



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING COMPOSITION

Six years ago I returned to full-time teaching after a hiatus of more than 10 years. In many ways, I returned to the classroom with the same enthusiasm I brought to it when I first began. I hoped that during my absence students would have improved dramatically in writing and critical thinking. Unfortunately, the ability of students to write well had deteriorated in my absence and continues to do so with each passing year. I typically assign each class two formal papers per semester. Suffice it to say, I have read many papers since my return.

Last semester I attempted to improve the quality of student papers by conducting an in-class project, outlining what I thought were obvious steps in writing a paper. To determine if improvement occurred, I collected data on student scores pre/post the project. Students turned in their first paper as usual. Several weeks before the second paper was due, I presented "*Writing Papers for Introduction to Sociology*" as part of the lecture material, using an overhead projector. Basic issues included:

- Brainstorming/organizing ideas
- Planning to have introduction/body/conclusion
- Writing a rough draft
- Using grammar/spell checkers
- Eliminating non-essential words
- Plagiarising/citing sources properly
- Editing and revising
- Responding to all parts of the stated question
- Writing from a sociological perspective
- Using sociological terminology correctly
- Asking the Writing Center or your instructor for help (Call the Writing Center for an appointment. I will read/correct typed rough drafts delivered to me at least two days before the due date.)
- Creating the final draft

In class #1, 13 of the 19 students who completed both papers, or 68.4%, improved their scores on the second paper, one student's score remained the same, and five scores were lower. In class #2, 15 of the 21 students who completed both papers, or 71.4%, improved their scores, while six students' scores were lower.

One might infer that this in-class project had a positive effect, but variables not measured may have had an equal and/or greater effect. Those might include:

1. Students doing poorly on paper #1 approached paper #2 differently (spent more time/effort preparing, started earlier, asked the instructor or the writing center for help, etc.)
2. Students had become accustomed to my asking them to think critically about material and that skill had improved over time.
3. Students had been asked to think critically in other courses.
4. Students were able to think better sociologically during week 12 when paper #2 was due than during week six and paper #1.
5. Students approached the second writing assignment more seriously; class time was spent reviewing the mechanics of general paper writing.

In an attempt to examine the value of the in-class project further, versus the issues described above, I revisited grades for two classes held during a previous semester when no in-class project had been conducted. In two classes, totaling 28 students, 12, or 42.8%, improved their scores between paper #1 and paper #2—one or more of the above variables (or others not mentioned) may have affected these data. The improvement leads me to believe that the in-class project was helpful in raising students' scores.

I shall continue presenting this material to my on-campus classes, monitoring results, and identifying variables that help explain them.

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STOPPING THE REVOLVING DOOR: "SHOULD'VE" DOESN'T HELP

The students you have are easier to keep than recruiting new ones. Our students come with significant problems, issues, and concerns. Telling them that they should have, ought to, or must not, does not help them at all. Reminding students of the obvious does not support student success. We do not have to prove that we are smarter, better organized, or had similar life experiences. Expressions of sympathy and pseudo-empathy do not make them feel any better.

We should be pro-active, anticipate these situations, and communicate our expectations, their responsibilities, and what we can do to assist them. What we say and/or do not say may be just as important to supporting student success as what we teach.

We can help students without getting into their personal lives, where we do not belong. We do not need to be personal counselors and listen to students recite their litany of "bad breaks." Most of us are not trained as professional counselors, and trying to act as one is ethically wrong and fraught with potential problems. The following strategies have been successful for me and may be of value to others.

One, make your syllabus a compact, not a contract. A compact is an agreement to work together to achieve a specific goal. A contract is an agreement of give-and-take in equal amounts. Appropriate wording in the syllabus goes a long way toward helping students understand their responsibilities. Discuss the syllabus on several different days.

Two, include or have a "Panic Button" available—a document that students can submit with specific questions (with a telephone number or email address). You can think about it, suggest they come in for the response, or do such and such, including dropping the class. Telling them that they should not drop when they have no chance to complete with a positive grade is irresponsible.

Three, include and encourage out-of-class study groups. Tell them that, schedule permitting, you will attend and help. Students often panic because they do not have a helpful support system at home; they benefit significantly from establishing one in school, but they may not know how to get started.

Four, take a break from lecturing and have in-class work groups, such as reviews before tests. Walk around and see who is not participating and have these students meet with you in class, after class, or before the next class.

Five, review, review, review, but also preview. It is important to review the material for emphasis; students often miss key words in their notes. Previewing tells students where things fit. Context, like location, can be pivotal.

Six, help them out; give them an outline of the whole class session, either on the board, on an overhead, or with PowerPoint. After they get accustomed to the format, you may be able to provide it verbally at the beginning of the day's session. But, to do so, you need to have a real lesson plan.

Seven, write out a lesson plan, and have it with you. Even if you digress, you can get back more quickly to the topic at hand, and the students are more likely to be able and willing to follow along.

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