



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TOWARD THE END OF THE COURSE

Returning to the classroom to teach a freshman seminar was a humbling experience! How do I wake up drowsy heads strolling into a 7:30 a.m. class? How do I convince skeptical students that the mandatory freshman seminar really is a critical component of their future academic achievement? How do I find the time to prepare lessons, meet with students, grade reaction papers, and do justice to the countless hours that our faculty planning team devoted to developing and designing the course?

Clearly, I was challenged when I reentered the classroom after nine years of administration. Far greater than the time demands was the ominous task of motivating students who didn't choose to be involved in their required seminar. I knew that students most in need of support services are the least likely to ask for them. How could I use this knowledge to prepare the most needy students in my class for the rigors of college courses?

During the initial weeks of the course, students seemed to be reasonably attentive, relatively responsive, and somewhat participative. However, I questioned the extent to which students internalized the materials and used the course concepts to develop success strategies. More often than not, the class members seemed only to go through the motions. For example, discussions about organizational management resulted in students considering how they managed their time, priorities, and goals. Homework assignments and reaction papers indicated that students understood the concepts; however, their behaviors led me to believe that few, if any, of them were applying the concepts and developing constructive organizational skills.

Such was the tone of the course for six of the first eight class sessions, and I began to question my decision to teach this seminar. I realized that my inability to reach my students was resulting in more than passing frustration. Toward the end of the sixth class, perhaps due to my frustration, I commented that many of the

students seemed to be well-intentioned people but lazy learners. Surprisingly, this led to a discussion on the value of active involvement in learning rather than acting as a passive spectator in the classroom. Links were established between active learning and effective performance in the workplace. Discussions focused on the relationship between a positive self-image and confidence in one's ability to learn and succeed academically.

The following week's discussion focused on the value of studying on a culturally diverse campus. Spirited discussion led me to wonder whether the students simply related to the topic or if the previous week's discussion impacted their behavior.

The eighth and final week of the class provided an opportunity for summary and reflection. The final assignment required students to submit a three-page paper identifying the topics that were of greatest value and explaining why they were useful. A funny thing happened toward the end of the course: Students opened their minds and disclosed personal reflections on the impact of their learning experiences.

Quotes from some of the students' final papers are the best and most revealing evaluations:

"Being a good listener is a life skill that is essential to being a well-educated individual. I want to learn all that I can here at college, in order to become the best teacher that I can be. Education not only comes from textbooks, but it also comes from the experiences related by instructors and others, casual conversations, the media and by the comments of others. Effective listening and learning go hand in hand."

"Before I started this class my schedule was all over the place. I ran from here to there, doing this and that. COL101 helped to manage my time the way I like it."

"About 99% of us in class were new. Nobody knew anybody until class went on. As weeks have passed we learned a lot from each other. Probably more than anyone of us had expected."



"The first assignment was 'What do I want and how will I get there?' This question really made me think of what I wanted to study. It also made me think of what I want out of life and what was I working for. I figured out that I wanted to get an education so I could repay my parents for everything they did for me. What motivates me is seeing my father working 12 hours a day for a miserable 15 bucks an hour after working for 25 years."

"Life-long learning is another reason for reaching my goals. I believe that you learn something new every day. ...Exploring diversity is an excellent way to understand different cultures. I feel like taking everything in, and I love it. I love learning about other people because I believe that they have something to teach me."

"In most of my classes I felt like I did not matter because my teachers would not let me say anything. My job was to sit and listen and possibly take notes. In this class you actually knew my name."

Lessons Learned

Returning to the classroom has provided me with principles that henceforth will guide my work, not only as a teacher but as an administrator.

- Trust that your classroom leadership will contribute to student learning. Don't come to a quick conclusion that signs of student disinterest are indicative of an ineffective learning environment.
- Share your affect as a way of reaching the feelings of your students. Your appropriate displays of frustration and non-judgmental descriptions of perceptions can lead to students examining their behaviors, becoming involved, and making more effort to participate and learn.
- Stay with the course when the going gets tough. Never give up on your students' potential to learn. Great and useful insights can emerge at the most unexpected time.

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October 26, 2001, Vol. XXIII, 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, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu