



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD)
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Dramatizations: Philosophers (and Students) Come Alive

Like many Introduction to Philosophy instructors, I have long felt frustration when faced with the task of getting students to grapple successfully with primary sources. I do not believe that Introduction to Philosophy should be someone's assimilation of Aristotle, Marx, and other dead white men's thoughts. In fact, I do not believe that dead white men should be the repository of philosophical wisdom. Three years ago I decided to find a text and a methodology which would expose students to primary sources and a text which would include a respectable number of women's and non-Western voices, while still doing justice to the traditional philosophical concepts such as the good life, freedom, epistemology, and paternalism.

I chose Lee A. Jacobus' *A World of Ideas* for the primary text and continued to use Camus' *The Plague* during the first three weeks of the course to establish a vocabulary of philosophical reflection. During those weeks, I encourage students to read and respond to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," to Joseph Campbell's "A Hero's Journey," and to Jim Klein's POV film on Kent State at the time of the May 4, 1970, killings of four students by the National Guard and then decades later on a 1990's campus. These stimuli are geared to help students forge their "Philosophy of Life" papers (personal explorations), which I read anonymously to the entire class.

For the next few weeks of the course, I hold seminars on Aristotle, Simone Weil, Mary Wollstonecraft, Machiavelli, Frederick Douglas, Lao-Tzu, and Martin Luther King; and I lecture on Paternalism and Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" (topics not in the Jacobus text). At the end of week five, I create some gender and ethnic balance and some "live wire" collaborators. I show some of Steve Allen conversations, "Meeting of the Minds." Students enjoy seeing how professional actors and actresses portray Cleopatra, Aristotle, Teddy Roosevelt, and Machiavelli, both posturing and making important points. In their groups, students brainstorm how to cover at least two important themes with at least three philosophers from those we have discussed. They may choose another philosopher we have not covered or a contemporary figure (e.g., Tupac Shakur, Madonna, Roseanne, O.J.,

Rush Limbaugh, Alex Trebek). Then, they must determine how best to present a 10- to 12-minute dramatization. Students have had jail-cell conversations, "Dating Game" dilemmas, and the like. This fall, class participants particularly enjoyed a poker party hosted by Machiavelli for his friends Karl Marx, Simone Weil, and Lao-Tzu. The acting was first-rate, and the philosophical discussion quite illuminating.

Machiavelli (disguising his true intention of winning the game) greets Karl Marx: "Karl, my friend, how are you this fine evening?"

Marx: "Not so good; Gorbachev called me at three this morning whining about the state of affairs in the former Soviet Union.

Former... That flaming boob let communism slip through his fingers! It could have been perfect, but now I will never know. Stalin, Lennin, Breschnev, all of them missed the point. No, I am not so well!"

(Later, when guests have arrived and the game has commenced) Lao-Tzu: "There is no misfortune greater than being covetous of another's hand. Hence, in being content one will always have a full house."

(Machiavelli begins to play cards more aggressively, adding to his pot from all participants—he says he would rather play without face cards, "too bourgeois!" Simone had paused several times to pray for the poorest of the poor.) Inevitably, Machiavelli starts to take all the money from the last large pot he has engineered underhandedly, but Lao-Tzu, who has drawn no extra cards, has a full house. He calmly asserts: "The Tao conquers all."

Students are given a group grade: 20% for content, 20% for creativity, 20% for communication, 20% for evidence of collaboration, and 20% for the combined grade that students in the audience award the group after the dramatizations are completed.

As Lao-Tzu has written: "It is on disaster that good fortune perches... It is beneath good fortune that



disaster crouches." My students are snatching philosophical victories out of the jaws of defeat. As learners, they and I must take care that the transitory success we feel after our dramatization exercise does not allow us to slide into complacency before we have completed course-concluding seminars on Darwin, Nietzsche, Ruth Benedict, C. G. Jung, Descartes, and Mary Daly.

I want my students to gain, through their dramatizations of philosophers and philosophies, and through the course as a whole, what Jung said of his memories,

dreams, and reflections—that such inner experiences “were the fiery magma out of which the stone that had to be worked was crystallized.”

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Student Reaction Papers

Many of you may have tried the “one-minute paper” at the end of a class to extract students’ reactions to the day’s lesson. I have taken this simple, end-of-class assignment a step further with noteworthy and successful results. I call it the *first-month reaction paper*.

Students are instructed to write a cohesive, coherent paragraph with a specific topic sentence. The paragraph must be developed adequately with examples and details to explicate fully the main idea. They must describe, in one well-developed paragraph, the experience and/or the impact that this particular class has had on them at this point in the semester. They may write on anything pertaining to the class, instructor, or materials. Their final draft is due in one week and will be graded. As an added incentive, I promise to drop their lowest grade at the end of the term. Students see that writing this paragraph is an opportunity not only to enhance their grade, but to give their instructor honest feedback concerning positives or negatives in relation to the course material, the delivery of the material, and any other items or issues they wish to address.

Their comments have run the gamut from “The instructor needs to slow down when he is lecturing” (which was probably excellent advice as I have a tendency of talking too fast when making an important point) to “This is the first English class where I have realized how much there is to effective communication.” Naturally, I have received bubbling accolades, such as “Dave has an incredible way of motivating his students,” and “He cares that we *all* learn the material.” And, I have received useful comments about the classroom, such as “I feel this is a non-stressful environment with a lot of humor, which makes me relaxed and really want to learn this material.” A comment like this confirms my beliefs that motivation, rapport, and an environment conducive to serious learning are important. With these comments in

hand, I can address my students’ concerns to modify, improve, and revise the presentation of the course material. Also, I can gain more insight into their *individual* problem areas, so I can help them on a one-to-one basis.

This paper can be implemented in most academic disciplines and certainly in courses where instructors are concerned with their students’ perceptions. Tailor the paper to your unique discipline and needs. Ask learners to describe their experiences and/or the personal impact that your course has had on them. When the assignment is received, look carefully at students’ comments and suggestions with an open mind, take note of their comments earnestly, and act upon them if needed. Give back their papers in a timely fashion (within one week), and thank them sincerely for their suggestions, comments, and concerns. Finally, have fun integrating this assignment into your course schedule and improve the course or the delivery of materials where you think it will help your learners the most.

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April 2, 1999 Vol. XXI, No. 10

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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to INNOVATION ABSTRACTS, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712-1293.
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