



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## SHORTENING THE DISTANCE TO SUCCESS IN BIOLOGY

In an effort to shorten the distance between student and instructor, I have implemented a new strategy that may be of interest to others. In the past, following the first major test, I would post the grades and ask students to come by my office if they wanted to look at their test papers. I would make the common remarks that if some of the students didn't start studying, they were going to be left behind. So much for the pep talk. Very few students ever came by my office to look over their tests. I began to realize that I had to be more assertive in my efforts to instill a bit more concern for learning into the minds of my students.

So now, after the first and second tests, I post grades as usual, with the following exceptions. Alongside the ID numbers of students making an A, B, or F on the first test, I write "see Mr. Lay," instead of a score or grade. I also place a sign-up sheet on my office door where students can schedule appointments to see me over the next few days.

When a student who has made an F on the test comes in, I find his paper, give him a key to the test, let him see what he missed and ask questions if he wishes. I also talk about the amount and type of study that are necessary to do well in this course. I try not to be too negative after the first test and usually let the student know that turning things around right now is critical—passing the course is still possible.

But I do not stop there. I have often felt that while we usually criticize those who do poorly, we do not always praise those who have done well. So the students making A's and B's must come to my office to get their first test grades, also. I give them their test papers and answer keys for checking their responses. I then explain that the main reason for calling them to my office is to thank them for their diligent work and congratulate them on making a good grade on the first test. Sometimes, the student is surprised. I've had students tell me that they thought they must be in trouble. I've also had

them tell me that they had never had a teacher thank them for doing well.

I continue the same procedure for the second unit test with the following exception; only students making A's and F's are asked to come by. This time, I counsel students making an F as I did after the first test—unless they are "second timers." Then, I look at all of their grades, including lab, and give them an idea of their overall average and what will be required for the remainder of the semester in order to pass or make an acceptable final grade. I ask about study habits, work schedules, and extracurricular activities, then discuss options—e.g., dropping the class and trying again later. Scholarships and financial aid may complicate these options. How about a tutor? We have tutors available through Phi Theta Kappa. Is there participation in a study group? I customarily divide my classes into study groups.

Students making A's are thanked again for their good work.

We are concerned about students' welfare and really *care* that they succeed. But, we must do more than just say, "I care."

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## IS THIS REALLY IMPORTANT?

"Is this important?" "Is this going to be on the test?" "I missed a day—did we do anything important?"

These questions are disliked by teachers everywhere. One of my son's teachers had these and seven other questions listed on a wall poster, labeled "Don't Even Ask These." But I had to wonder what students were really wanting to know when they ask these questions and why we respond in such a negative manner.

Perhaps all students are asking is for prioritization of the information we have presented. Teachers may have prejudiced the way that the students ask. They may have used "it will be on the test" to provide a crude form of prioritization of the information presented in class and text—a faulty method. What students really want to ask is more likely "how important is the information you gave just now compared to the other information layered in text, lecture, or other sources?" Of course, students may not feel empowered to ask this way, or know how to ask; so perhaps the more accepted approach is the "test" question.

Our response, unfortunately, is also preconditioned. We are angered or irritated that they are talking us into doing some of their critical thinking for them. The precedent to analysis would be prioritization of information, and they want a shortcut.

Should we be angered or irritated? I suggest that while this might be a natural response, another might stimulate more learning. After all, in introductory courses, particularly in general education classes such as the ones I teach in history and government, some events and ideas truly are of more importance than others.

Someone applying for a job who does not know the particulars of the Jacksonian Bank Controversy is not considered uneducated. However, someone who cannot articulate the significance of the attack on Pearl Harbor is considered uneducated, even if he passed all of the required history courses. Those of us with multiple degrees recognize the importance of prioritization implicitly. So why do we bow our necks at students who seek it?

I think we may see these questions as a threat to our position. Who among us has not wanted to say, "Of course, if I said it, it's important—am I just flapping my jaws up here?" To respond from an authority position, however, misses the point, and may miss the questions really being asked. After all, in an hour-and-a-half lecture, did you say at least one thing that was less important than the rest? Do you really put *everything* on the test? Perhaps the best way to turn these questions into a profitable education experience is to direct

questioning responses back to the student.

- When asked, "Will this be on the test?" we could ask, "Should it be?" The prioritization effort could drive the class toward consensus.

- If asked, "Did we do anything important in the class I missed?" we should ask the class at the beginning of the next class period. Prioritization could be sought from the whole class, asking just how important the information presented was to those who were present. Of course, care should be taken to avoid embarrassing the student asking the question.

Of course, the instructor should structure the consensus-achieving mechanism so as to fit the lecture and goals of the course; but a lively debate, even an uninformed debate, can be used to enlighten.

Finally, I discuss the idea of prioritization with the class. I am surprised when students demonstrate a limited knowledge of this concept, but they typically need a name to attach to what they are attempting to do and are grateful for guidance. They want to know that it is acceptable to believe that some things are more important than others. It gives them some freedom to set their own priorities about information they gather in their classes and their texts.

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