



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## Fantastic Projects

When asked to teach a course called *Fantastic Literature*, a survey of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, I was scared—and not of Dracula's fangs. While I had been a science fiction and fantasy buff in high school, that felt like a long time ago. Additionally, I had never felt any attraction for horror and had no idea how to approach the subject.

I ended up teaching what felt like an introductory literature course. I wanted students to leave with more than just an academic knowledge of these particular genres, but with an appreciation for why literature, all literature, is indeed fantastic. Still, the first batch of papers was disappointing. There were some good ideas, but very little connection of those ideas to any overall view of literature or genre fiction in particular. I gave plenty of feedback and opportunities to revise, but still I had little hope that paper two would be much better. Somehow, the thrill of reading *Dracula* and *The Hobbit* in a college literature course had worn off, and the tools of analysis I had given the students were taking away what magic was left.

I put the problem out of my mind, hoping that by the time their next paper was assigned, I would have found some way to rekindle my students' fire for fiction. Then, toward the middle of the semester, a friend who is getting a master's degree in creativity at Buffalo State College called me and explained that for her program she needed to teach a lesson in creative problem solving. She wondered if she could come into one of my classes to do it. Her idea was that a class could use problem-solving techniques to come up with innovative projects. There was a catch, though. I had to let them follow through on their ideas and not squelch them for not being academic enough.

This seemed like a way out for my *Fantastic Lit* course. Ultimately, the only parameter I set was that the project had somehow to touch on themes that we had studied in the course. I was curious about what would happen when the students were given a wide field in which to wander.

I introduced Karen at the beginning of class and helped her distribute Post-It pads and markers to each student; then I took my seat in the circle with them. The first part of the process, Karen explained, used diver-

gent thinking. She put the rules on the board, the most important of which was "Defer judgment." The plan was for students to generate as many ideas as possible, not worrying about whether they were doable or not. Each time a student had an idea, he or she wrote it on a Post-It and called it out. Karen would take the Post-Its from each student and stick them on the blackboard.

When energy and ideas ran low after about ten minutes, Karen gave each student a little toy to play with—a troll, a turtle, a tiger puppet, and other little figurines. Students were encouraged to work their toys into ideas for the project.

After another five minutes, ideas died down again; but there were already about 100 on the board, so we took a break while Karen arranged the Post-Its into orderly rows. She erased the rules for divergent thinking and put up the rules for convergent thinking, the most important of which were to be deliberate and stay focused on the goal. Students then were told to go up to the board and choose the idea or ideas they liked best. They could take the actual Post-It or copy down the idea, and if they wanted, they could build onto it.

Once each student had selected an idea, the next step was to fill out a contract, including the due dates of the contract (the next class meeting) and the project (three weeks hence), the student's name, and the project chosen. Contracts were the only way I could know exactly what students were trying to achieve and what work they wished to have evaluated and how. I checked the contracts and added grading criteria if necessary. For the most part, though, students were rigorous about what they asked of themselves.

Ultimately, about half the students chose to work in groups, while the rest worked alone. One group of students created a board game with about 100 questions related to works we had studied. Another group took characters from the works we had read and adapted them to a *Dungeons and Dragons* game scenario, giving each character powers and liabilities based on their actions in the stories. This group also created a beautiful map that melded settings from all the different works—horror, science fiction, and fantasy. A few students built models of robots, "aliens," and space explorers; others drew beautifully detailed



pictures of horror, science fiction, and fantasy scenes. Two students wrote fictional stories—one horror and one fantasy.

Overall, the project was a complete success. Because the students were self-directed and able to use their strengths and preferences in completing the work, I felt they put more effort and time into it than they would have put into an analytical paper. I was impressed with their many talents and realized that many had a deep understanding and appreciation for the works, but

were not as good at expressing themselves in an analytical paper as they were at expressing themselves in a manner of their own choosing.

*Shir Filler, Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at North Country Community College, 29 Winona Avenue, P. O. Box 89, Saranac Lake, NY 12983-0089.  
e-mail: shir@northnet.org

## *The Multicultural Minute*

We old geezers who have been teaching a third of a century or more are sometimes stymied by expectations that we will be "multicultural" in our classrooms. Back in the Dark Ages when we attended college, we studied the words and deeds of old, dead, white, European males and that was it! And today, in my own case, that is about all I know!

To remedy that deficiency, I have been spending about a minute at the beginning of each class session mentioning holidays which are being celebrated around the world and events which occurred on this date. The Chinese New Year gave rise to quite an interesting discussion of alternative calendars, how time is measured in different cultures, and the origin of calendars. In a class of 30, not one Anglo student knew the origin of Cinco de Mayo. (One asked if it comes on the same date each year.) Students were fascinated to learn the pagan and astronomical connections to Easter. Several students thought that Thanksgiving was celebrated worldwide the third Thursday in November and were nonplussed to learn that even Canada has a different Thanksgiving Day than the United States. Ground Hog Day prompted a discussion about superstitions and traditions, their origins and their value.

The Multicultural Minute seems to be particularly appreciated by the increasing cadre of international students I have in my classes. It gives them an opportunity to discuss the holidays and histories of their homelands and to learn more about the United States.

On the occasional day I forget to research the events of that day, students will ask, "What happened on this date?" or "What holiday is it today?" For an aged sage, at least I have incorporated a dash of multiculturalism which students seem to find enjoyable and which isn't beyond my grasp.

I have found the following to be useful, simple references:

The "Almanac" in each issue of *Atlantic Monthly* (good for astronomical data, particularly the names of the full moons each month, since many of these have American Indian origins).

Hale, Judson (Ed.). *The Old Farmer's Almanac*. Dublin, New Hampshire: Yankee Publishing Co., 1999 (published annually).

MacDonald, Margaret Read (Ed.). *Folklore of World Holidays*. Detroit: Cole Research, Inc., 1991.

Thompson, Sue Ellen and Carlson, Barbara. *Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations of the World Dictionary*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, Inc., 1993.

Puckett, Barry and Henderson, Helene (Eds.). *Holiday and Festival Index*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, Inc., 1995.

Whiteley, Sandy (Ed.). *Chase Calendar of Events*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1999 (published annually).

*Robert C. Bennett, Instructor, Philosophy*

For further information, contact the author at El Centro College, Main and Lamar, Dallas, TX 75202.  
e-mail: rcb@5310.dcccd.edu

*Suanne D. Roueche, Editor*  
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E-mail: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu