



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## THE TRUTH ABOUT TEACHING

Don't let anyone ever kid you: teaching is not hard work. It is exhausting, excruciating work. I had the honor of being an adjunct faculty member for Tunxis Community College during fall '99 semester, teaching the first section of freshman composition. Even though I have spent a fair amount of time in the classroom over the last 20 years, it has not been as a composition instructor. That was where I started in 1970, but the circuitous career path I have taken over the years has led me in other directions. Being in a composition classroom again, however, reminded me of all the emotions I used to experience every semester—a roller coaster of highs and lows, a swing between confidence and self-consciousness, a single breath between knowing and the panic of not-being-quite-sure-but-hoping-no-one-catches-my-error...if-there-was-one.

I had 15 students in this class—small by most standards and certainly a manageable size during paper-grading time. An evening class meeting once a week was a familiar pattern, and nothing seemed unusual until I actually got in the room and realized that I had three hours to make the class meaningful and enriching, rather than boring and potentially deadly. Yikes! What was I thinking? Why did I agree to do this? I felt just like I did that first semester out of graduate school when I walked into a class full of eager students, some of whom were older than I was. (OK, so age is not an issue any more....) Here are some of the thoughts I have about teaching after this experience:

- You can fool some of the students some of the time, but not for long. They know when you are not prepared, intellectually engaged, or paying much attention. They may be polite and not say anything, but they know.
- Most students do not expect you to be the expert all the time on every topic. They seem to enjoy teaching you something they know that you do not and really do appreciate you more if you are open to mutual exploration.

- You get better answers to questions if you ask only questions to which you do not already have a clear answer formulated.
- It is OK to stray from a lesson plan if something more important starts happening in the class. It is NOT OK, however, not to have a plan.
- There are few things more painful than a class that bombs.
- There are few things more exhilarating than a class that clicks.

I am certain that I was not discovering anything new about teaching and learning during this semester. Furthermore, the circumstances in which I operated this semester were not exactly typical. My students were all males between the ages of 18 and 21. They wore uniforms; I wore a body alarm. They were not allowed to go to the bathroom alone; I was told to make sure I had access to the door at all times.

Our classroom was small and not elaborately equipped. We had no computers, no overhead projectors, only one white board, and a VCR that sometimes worked. Students were allowed to have limited amounts of paper and a clear, plastic pen. They were allowed to go to the meager library only once every six days, but could have magazines with them from time to time. They had access to television, but not to cable. No, this was not a local high school, but rather the Manson Youth Correctional Facility in Cheshire. All of the students had been sentenced there. One had been there since he was 14 and will remain until he is 21. I have no idea what he did to earn that sentence. Another student was transferred out and had no choice about finishing the class; he simply disappeared somewhere into the prison system.

In spite of the circumstances, most of these students seemed to be fairly typical of that age group. They were bright, and most of them actually wrote rather well in spite of limited mental stimulation. They were eager students, for the most part, and appreciated anyone who took the time to pay some positive attention to them. One student told me that his mother wanted to be a lawyer and was a student at Manchester Community





College. She had a 4.0 average, and he was determined to match her, A for A.

One thing that surprised me was that these young men all understood why they were there. Not one student played the victim or blamed anyone else for his plight. They had strong opinions but were open to other points of view and to grappling with the subjects at hand. In other words, they were doing better with this education thing than was their teacher.

As always, however, I had high hopes that because of something they heard or read in this class, or perhaps because of (rather than in spite of) my efforts at helping them be better communicators, they would never again be incarcerated. The danger, of course, is that once they are out and return to the environments which contributed to their arriving at Manson in the first place, they will fall back into old patterns of thinking and behaving. There is a good chance that some of them will return to prison as adults. At least that is what the statistics tell us. It is small comfort to know that any who return will be able to write complete sentences and well-constructed paragraphs. So, I tried also to teach life skills which included communication, good decision making, rational thinking, and considering consequences when making choices.

Teaching was simpler when I thought I was responsible only for subject matter, when my primary objectives were helping my students be better writers and making sure they could write about specific pieces of literature. Now I believe there are other issues with which we must concern ourselves, making that job of teaching more complex and much more personal. I want my students to be able to communicate not only about specific literature, but also about issues that concern them directly, by analyzing what they read, what they hear, and what they say.

Ultimately, the ability to think critically, solve problems, and communicate with others will make it possible for students to achieve their goals. Thus, it is our role to remember that we are at our best as teachers when we are more concerned about what students learn than we are about what topics we teach. My incarcerated students may be in a physical prison, but that does not mean that they have to be in a mental prison as well. Helping them be better writers may open some windows, but helping them think for themselves may take down barriers and permanently open doors.

No wonder teachers work so hard—there is a lot at stake!

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