



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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SURPRISE! SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT TODAY

A couple of years ago, a student of mine reacted to a writing assignment I had made by saying, "Again? How come every teacher wants us to write about the same old thing?" This was definitely NOT the reaction I wanted to hear from a student, especially at the beginning of a semester. Coincidentally, that semester several of Steve's teachers had asked him to write about his goals, and he was bored by the repetition. His comment struck a chord with me because I think variety is important in the classroom. I don't want students to feel like they're doing a lot of the "same old thing."

After teaching technical writing for the first time last year, I wanted to add more variety to some of my writing assignments to make the course more fun for students, since writing technical documents can become tedious at times. One of my assignments had required students to fabricate the details of an accident or altercation at a fictional company and then write up an incident report. I remembered some of the dramatizations on "real-life" television shows and wondered if students would enjoy the assignment more if they could watch a video of a simulated accident, as if they were actually witnessing an accident at work, and then write up their reports. They would have to observe what happened carefully and take good notes to make their reports accurate and thorough.

But where could I get such a video? I first thought of taping a television show, but I could never find an episode with a simulated accident at work. About the time that I was ready to file the idea away in that "Ideas" file we all keep, I remembered that Hutchinson Community College has an Emergency Medical Services department. Perhaps one of the EMT teachers might have a training video that would work for my technical writing class. It didn't take long for an instructor to send over a video showing a simulation of an employee being hurt by a falling box in a warehouse, exactly the type of video I needed. This time my students worked in small groups and enjoyed writing the Incident Reports,

especially because the acting in the video was pretty amateurish at times. While students were entertained by some of the actors' attempts at showing pain and distress, they still took accurate notes of the important details in the video and wrote good reports. Using the video to enable students to witness, instead of invent, an incident made the assignment seem much more authentic and, therefore, more interesting. An additional benefit for me was that the assignment proved easier to grade because all papers were about the same scenario.

This coming semester, I plan to change another assignment, one that requires students to write up a set of instructions. Instead of being asked to create their own procedures to write about, something that repeatedly seems difficult for many students, they will undoubtedly be surprised when they come to class and find that we will be making kaleidoscopes. Yes, my classroom will look like an art room with all the supplies laid out (PVC pipe, mirrors, bits of glass and beads, glue gun, etc.) so students can each construct a real kaleidoscope.

In the past I have simply *told* students in my lecture that one way to plan a set of instructions is actually to do the procedure and make notes about the various steps. Now, however, I will be showing, not just telling, because students will be assigned to write up a set of instructions for making the kaleidoscopes they will be holding in their hands. I think that, once again, students will respond favorably to a writing assignment which is presented in a way that is slightly off the beaten path. Again, having students use a common context should simplify grading for me!

If *we* begin to feel that our assignments and classroom activities look routine or even a bit boring (heaven forbid!)—a bit too much of the same old thing—how will students feel about the work they will be doing? Students respond to variety. A little variety can go a long way toward keeping them interested in what we're trying to teach, and it can also help us reach those students with different learning styles, especially those who are more visual or kinesthetic learners. Occasionally, I think we should also look outside our own departments for ways to add some spice to our teaching



methods. Is there an unusual way to present our subject matter that will make learning more fun and meaningful for students? Could we use art or music, for example, in a classroom activity? I know that if my students are really engaged and having fun with a writing assignment, they will usually spend more time writing, and I will see better papers. When they are excited about an assignment, I get more excited, too, and I am a better teacher.

Janet Cook, *Instructor, English*

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FISHING FOR POETS

Clatsop Community College is located in Astoria, Oregon, where the Columbia River flows into the Pacific. Since the earliest times, Astoria has been a fishing town. With the depleting salmon runs, however, the future of fishing is shaky at best, and the future of the community is uncertain.

For three years now, CCC has co-sponsored the "Fisher Poets Gathering," a three-day poetry festival for commercial fishermen and women who have poems, stories, and songs to share. The gathering has brought us all together for a chance to celebrate our maritime industry and lifestyle, and to keep our stories alive for future generations.

The festival was brought into being by a group of friends: an English teacher, a French teacher, a college counselor, a stock broker, a museum curator, and a couple of fishermen. We hold the festival in a local brew pub situated on the Columbia River. We schedule it late in February, between halibut and crab season. This year, over 40 people participated: fishermen, fisherwomen, deck hands, cannery workers, seiners, trollers, trawlers, shrimpers, and crabbers. They read heartfelt stories about disasters at sea (and near-disasters), read poems both serious and comic, sang songs about their fishing heritage, told stories both true and maybe not-so-true, and shared a common respect for nature and her gifts to us.

For those who had more experience with a net than with a pencil, we offered workshops on topics such as getting started, polishing your work, how to get published, and even how to self-publish. For poets who

weren't on the program but who finally mustered up their courage, we set up two "open mike" sessions for spontaneous readings. "Fisher Artists" found a venue for their work at a local gallery and at two slide-show presentations. "Fisher Musicians," including *Shanghaied on the Willamette* and *Poseidon's Adventures*, had a chance to sing and to teach us their songs.

After the festival, we edited and published an anthology of Fisher Poetry, called *Salt in Our Veins*. The anthology has become a tangible symbol of what our town can accomplish in the literary world.

Our audience this year reached a peak of about 300 (from Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California), which meant there was standing-room-only in the bar. It was gratifying to see "non-poetry types" (cannery workers on their dinner hour, for example) pay five dollars to stand in a crowded bar for the privilege of hearing poetry read out loud. It was clear that they were responding to their life on stage, and it was clear that they saw a glimpse of a world that previously has excluded many of them.

This is what teaching in a community like Astoria has meant to me—that we bridge the gap between the "high culture" of academia and the "popular culture" of our streets and docks. I am looking forward to next year's festival, which promises to be even bigger and more boisterous.

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