



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

ALLOWING OUR STUDENTS TO SING THEIR BLUES

For the last 30 or more years, the face of the entering freshman student has been changing. Alongside youth-kissed, freckle-faced, bright-eyed, flip-flop-clad, eighteen-year-old generation Y students (not to generalize), college faculty are seeing increased enrollment of students over 25 (generation X, baby boomers, and beyond) and students under 25 with circumstances that make them “nontraditional” in our classes. Many first-year nontraditional composition students enter our courses with a great deal of trepidation, not confident in their abilities. They sometimes believe that, because they have not been writing actively in an academic setting, they are behind. I submit that these students have something that can work just as well as years of recent formal writing experience—they have got blues (life experiences). These students, with their rich, fully developed, grown-up lives filled with children, grandchildren, husbands, wives, divorces, careers, layoffs, life crises, and on and on, make our classes ripe and challenging places for learning.

Blues is that musical tradition started by African Americans singing their stories. Students have stories to sing, and writing teachers must teach them to put those songs into written form, teach them to value the place from which they’ve come in order to make the most of where they want to be. In order to do that, instructors need to know where students have been, where they want to go, and what they may need to get them there. In the process of learning more about their students, instructors may be required to help them develop and strengthen their self-esteem, broaden their perspectives, and help them think more critically. What can we do as the facilitators of learning as we become the producers of these blues records?

First, our assignments should show that we value students’ opinions, experiences, and perspectives—so that they can, too. Assignments designed with non-traditional students in mind not only make their learning experiences positive, but so, too, the experiences of

all students. Two types of writing assignments have proven to be useful in helping all students write their life stories: writing to learn and writing to communicate. I have drawn from these types to design two particular writing activities: action journals and writing my life, or life effects.

Action Journals

At the beginning of each semester, I require students to provide some basic personal information that will be used in future assignments. Students keep these personal data filed away in their course folders and return to them when they begin writing their first essays:

- Age
- Political affiliation/leanings
- Socio-economic background/type of work
- Religious affiliation
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Race/ethnicity
- Geographic region

On Action Journal days, students are given prompts, some of which come from newspaper headlines, magazine or journal articles, or notable quotes. They respond to these prompts, keeping in mind that their own perspectives and life experiences will shape their responses and will be different than those made by other students in the class. After reading the prompt, students react twice—the first time, they respond through the lens of their own life experiences; the second time, they change one piece of information they provided on the personal information data sheet and respond to the prompt again.

In this exercise, students begin to think and write from different perspectives. For example, if the prompt is a newspaper headline about the war in Iraq, each student reacts from his or her own perspective, then from someone else’s—e.g., an Iraqi American or Muslim/or a veteran. They share their responses aloud.

Students also have the opportunity to bring in their own prompts. Shorter, writing-to-learn activities can be



turned into longer, writing-to-communicate activities. Any prompt can lead into a cause/effect/research paper. The students take “action” and research a diversity of ideas. The prompt for a rhetorical mode could be this question: “How will military action in Iraq affect its citizens; how will it affect Americans?” The prompt for a descriptive essay could be this situation: “You are an infantry man/woman in the desert involved in a military battle. Describe what you see and how you feel, both mentally and physically.”

Writing My Life, or Life Effects

An approach to the cause/effect/descriptive rhetorical mode is Writing my Life, or Life Effects. Students look at some aspect of their lives—e.g., school, work, family—and describe how (good, bad, or ugly) things are going and why they are going that way. Students may look at contributing causes, main causes, remote causes, immediate causes, and the like. Or, students may examine the effects of being in school on work, family, and relationships. They are encouraged to think about and describe some possible long-term effects, both positive and negative.

These assignments use students’ experiences, or their blues—all of their connections with the world—as material for their papers.

Other Suggested Assignments

Comparison/Contrast

- Play Otis Redding’s version of “Satisfaction” and then that of the Rolling Stones. Have students identify the similarities and differences, and discuss them as a class; conduct Internet searches to determine how they have been marketed, and then bring their findings back to class and share. Students then will have information for writing a comparison/contrast paper.
- Have students compare their relationships, parenting styles, and work ethic to those of their parents or their children.

Informative/Research

- Have students conduct informal interviews with family members (from several generations, if possible) to identify trends in their mental and physical conditions, marital situations, career paths, and educational levels. Then have students explore one of these trends. This exploration becomes the basis for research and writing, and makes their assignment more personal and self-centered.

Cause-Effect

- Have students choose a current event/headline and discuss a number of possible causes or effects. Topics that are specific to a state or region are popular subjects for cause-effect papers. For example, many of my students have chosen to write about the effects of the education lottery or blue laws on our citizens.
- Have students examine the grades they are making on assignments/examinations in one of their courses, explain the causes of/reasons for those grades, and discuss the effects of those grades on their academic futures.

Of course, students should be given some opportunities to self-select topics.

Cinder Cooper, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Tri-County Technical College, P. O. Box 587, 7900 Highway 76, Pendleton, SC 29670. e-mail: ccooper@tctc.edu