



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

THANK GOODNESS FOR MR. BEAR

I've taught writing classes a long, long time. I began when I was eight. Back then, it was dolls and stuffed animals who sat in rows facing my blackboard. I taught them homonyms. "Pair, pare," I told them and wrote the two words on the board. "And sometimes they come in threes! Look at this, Class! Rain, rein, reign." I wrote all over the chalkboard—hundreds of homonyms grouped around a message to my brother, "ERASE THIS AND I'LL TELL ABOUT YOU KNOW WHAT!!!"

Margaret Rose, my most beautiful doll, came to class wearing a white fur cape over her sequined taffeta dress. Always on the lookout for photo opportunities, she never squirmed, never changed the royal tilt of her head. She was named after the British princess.

Shy elephant wouldn't speak, no matter how I coaxed. Panda, on the otherhand, was a know-it-all. He folded his arms across his chest and, his beady eyes flashing with skepticism, refused to learn anything new. Diana wanted to turn every class into a party. She wore her skating costume to school, bare midriff and all.

Raggedy Andy lived in dreams; he never heard a word about homonyms; he wanted to know if cloud castles had plumbing or if fairies knew better than to eat poison mushrooms. Baby was always hungry. If her bottle fell out of her mouth, she wailed. She raised her hand only to ask if it was snack time.

Mr. Bear arrived late. He tossed spit balls at Margaret Rose. He burped in the middle of lectures. He told silly jokes about his family and then laughed and laughed until I had to scold him and put him in the corner. Class was dull while he was in the corner, so I always rescued him after a few minutes.

"Your play school is so-o-o loud," my mother would say. "My students are so-o-o naughty," I'd tell her. "Teaching is hard work." Today, I teach people, not dolls. But not much has changed.

In the first class of the term, my students introduce themselves. Lily Ann tells us that after three months of writing, she's finally finished her thousand-page historical romance. "I expect to be on Oprah," she says.

Sequins glitter on her cuffs and collar.

Patrick crosses his arms over his chest and tells us he has written sketches for more than fifty short stories. "Don't bore us with lectures," he says. "We know all that stuff."

Darlene flutters impossibly long eyelashes at Alan, the widower. She raises her hand and her leather top rises as well, revealing a tanned midriff. "Let's end class early," she says. "We can line dance till midnight at the Firebrand Lounge." She's going to be disappointed in Alan, I think; he truly lives in another world. He's writing a novel about a feminist James Bond. I call him Andy by mistake.

Gabriela slides into a chair at the back of the room. "Join us in the circle," I urge. She shakes her head and bends over her notebook. I think of shy Elephant and quickly call on Martha.

"I've written a cookbook," Martha says, enunciating with difficulty around what appears to be a large lemon drop. "One Thousand Ways to Prepare Formula for your Fussy Infant." She's brought her manuscript. Bottles wearing tiny booties dance across each page.

Everyone is here, I think, except for Mr. Bear. Thank goodness for small favors. However, as we settle down after introductions, a man in brown sweats jogs through the door. "Sorry I'm late," he tells us while trying to catch his breath. "Stuff going on at home today. My boy got thrown out of fourth grade. My girl won the broad jump. After that, my printer jammed up." He stops to breathe and flourishes wrinkled papers at us. "I think all the sex scenes overheated the printer. Ha, ha, ha." He finally sits down and opens his notebook.

"Let's talk about character," I say, and in my voice I hear the excitement of a new class and new challenges. Now that Mr. Bear is here, we can begin.

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SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning enriches lives. Students can provide service and create learning opportunities for themselves at the same time. The mathematics student who excels in algebra or statistics will learn even more by tutoring a second-grader in basic arithmetic.

Students enrolled in Mathematics for Elementary Teachers at Iowa Central Community College donate one hour of tutoring per week to elementary school students. This is just one of the many opportunities our students have to participate in service learning. My students are encouraged on the first day of class to get involved in this extra credit project—a collaboration with a local service agency that pairs mentors with students. [Students can create their own tutoring session if a local service is not available or convenient.]

Students who choose to become involved in service learning receive credit. Criteria for receiving credit include:

- Meeting with the student once a week for a minimum of 12 sessions
- Keeping a journal
- Validating the meetings.

Guidelines for the journal include an entry for each tutoring session and a notebook or format that would be acceptable in a portfolio. Each entry includes: name of student; place, date, time of meeting; what the mentor did during the session; how the mentor felt about the session; how the session related to what we are doing in class.

After the last session, the student provides a written impression of this project.

- Was it worthwhile? Why or why not?
- How could this project be improved?
- What did you like most, least?
- How will this help or hinder your career?

The project works toward a college goal that students will become involved in community service. Because my class is a mathematical theory, not a methods, class, classroom work focuses on theory and manipulatives. Students are responsible for preparing for the tutoring sessions on their own.

Students, mentors, parents, and elementary school personnel report that this project is rewarding. My students learn patience, tolerance, compassion, and teaching techniques—all valuable to a teaching career and learned by the type of hands-on experiences this project provides. And, the sessions make lasting impres-

sions on the children being tutored and on the educational community.

Skills that students develop during the project include:

- Organizing time to set up sessions
- Meeting with teachers and parents
- Writing reports
- Using mathematical manipulatives
- Using the Internet to find lesson plans, and the like
- Developing creative ideas by using workbooks, computer programs, and library books.

Service learning is neither difficult to organize nor to evaluate. And, it is an opportunity for students to make a difference in their communities.

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September 24, 1999, Vol. XXI, No. 20

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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, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu