



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Issues for Debate: Increasing Student Participation

For many years I have been observing the level of student interaction and participation in my business courses. Some students are shy, afraid to say something wrong or be exposed to the criticism, unprepared to discuss the topic, or simply not assertive. Many of my students are commuters who travel an hour or more to come to campus or are taking a class in the evening after eight hours of work. They have other roles to play as spouses or family members, parents, heads of households, employees, civic leaders, church members, or citizens, so class participation is not their first priority.

After trying different strategies to increase the level of student participation in class, sometimes with great success and sometimes with lukewarm responses, I decided to develop a series of *issues for debate*:

- "Is it O.K. to use your company's computer to print some posters for the garage sale that you are going to have at your home next Saturday?"
- "Is it ethical to make personal calls to your friends from the office on company time?"
- "Should a company institute mandatory drug testing for all employees without regard for the employee's privacy rights?"
- "Does a company have a say in the activities of an employee during off-work hours?"
- "Does an employer have the right to put TV cameras in offices, employee lounges or bathrooms to monitor employee activities or to reduce employees' thievery?"
- "Does a retail store have the right to install TV cameras and special mirrors in dressing rooms in order to control shoplifting?"
- "Is it O.K. for an American sales manager working abroad to offer a bribe to a foreign purchasing agent in order to obtain an order, when working in a country where bribes are customarily given?"
- "Should underdeveloped countries not be allowed to learn high technology, so we can have them as buyers of our high-tech products, and not as our future competitors?"
- "Is it ethical to spend millions of dollars to advertise cigarettes and tobacco products in third world countries?"

- "Is it O.K. to use the office copier to make a copy of your personal tax return?"
- "A domestic company has in storage a large quantity of products that it cannot sell here because the product does not meet the safety standards required by our government, should this company sell this product in foreign markets where there is no strict regulation, even if the product could be unsafe to buyers and consumers?"
- "Should an employer have the right to intervene in 'office romances'?"

The students receive the *issue for debate* one week before the scheduled discussion and are asked to prepare by tapping any information source they wish. Some students go to the library and launch a formal research effort using periodicals, journals, and encyclopedias. Others use more unorthodox methods, such as asking other faculty members or knowledgeable individuals in the community. A student may take a position supporting an issue, or not, but must explain the reason for taking the position.

On the day of the discussion, the class members are divided into two groups. The students who have a common position are given time to exchange ideas and to explain to other students in the group their main arguments and strategies to be used in the forthcoming discussion. In most cases, there is a lively discussion of the issues, with balanced student participation. Most students are able to apply concepts and principles of the class lectures into the discussion of the issues. They are able to form opinions, take positions and defend them, understand other students' and the instructor's opinions and points of view, and develop an appreciation for current business events and legal issues.

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Criminal Law—The "Grimm" Truth

Many students of criminal justice perceive the subject of criminal law to be boring, difficult, or intimidating, and the classes to be long-winded lectures about elements of crime, culpability, intent, and proof. Aside from the students' personal experiences, little practical application is traditionally incorporated in these courses.

To increase student interest and provide practical application of criminal law to life, I decided to require each student to read one fairy tale from a select group of tales and to apply the Texas Penal Code to the acts described in the story line. Several children's stories that included crimes in the plot were identified: *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *The Three Little Pigs*.

The basic premise of the assignment was that the story represented a police report, prepared by an officer and submitted to the student, acting as a supervisor. The goal was to have the student/supervisor recommend all charges to the prosecutor.

The student was to list, in chronological order, all criminal acts that occurred and cite them according to Texas law. Then, all facts of proof from the story were to be identified for each crime; this required recording the elements of each crime. All actors were to be identified and matched with their criminal acts. After the major crimes were identified, the degree of offense (felony/misdemeanor) and level were to be identified according to Texas law, and all lesser offenses listed. Finally, all identifiable defenses and justifications were to be listed and cited according to Texas law. Then, recommendations were made on what charges should be brought against whom.

Students were allowed to work individually or in groups, but each was required to submit an individual report for grading. They were encouraged to meet with me at least once before the assignment was due to discuss progress. I used this time to guide those students who either were making this assignment too hard (several did) or were heading in the wrong direction. No instructions were given on the length of the report, the detail required, or the depth to which the student must delve into the law. Students were merely told to answer all questions in the instructions.

The assignment was made during the 12th week of the semester, after the majority of the course work had been completed. This allowed me adequate time to introduce the class to the principles and concepts of criminal law and the Texas Penal Code.

Students were interviewed at the end of the assignment. Many were amazed at how violent children's books can be when viewed from an uncommon perspective. Others said they found the law less intimidating when there was an objective to achieve. Several expressed concern over accuracy and comprehensiveness of stories/reports, while others said they learned more about the law in two or three weeks than they had in the previous 12. Not one of the students indicated that this assignment was useless or unnecessary.

Students were allowed to use the Texas Penal Code during the comprehensive final exam. Fewer students looked at the Code during the exam than in previous semesters, and those that did spent less time hunting and searching for answers. They were more confident in their ability to use the Code, and final grades were considerably higher than in previous semesters.

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