic life has not changed; students are still struggling to find appropriate majors, dealing with finances and all the other bureaucratic obstacles one must hurdle before obtaining a degree. There are many students who feel disillusioned because obtaining a degree is nowhere in sight. I usually mention that it took me 20 years, with some interruptions—such as three children, one husband, and one dog—to complete two degrees. This is usually followed by a pep talk about not giving up on goals and plans for the future.

My goal is not only to teach literature and writing theory but to teach acceptable student responses. Essays which have spent several days in the laundry pile, folded, placed in the back pocket, and smoothed out on my desk before being submitted are not accepted. I mention the professors I have had who refused to accept writing assignments on paper with one corner slightly turned up, or with too much "white-out," too many erased words, and the like.

The most stressful time of the semester for me is the day the final term papers are due. Because I do not accept late assignments except in extreme emergencies, I find that there have been several deaths in the students' families, and I usually end up feeling responsible in some way! When reminding students several weeks in advance about the due date for the term



papers, I mention that my grandmother died four times while I was in college! Again, many students feel that even if they were not in class (they were in South Padre Island, at the dentist, or at some other important activity), the assignment that was due on that day should automatically be accepted when they return, at their convenience. You will know when the emergency is real.

**Step 3.** Be *current* with the times. Know about world, state, and local events. Reading the local newspaper one evening, I found a brief notice that parking violations would not be issued for 10 days because the printer had not sent the new tickets. Since my students and I face the same parking problems, sharing this information was met with applause and enthusiasm.

Attend films and know the current idols or heart throbs. In an introduction to drama and Greek tragedy, I lectured on Aristotle's *Poetics*. I talked about the Greek theatre-goers and the playwright's intent in producing a catharsis in his audience. A young woman

asked if it might have been how she felt while crying during *Legends of the Fall* with present-day heart throb, Brad Pitt. Exactly! A lively class discussion ensued examining recent films that have had this effect on the students.

### Conclusion

Evaluate the rapport you have established with your students. Your goal is not to become an equal or to establish friendships but to have your students see you as a human being who is interested in the subject matter of the course, in the world, and in them.

**Silvija Meija**, *Instructor, Humanities and Performing Arts and Department of Communication*

For further information, contact the author at Lansing Community College, P. O. Box 40010, Lansing, MI 48901-7210.

## Sports: A Bridge to Cultural Understanding

Competitive sports always offer opportunities to bring out both the best and worst in participants. An interesting dilemma presented itself during one of my physical education classes. The course was a multi-skill-level badminton class of 41 students. Their diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds were getting in the way of their desire to understand better a game they enjoyed playing. In this situation, calling the score and lines was providing the occasion for acting out distrust and disdain based on cultural and ethnic differences. Students were losing the essence of the game experience by engaging in arguments and threatening behavior that reflected their lack of understanding of each others' cultures.

However, I realized that it was not enough to explain basic game etiquette; some other strategy for reducing or eliminating the discord had to be implemented. One afternoon as I was playing with a group of students who were calling out scores in Spanish, the perfect strategy occurred to me. At the next class meeting I presented my idea. Instead of limiting ourselves to calling scores in English, we could use the game situation to learn the numbers in other languages. We might also learn common greetings appropriate to a class setting. I emphasized the value of understanding and tolerance in a learning environment.

At first the students seemed surprised and unsettled by my suggestion. I asked those who thought it might

be a good idea to write in their own language the numbers 1 through 15, as well as a few common greetings. I announced that I would make copies for class members who requested them. Almost everyone took to the idea. I, along with the students, learned and began to use numbers and terms from the several languages represented in the class. Soon a score of 8-9 was being heard as "ocho-nueve" or "bah-gio." Students taught each other and me the correct pronunciations. Differences had become matters of interest rather than occasions for conflict.

I have continued to use this strategy for promoting understanding and positive relations among my students. Each time I introduce the idea, there is the initial stage of distrust, but it is soon followed by enthusiastic engagement in the project. And each time I am reassured that sports are wonderful vehicles for bridging the differences between players.

**Carole A. Beeton**, *Instructor, Physical Education*

For further information, contact the author at Diablo Valley College, 321 Golf Club Road, Pleasant Hill, CA 94523.