



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

I had been teaching composition classes for two years when I was asked to take over responsibility for the introductory literature survey course at my regional school. Although I felt well-prepared for the task, I was concerned about the course objectives. I went to all previous instructors and asked what each believed was the primary goal of the class. Many mentioned that the course was taken primarily by non-English majors to fulfill a general requirement and that this population had a decided lack of interest in literature as a subject. Repeatedly, I was told, "Just get them to read." Exposure to a wealth of literature seemed to be the number one priority.

Yet, I was unhappy with my ideas about how to go about achieving that goal. I could assign readings, force my students to discuss them, and have them write about what they read. However, I felt that the course should accomplish more. I wanted to see the students connecting with texts. But how could I help them see "connection"?

My answer was to incorporate an *individual expression* activity into my curriculum. Each student selected a text—a poem, short story, or play—that had not been assigned as class reading, developed a creative interpretation of the text, and presented it to the class. Creative interpretations used some method other than reading and reporting to demonstrate that a connection had been made. I assured the students that they were not going to be graded on "artistic merit," but rather on how their individual effort expressed their reactions, thoughts, or feelings.

Each day began with one individual expression presentation. Students signed up to present and had a week to get going. They submitted proposals that named the work to be presented and speculated about the expression they would use. I rarely had a problem with repetitions; however, when two students did select the same work, I asked them to present on the same day so that the class could experience the different perspectives.

Students were wary at first, worried about their abilities. I had to reassure them that I wasn't looking for art, that a simple collage of magazine pictures would demonstrate a connection. The first time I used this assignment, I was blessed with creative, energetic students. The very first presentation was a papier-mâché sculpture of a lawn mower running over a frog, in response to a poem about futility. After that, the students took charge.

I found the individual expression assignment to be a huge success. My students enjoyed interpreting something entirely on their own, and they liked starting each day with a new presentation. Students were always on time for class because they didn't want to miss the presenter. I found out more about what my students thought about literature, and I was impressed with the presenters' creativity and artistic abilities.

I also learned about the kind of literature that my students liked. The survey course reading list tends to be filled with selections from the traditional canon. Because students picked texts for their individual expressions, the class was exposed to a much broader range of literary forms and writers. I noticed a large number of female and African-American writers were chosen, which helped to increase the diversity in the curriculum.

Upon leaving the class, some students reported a much-improved opinion of literature, in general, and of the selected texts, in particular. One student said, "I don't think I'll remember much about Shakespeare, but I'm never going to forget that lawn mower chopping up that frog!" I still have that sculpture and many other expressions that students have submitted, and I use many of them in my lectures.

Karen Turner, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at at Spokane Community College N. 1810 Greene Street, Spokane, WA 99207-5399.

e-mail: kturner@scc.spokane.cc.wa.us



THE DREADED OUTLINE

As we near the end of every semester, my developmental writing students and I are faced with writing a final essay preceded by an outline. Because I was a student who, like many others, wrote required outlines after I had written the paper, I tried to find a way to show the importance of using an outline without making it an onerous task. I came up with two methods that work well.

When assigning a narrative paper (although both methods work for descriptive and other expository writings), I ask students to draw a road map. Their abbreviated thesis sentence is "Home" and their conclusion is the "Destination." Along the highway between "Home" and the "Destination" are off-ramps leading to their major points. Each supporting detail leads back toward the highway and a continuation of the trip. Each trip has to have at least three off-ramps between "Home" and "Destination."

When the road maps are turned in, they are distributed among the students, but no student receives his or her own. Each student is responsible for writing a cogent essay based on the information presented in the map he was given. During the next class, an in-class writing assignment is completed by the cartographer on her own map. The students then compare what the map indicated to the first student with what the cartographer actually meant. Sometimes, the results are quite close; at other times, the results vary markedly. Often, there is great humor between what the outline was to convey and how it is interpreted.

The second method uses a cartoon format. Each student receives a page of nine cartoon boxes; students may duplicate that page as many times as necessary in order to draw a cartoon that explains the story. The cartoon is then given to another student for translation. Again, an in-class writing is completed by the original cartoonist and compared with the translator's story.

An essay, complete with outline, is required by the end of the semester. Students are far more comfortable with outlines by this time. Often, they cartoon the outline and ask an impartial observer to translate it before typing the finished product.

Besides learning about outlines, students learn that all language, even a map or a cartoon, is a form of communication that is automatically translated into words by its viewer. Through the translation of their work by others and their own writing, students also become aware of the importance of sequential thought and appropriate transitions.

Finally, students love these assignments. They have a chance to laugh together and build rapport. Moreover, students who are more visually oriented have a chance to link one form of expression to the written form they will use throughout their college careers and beyond.

RoseLee Warren, *Instructor, Writing, German, Humanities*

For further information, contact the author at Western Nebraska Community College, 1601 East 27th Street, Scottsbluff, NE 69361, (308) 635-6077.
e-mail: warren@wncc.net

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

October 6, 1999, Vol. XXI, No. 22

©The University of Texas at Austin, 1999

Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER institutions for their own personal use.

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