



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

Commemorative Speeches: Sharing Similarities

My students make commemorative speeches, recalling memories of loved ones who made indelible marks on their lives. The recognition that someone has influenced another to achieve crosses all cultural levels. Students hear classmates thank grandparents for listening, teachers for taking time to explain concepts, and children for providing unconditional love. They are reminded that all humans cherish intangible, yet essential values.

The only requirements for the commemorative speech are that students focus on someone of importance to them, speak from a manuscript, and restrict remarks to three minutes. They must describe actions that illustrate why their special person(s) motivated them.

After hearing these speeches over several semesters, I have come to believe that all students should have the opportunity to meet these wonderful sources of inspiration. So now, students are encouraged to invite these special individuals to class to honor them in person. [A dental hygiene student invited two of her instructors, and it was the first time I witnessed my colleagues speechless!]

In a class of five Asian students, two African American males, one physically handicapped person, several students over the age of 40, and others, I began to understand the transformation that can take place when people from various backgrounds and cultures share intimate life details. One Asian student talked about her mother and the hours she worked at night to provide support for her family. She started crying when she talked about a boy she dated who did not meet the approval of her parents. During this difficult year, she distanced herself from her mother, only to return after her parents' fears were justified. This was a story everyone in the class could understand even though it was delivered in a clipped Japanese accent. Another student recalled how difficult it was for international students to adjust to the United States. The speaker said that American students often give international students elaborate handshakes as a way of trying to make them feel welcome. What they do not realize is that these gestures are very foreign; one student thought his new American acquaintance was

trying to break his wrist. Another shared how his mother had packed their belongings and moved to Boulder, Colorado, to get him away from gang influence. He explained how much he missed his mother when she moved back to Los Angeles after he graduated from high school. He shared how often he called his mother to persuade her to return to Colorado. As a punch line to his speech, he said he has continued to call her every week to get her to change her mind, always calling collect. At the word "collect," the whole class broke out in uproarious laughter.

Not once have any students thanked people for giving them money or for helping them acquire status or powerful positions. When students speak of inspirational people in their lives, they fondly remember simple, yet touching acts. It is the genuine gestures—taking the time for who they are and, most important, giving them unconditional love—that have made the most impact. Diversity adds extra flavor to the speeches, but the speeches have universal meaning because vivid personal examples speak to people of all backgrounds.

After my experiences with these wonderful speeches, I went on to adapt this activity to my other classes. In humanities, I ask students to identify an artist who has influenced their outlook in some way. In English, I ask students to look for historical or literary figures who helped change their vision. In these classes, I bring examples of authors who have written, in the prefaces of their books, why certain people earned a special thank you.

With my practiced eye, I see that students devote significant amounts of time selecting the best words to communicate deep, sincere feelings. They learn to trust their observations and appreciate the audience's instant reinforcement of their message.

Would I apply this activity in a math or science class? Most certainly! It is important to single out someone who has sparked curiosity or who has removed barriers to understanding the abstract mysteries of math or science.

In adaptations of this speech, I stress the commonalities, the universal interpretation of this activity. All people, no matter their background, need moments of



love and recognition. All people, no matter their economic status, can become excited and inspired by gestures of goodwill. After delivering and listening to commemorative speeches, it is easy for students to identify our human similarities, the first step in learning to appreciate other cultures. We become transformed as we listen and share some part of others' lives, and we are reminded of what is important in our own.

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
October 25, 1996 Vol. XVIII, No. 24

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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals postage paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to INNOVATION ABSTRACTS, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712-1293.
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