VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 5

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

Designing a Course With *Students*

I sat in my office weighing the pros and cons of the structure of my twentieth century humanities courses and asking myself—Should there be three or four major exams? How many words should be required on each? Should we study Coppola or Hitchcock? Then the realization hit. The answers to these questions really didn't matter to me—I've done the courses with three exams and with four. I've chosen Coppola over Hitchcock one semester and then Hitchcock over Coppola the next. I wondered—do these decisions really matter to students? If they do, I reasoned, why not let them make them?

At that moment I began thinking about designing my courses collaboratively with my students. I immediately realized this would present certain problems. How could they make good decisions if they didn't know the material? How could I produce a syllabus and course calendar for the term if I didn't know what we would be studying? Would this make any significant difference in the course? This question drove home my need to experiment. How could I know if this would make a difference if I didn't try? How could I encourage my students to become risk-takers if I wasn't willing to be one, too?

The first step was to address the course content. Could students make good decisions if they didn't know the twentieth century? I decided that they would have to select content based on name recognition. I would prepare a "Course Content Worksheet," listing all of the authors and subjects in our anthology. Next to each name I indicated the discipline represented—i.e., art, music, philosophy, religion, etc. Then I added a list of topics and historical areas covered in the text. Finally, I added a category called "other" where students could write in their own ideas. I decided to pass the worksheets out on the first day of class and have the students submit their choices on the second. Each student could vote for his/her top 15 authors/subjects and top 5 topics/areas.

The second step was planning for the development of the syllabus. Early on, I realized that there were parts of the syllabus that students could not vote about keeping or throwing out—e.g., the withdrawal policy and the writing reinforcement requirements in the course. However, I was willing to let students determine how final grades should be averaged, the attendance policy, how many tests there should be, and what other kinds of assignments, if any, should be used to reinforce the writing required in the course. I developed a "Course Syllabus Worksheet" on which I listed options: Should final grades be determined by a straight or weighted average? How many absences constitute "excessive"? How many should a student be allowed before being withdrawn? I also asked students to comment on disruptive behaviors which should be prohibited in the classroom. Again, students would receive the worksheet on the first day of class and return it the next.

After developing these worksheets, I got worried. What if students made dumb choices? What if they included too many assignments and burned themselves out? What if I couldn't arrange their choices into a coherent scheme for the course? Was I insane to even think of doing this? To stave off my fear, I decided to (1) inform the students that this is an experiment and that we are all taking a risk; (2) average the results from all the sections of the course for one syllabus for all classes (otherwise, I reasoned, I would go crazy trying to keep up with the differences); and (3) make it clear that I would reserve the right to countermand their wishes if I thought they were doing something really stupid, or detrimental to themselves.

On the first day of class, I presented the experiment, the rules, and the worksheets. The students were at first bewildered, then disbelieving, and finally excited about the project. They moved from being skeptical to optimistic. Most had never been asked what they wanted to study. They asked for information about the names on the worksheet and the topics/eras listed. I answered questions about course content. To my surprise, we had lively class discussion on the first day of class. I told them that I would tally the results of each of the classes and we would study the top vote-getters. I also told them that the second class would be devoted to debating the content of the syllabus, using the worksheets. Students were asked to come prepared to lobby for their choices.

The second class was as dynamic as the first. We

debated how to average final grades, how many tests to have, whether or not summaries of reading assignments were a good idea, and whether to have cultural reports, journals, or a documented essay. As I recall, almost every student in each class spoke to some issue. Those first two days of class generated more discussion from more students than I had generated ever on the first two days of any of my classes. Students seemed to have a sense of being a part of a group, rather than just an isolated individual among strangers. A new classroom dynamic was emerging.

As I tallied the results of the worksheets, I got a list of "winners," not very different from those I might have chosen. Martin Luther King and Alfred Hitchcock got the most votes. Surprisingly, however, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and Pablo Picasso came in a close second—only one vote less. These were followed by The Who, T. S. Eliot, Andy Warhol, Frank Lloyd Wright, Igor Stravinsky, and Salvador Dali, an eclectic mix of the popular and the powerful. Students wanted to study the turn of the century, the Viet Nam war, and the rise of the counter culture, among other things. I couldn't have done better myself!

To my surprise, I had little trouble blending the course content with the syllabus the classes had designed. Rather than being routine, it tested my skill. During the process, I reported my progress to the classes; and when I produced the final course calendar, they accepted it. The process was fun, and there have been some unexpected side effects. For example, when we studied T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, no student asked, "Why do we have to study this?"—a question I routinely received when *I* chose the poem. This semester students entered with minds open to the spirit of the poem. The best bonus was that *no one* complained about anything!

I realize that this approach is not for every class nor for every teacher. In courses where content is specified, as in mathematics or the sciences, students could not select content; but they might be consulted about the number of tests, the attendance policy, or proscribing disruptive behaviors in the classroom. However, anyone who has a flexible curriculum and wants to work collaboratively with students should try designing a course *with* students. It fostered a spirit for my classes that we were in it together—a great attitude!

Roberta Vandermast, *Coordinator and Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies Program*

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Using the Newspaper to Develop Reading Skills

Many developmental students have little exposure to governmental, intellectual, or cultural aspects of the world. We have found it helpful to incorporate the newspaper in our developmental reading classes; there is something of interest for everyone, and students can develop skills while working with interesting topics. Our students benefit from increased vocabulary, improved comprehension, and increased critical thinking skills.

Two of our newspaper assignments have been especially successful. Students work individually or as teams on a Newspaper Scavenger Hunt. A list of items is given to each participant. The items are to be found, cut out, labeled, and arranged in the order that they appear on the list. Sample items include: transition words; the name of a state that borders Canada, or Mexico, or the Atlantic Ocean; an editorial cartoon; the name of the president; etc.

The newspaper helps develop critical thinking skills while providing exposure to world events and geography. Divide the class into small groups and have each group select an article that involves a foreign country. As they discuss the article among themselves, they complete a summary sheet containing items similar to the following: name and location of the country, type of government, main idea of the article, major details included in the article, and implications for the United States.

We have found that students and instructors have fun and learn new things with every newspaper activity.

Fran Turner, *Instructor, Developmental Reading*

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
February 19, 1999 Vol. XXI, No. 5

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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