



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ON TREATING STUDENTS AS ADULTS

During winter quarter, 1988, I taught a distance education class on communication theory over our university's COM-NET system, a combination of a telephone conference call with 12 remote sites and audiographics (electronic chalkboard and slow-scan video). I found that maintaining the human element in the class presented a major challenge. One means of doing so was having students write short essays at the beginning of class, while roll was called, asking them to share feelings on paper about something that would catch their personal interest.

I had been teaching the class for nearly one month, and a certain degree of rapport was building among class members. Then in the fourth week of class, just prior to the class beginning, I received an unexpected telephone call informing me that Carol, a student at a remote site, had been diagnosed with leukemia, had begun treatment, and died unexpectedly from sudden hemorrhaging. Her death came as a shock to me and to classmates at her site in rural Utah, and at other sites as well. Announcing her death was one of the hardest things I experienced as a teacher over distance education, or in my teaching career, for that matter, because it was impossible to read the reactions of students at other sites. Carol had participated in class the previous week and was suddenly gone. But I felt that I had to inform class members of the situation, and I did so as tastefully as I knew how. Since that time, her short presence in my class has been a cause for reflection.

During the week prior to her death, class members had written a short essay on this assigned topic: If you were called to testify before a university subcommittee investigating COM-NET regarding what you had learned thus far in the Communication Theory class, what insights about medium and message would you share?

I had read these essays, commented on them, and was about to return them to the students. But I kept the last one from Carol and have reflected upon its contents

since that time. It was a brief statement, probably dashed off in ten minutes or less. What made it noteworthy was its finality as the last statement from a capable student.

Carol had written about the evolution of her experience with the telecommunication system, how her first two classes, scheduled in workshop fashion with large blocks of time, had been "an experiment in the macabre." She told of her frustration in being told that one class required a prospectus of the student's Creative Project.

"...I'll never forget the comment of the professor when he said, 'It doesn't matter what you write the prospectus on for this class; it's just practice for you when you write the real one.' That class was a total waste and very frustrating.

From then on, COM-NET evolved with professors trying various methods, and finally coming to the point we're at now of using the system to its maximum potential. It's great and I feel as good about anything I've learned over COM-NET as any undergraduate class I took on campus. But I'm a little concerned about the paranoia displayed by some [professors on campus] who say students are abusing the system. Please give us credit for being adult enough to know what to do and how to act in class."

Some of the specific elements mentioned in Carol's essay reflected on aspects of our use of the COM-NET system. I knew that the earlier class, arranged in workshop fashion, had been difficult; I had talked with the other instructor that quarter and learned of his frustration with the imposed format. Unfortunately, that was Carol's first quarter. The later classes reflected a growing level of experience among instructors in using the technology, eventually becoming more comfortable with its use. The concern some professors had about abuse of the system stemmed from skepticism about operating over such a distance and relying so much on student initiative; faculty members who had not tried it were particularly concerned. They doubted that it could be as effective as the tried-and-true, on-campus instruction.



From my own experience, both on and off campus, I knew that the level of quality for courses varied considerably, but that it was possible to teach a course that was equal to and sometimes superior to the distance education system.

However, more than the specific concerns about the local distance education system, there is a message that should come through for all college or university teachers, or trainers in business and industry, when working with adults:

- Give them credit for being adults. Realize that they have families and jobs and many responsibilities.
- Give them assignments that connect with the realities they face.
- Expect good work, but understand when things don't always work out exactly as planned.
- Remember that we are more than names on a roll or voices over a speaker phone.
- And finally, realize that experiments with distance educational technology make qualitative differences in people's lives and that we as teachers are ethically responsible to make those experiences the best that we can.

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THE SPECIALTY SPEECH

One of the most difficult problems in teaching a public speaking class is the lack of time to cover all of the material and to have students speak as often as they should. In an introductory course, students must develop their speaking skills by describing, informing, and persuading—the first three speeches that are standard in most public speaking courses. For the students' fourth speech, however, I've assigned the "specialty" speech.

The specialty speech is different from the others in several respects. Most notably, it's the only speech for which I choose the topic—actually, students draw their assignments from a hat. I tell them that in the outside world they may be required to speak on subjects about which they have little knowledge. So far, topics have ranged from presenting a status report to speaking on television.

To gather the information they need, students are required to research their subject as well as cite their references during the course of the speech. This requirement not only moves them up a level on the taxonomic scale, but it allows them to discover and share with the class the wealth of information available on public speaking topics.

The information that the students share and my comments on each subject allow the class to cover a wide range of subjects in the limited time that we're together. Feedback has been positive, and the knowledge students have shared has been extensive.

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