



# 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

## *Creative Writing in the History Classroom*

Research indicates that students sharpen their critical thinking skills through writing, and "writing across the curriculum" has been a high priority at Midlands Technical College. For the 1992 fall semester, I designed a writing component for History 110, our one-semester United States history survey course.

In this course I combined the study of history with the requirement for each student to create a fictional family and then develop the memorabilia from which an American saga might be written about that family. The idea was for each student to introduce a new-comer—European or African—into the American colonies and build a family story around that person's descendants through history to the present time. The students were instructed to connect the fictional family to their own grandparents so that the span of history would be more meaningful. The story would be pieced together through "primary sources"—the documents left by that family and "discovered" by the students. Students also had to base two of their entries on genuine historical documents which they located in libraries, county courthouses, local or state archives, or other repositories of records. With this requirement, the students were introduced to research in original sources.

Each class began with a short quiz to encourage regular study habits, and then the class discussed the reading assignment in the textbook. From time to time, students would share ideas about how they were going to place their families in the particular period being studied. Essay examinations were administered at midterm and at the end of the semester to grade the students on historical knowledge and understanding.

For the second part of the class, the students worked in the Writing Center to create the family papers. Combining knowledge of history with imagination, the students drafted letters, wrote entries in personal journals, dictated wills, and composed newspaper clippings or other documents to show how American families might have been affected by events they witnessed. At the end of each class, students printed a copy of the day's work for me. I marked these papers to indicate errors in grammar and to make suggestions for improvement in style and historical accuracy.

(Having access to the word processors made it easy for them to make changes.) The students also served as editors of their work, writing brief introductions for each document to explain how it formed a part of the family story. In addition, each wrote a general introduction and conclusion to the saga. Through these exercises, students gained a deeper understanding of the impact of history on the lives of ordinary citizens.

As the semester progressed, the students became more knowledgeable and confident, and their work improved in quantity and quality. At first, most students composed one-half to two-thirds of a page for a document. Later, most were writing two and sometimes three pages for each entry, and they were very willing to make the revisions I suggested. (One student's portfolio reached 75 pages of revised composition.) I graded the body of work at the end of the semester, taking into account whether all 23 assignments were completed, how well revisions had been made, the depth of historical perspective as well as creativity and good writing. A significant sign of the quality of the students' work was the decision of the editors of *Stylus*, the college's literary magazine, to include selections for publication in the spring issue. Students whose works were published were pleased with this recognition.

According to the students' evaluations of the course, they liked approaching history in this new way. More than 85 percent said that writing about history on a regular basis deepened their understanding of historical developments; that writing about historical events in a personal way made these events more meaningful; and that dealing with history in a creative way brought about a greater appreciation for it. Ninety-two percent said that their thinking skills had been challenged by integrating historical material into a personalized narrative. One hundred percent said that the course was intellectually stimulating. From my perspective, too, the course was successful; however, it required a great deal of time.

For the next semester, I assigned handwritten letterbooks (one-subject notebooks) to the students in one of my sections of Western Civilization II. After each class, the students composed letters which delved



into one of the events or issues which we discussed in class. The author and recipient of each letter had to be identified (e.g., from Pierre, a participant in the storming of the Bastille, to his pregnant wife, Jeanne, telling of his hopes for the future of France) which required the students to consider these events and issues in very personal terms. I quickly checked four of the letterbooks at each class, just to encourage the students to keep them up-to-date. On three occasions I collected the letterbooks and made suggestions for improvements, along with remarks of encouragement. At the end of the term, I assigned grades to the letterbooks, which constituted 16 percent of the semester grade. I also designed an evaluation instrument to determine the students' responses to the course generally and to the writing component specifically. They were very positive.

The letterbook is a good compromise for a writing assignment in courses which do not concentrate on composition. This technique encourages students to write on a regular basis without creating a major grading burden for the instructor. It requires that

students think about issues the instructor is addressing. Finally, it moves the instructional material into a more personal realm for the students. Can it be adapted for a mathematics course? Have students write to friends and pose a word problem devised by the student, applying the mathematical principles being studied. Give extra credit for a response which shows how the solution was reached. Sociology? Have students write to an imaginary pen pal in a foreign country to explain sociological developments in the United States. To add a multicultural dimension, have students research conditions in a foreign country and write letters from that perspective, applying the sociological lessons learned in the classroom to a different society.

Be creative with assignments. Be patient with students. You should be surprised and rewarded with the results!

**Dixon K. Durham**, *Instructor, History*

For further information, contact the author at Midlands Technical College, P. O. Box 2408, Columbia, SC 29202.

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### PRECONFERENCE SEMINARS

Sunday, May 21, 2:00-4:00 p.m.

- **Country/Western Line Dancing Lessons**—William McPherson, *Chattanooga State Technical Community College*
- **Faculty Evaluation: Characteristics of Effective and Defensible Plans**—James Hammons, *University of Arkansas*
- **How the 500-Channel Universe Will Change the Way We Teach**—Larry Johnson, *League for Innovation in the Community College*
- **What's Hot (and What's Not) in Faculty Development**—Mike McHargue, *Foothill College*
- **The Student At-Risk in the Community College**—William Moore, Jr., *The University of Texas at Austin*

- **A Vision for the Twenty-First Century**—Donald G. Phelps, *The University of Texas at Austin*
- **Improving Student Motivation**—John E. Roueche, *The University of Texas at Austin*
- **Making Access and Curriculum Reform Compatible Goals: A Faculty Perspective**—Uri Treisman, *The University of Texas at Austin*
- **Strategic Learning/Strategic Teaching: A Model for the Twenty-First Century**—Claire Weinstein, *The University of Texas at Austin*

### KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

◆ Monday, May 22, 8:30-9:45 a.m.

*Juliet Garcia, President, The University of Texas at Brownsville*

◆ Tuesday, May 23, 8:30-9:15 a.m.

*George Boggs, President, Palomar College, and Immediate Past Chair, AACC*

For more information, call 512/471-7545.

**Suanne D. Roueche**, *Editor*

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