A PROACTIVE CLASS

The levels of spontaneity, excitement, and sincerity generated when students become active in the learning/teaching process never cease to amaze me. In fact, when the students become creative and assume ownership of their work, the results are remarkable. The role that creativity plays in learning is best illustrated by one of my recent classes.

Each semester I require that students prepare an oral presentation on some computer topic, which can be their choice as long as I approve it. I know that in the business world a programmer or analyst frequently has to make presentations to management or instructional technology users. The students are required to use a visual aid to help make their point. The aid can be handouts, transparencies, board work, posters, PowerPoint presentations, or any other tool they choose to use. The students are usually very creative, and most of them do an outstanding job with this project. The students must listen closely because anything they hear in my class could appear on a test, which stimulates listening, note-taking, and attentiveness.

Last semester one of the students gave a presentation on HTML programming. After a brief explanation of his handout on language rules, he worked with the class on writing an HTML program to create a web site for each student. The class got excited, and learning became personal! Where once this student had not had much to say, there was suddenly camaraderie. He became interactive with all class members—astounding what a little teamwork will generate.

After listening to students excitedly discuss HTML, I asked if they wanted to consider developing a web site for our department. As this was a systems analysis and design class, not HTML programming, students had seen about as much HTML as I had. They were aware that the project would take extra effort and that we would have to learn the language aspect together. Yet, they again were excited and willing. Our webmaster and administration permitted us to develop a website, although no department websites had been developed at that time.

I kept a diary of each class meeting to be sure that we monitored exactly which responsibilities individual students assumed. This diary was not only for grading purposes but also to help keep the class on track with lesson plans for the analysis. Stephen Covey says, "Start with the end in mind." That is exactly what we did. We decided we *would* end up with a departmental website.

We made learning fun. We started with the school's mission statement to be sure we considered the mission and students first. Interviews were conducted with the college's webmaster, teachers in the department, employers of our students, and previous students. Thank-you letters were written. Pictures were taken, and data flow diagrams were drawn. A decision tree was prepared. The results of 20 surveys from two area high schools were entered into the computer, tallied, graphed, and charted to demonstrate the needs of prospective students. Teams of two worked on the programming, much of which had to be done outside of class. The webmaster for the college came to class and answered questions about the programming. When we finished, we had quite an impressive packet of information, and we had a website.

My job as the teacher was to explain the analysis techniques and to guide the process. Every day we covered work done outside class. The students had to give up ownership of each task in order to assume ownership of the whole project. Then we decided what was next and made plans for that part of the project. The discussion on some days would take the entire class time. On other days we would work on the computers. Almost every student gave 100 percent. The project was successful because the students wanted to learn and create, and most of all to be an *important part* of the project.

In past semesters we had analyzed a payroll project, and the last time I taught the class we worked on creating this website using HTML. This semester the class has decided to make a club page for the same site and to enhance the original work. I cannot wait to see ideas the students bring to class in the future.

When students feel creative and take pride in "their

work," they get excited. When they get excited, they become proactive; they *want* to learn.

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"FINDING" NEW SYLLABI

I do my best thinking on walks along a tree-lined canal path near my suburban home, so when I recently needed to create two new syllabi, I decided to look for them along the canal.

At first I was obsessed with *content*. What material should I cover? How would I cover it? How much was I going to have to read and study? What expertise did I have? I even imagined myself delivering long lectures, something I had not done in more than a decade!

Material with which I was not thoroughly comfortable and familiar made me as panic-stricken as a rookie! I could only imagine myself wrestling with the overwhelming tangle of steel cable content while students stared uncomprehendingly. I imagined I would have to untangle it by myself, and I would have to use the heavy steel rope to weave all those hours and hours of class into a course!

A simple question broke my obsessive circle of panic: How could I free myself from the overwhelming responsibility for all that material and all those hours? I admit it was a coward's question, but it led to the next: Who else can take the responsibility?

The answer, of course, was obvious: students. What could *students* do? This question opened the way for real thinking and planning—even inspiration. It marked the real beginning of the syllabi-creation process and led me to ask the most important and productive questions about objectives and purposes:

- What activities and assignments could I transfer from other classes I'd taught?
- What methods and techniques could I recycle?
- What assumptions and themes were translatable?

Before I could answer these questions, however, I had to ask others that were even more essential:

- What do I want students to learn?
- What do they have to do to learn it?
- How will I support their learning?
- How will each of us (teacher and learner) know that learning is occurring?
- How will we know the learning has been accomplished?
- Who will answer these questions? When? How?

These were the syllabi-creating questions! They enabled me to develop both new syllabi with an ease that made them seem "found" instead of developed.

I finished my walk and celebrated my readiness by making notes for this article in my teaching journal, the second best place for me to think. The syllabi nearly wrote themselves.

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