Volume XXV, Number 18

NISOD INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

INTRODUCING WRITING CONCEPTS THROUGH CLASS-BUILDING

Two of the most important aspects of first-level, process-based writing classes are getting the students to work with each other and the instructor, and getting them to begin the course with anticipation and confidence. Instead of reviewing the syllabus, giving a reading assignment, and dismissing the students on the first day of class (or doing some class-building exercise that will be perceived as wasting time), I get students involved in an activity that breaks the ice, introduces them to the major concepts of the course, and sets the tone for active learning. I want them to learn that they can write from the outset.

Before I take attendance, I ask students to write 10 questions (leaving some space for future notes between each) that they could ask someone they do not know in order to introduce that person to the class. When I have called all of their names and taken notes so I will know them by name the next time, I count students; and if there's an odd number, I quickly jot down 10 questions of my own and become involved. Next, I ask students to take out a blank sheet of paper, find themselves a partner they do not know, and then move the furniture so that they're comfortable speaking quietly to each other. If I'm participating, I warn that the odd one out will have me for a partner; this gets even the shy ones out of their seats in a hurry.

Keeping track of time, I allow each student five minutes in the interviewer/question-asker role and five minutes in the interviewee/respondent role; the information they gather is written on the blank sheet of paper. During the five minutes that follow the partners' asking and answering of questions, they review the information about his or her partner in their scribbled notes and create as brief and coherent an introduction as possible. Then, I ask them to hold on to these introductions and take their questions to a new partner, also someone unknown to them. We repeat the cycle of asking, answering, and writing a second introduction.

After this 15-minute segment has ended, each writer gives the second introduction to the person it was written about, who takes it to his or her first partner. If this is a 50-minute class, there will be just enough time for each student, now in possession of two introductions about his/her first partner, to create a more complete introduction that incorporates information from both drafts. This is the introduction that will be read to the class.

At this point, we rearrange the chairs into a circle, and I explain that we will be moving the furniture in order to facilitate working with each other and to avoid looking at the backs of each others' heads. I ask for volunteers, rather than going around the room systematically, so the students become accustomed to choosing to participate, rather than waiting to be pushed into speaking. There is audience response to this portion of the class: smiles and nods of recognition, laughter, occasional gasps (e.g., when ages of students at either extreme are revealed), and sometimes follow-up questions or exclamations when someone reveals something particularly intriguing. I listen carefully for clues about individual interests, as well as for class trends (it's useful to know whether there's a high percentage of parents or night-shift workers in a group when I want to use relevant examples later on).

After everyone (I introduce myself if the number was even, and I did not participate) has been introduced, I ask a few questions: Why didn't anyone tell us what his or her partner had for breakfast? "Who cares? Nobody wants to know that" are responses that indicates an awareness of *audience*, a word I write on the board and briefly explain. Sometimes, I'll hear, "That's not what you tell about in an introduction," and then I write *purpose* on the board. If that doesn't come up, I ask how everyone knew what to ask, and they define *purpose* very nicely.

Then I ask why nobody asked when his or her partner's first novel is being published (or what the partner's 10-page research paper is going to be about), and I'm informed that this is a beginning writing course. I write *topic* on the board and point out that nobody had any difficulty figuring out what questions would or

would not apply. To further prove this point, I ask why each of those who interviewed me offered to take back a particular question. When I ask which one, a chorus of "How old are you?" comes back at me from the class. I always refuse to let the interviewer take it back and answer truthfully, but students frequently omit that information in their introductions; either way, I have the class' full attention as I ask why they think this occurred. The answers I get generally result in more laughter and a red face on my part, but the messages are clear: students based their questions on assumptions about their topic without any trouble, and their writing instructor is capable of laughing at herself.

When I point out that most of the introductions started out the same way, the class is with me. "What's your name? How old are you? Where are you from?" come before the questions about family, work, and hobbies. When I ask why this is so, my first-day students tell me that this ordering of information makes sense, that some pieces of information are more important than others and need to come first; I write *organization* on the board.

"Well, you already know how to handle all of the major components of writing. You got them all. What can we do for the rest of the semester?" They know the answer to that question, too, and they're ready to talk about it. On the board, I note the pages in the handbook and the reader that have been covered by our activities, for those who like to see the information presented formally in print. Then I tell them that they have just had a full sample of what a typical class session is like—a brief introduction to the material, a small-group activity, and a whole-class activity. Furthermore, I tell them that if they choose to stay in this class, they should do so knowing that it is no place to catch up on sleep.

The first night's homework is to read the syllabus, write down any questions, and figure out how what we have just done in class relates to the information in the syllabus. After the students have asked their syllabus-related questions early in the second class session, they discuss how the steps of the writing process described in the syllabus relate to our introductions. Once one of them gets the explanation going, there are always enough others to put all the pieces together. The questions are the pre-writing; the scribbled answers are the rough draft; the somewhat refined write-ups are the mid-process drafts; and the introduction read to the class, with its additions of new information and spontaneous verbal changes, is the final draft. None of these steps caused them any difficulty on the first day of class, and we will be working just like this throughout the semester.

Now, we're ready to move on to the big question: Why write at all? As we move from the pragmatic to the transcendent, my students are listening and responding, already comfortable with each other and with their own ability to handle the course material as it comes. They understand, without being told, that in this class, learning is a conversation, not a lecture. The conversations continue outside of class, student-to-student and student-to-instructor, but always writer-to-writer in formal and spontaneous discussions about what they are thinking and writing.

When I began combining the content and form of the course in this way at the beginning of the semester, I found that my students joined the conversation more quickly. This attitude makes student ownership of new material much easier. By the second week of class, each newly formed working group stands together in front of the class to explain and illustrate a method of pre-writing, using audiovisual equipment. They are surprised that they are capable of teaching the class at this point and often spontaneously applaud each other's presentations. Later in the course, when I need individuals to volunteer, they trust each other and themselves enough to share their work or to let someone else read out loud a piece they do not trust themselves to read. Whether the students are enrolled in developmental writing or composition, talking to each other, writing, sharing their writing, or discussing their writing on the first day, the activities prepare them for the rest of the semester.

This activity could be adapted easily to other courses. In non-writing courses, only one interview session (15 minutes, once the questions are written) should be necessary. Instructor's questions should always relate to course material and requirements. An added advantage to beginning the semester in this way is that instructors who are prone to "first-day butterflies" quickly will feel as comfortable in class as their students.

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September 12, 2003, Vol. XXV, No. 18

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