



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

“PLAYING IN THE MUD”: TEACHING GOOFY (OR OTHERWISE) PERSONAL RESEARCH

Some years ago I read a professor’s lament that teaching geological concepts had become problematic because recent students had not played enough in the mud—experience with TV and videogames had detracted from useful intuitions into the behaviors of natural materials. Strata, repose angles, and alluvial action were no longer being learned naturally from building sand cities and dams in brooks. His observation resonated with my own childhood, which had been filled with stonewalls and sand piles. In fact, I almost chose geology as my academic major.

I always remember this professor’s comment when I try to be playful in class, although how to make play educational is always a challenge. One time, in a technical writing course, I hung from a door (with rock-climbing gear) to teach process analysis; that was popular and successful, but can’t be duplicated very often or easily.

Recently, I merged an amusing situation with a chance to teach the techniques of personal research (using silent observations, interviews, or questionnaires to gather information, as opposed to conducting library research). Since this was a remedial writing class, I was also teaching rhetorical modes—specifically, the comparison/contrast essay. I tried to exploit two different pedagogies—while students worked on a major essay assignment as homework, I used the classroom time for peer groups to design and write a group essay relating to that week’s ideas. I began with an amusing anecdote, hoping the goofiness of it would provide the “entertainment.” Exploiting the fact that I’m the worst-dressed professor on campus, I explained that a few students had complained about my mismatched socks in official course evaluations over the years. Some students grinned immediately, and some hastened to examine my feet, leaning around each other like spectators at a traffic accident.

I introduced my personal research lesson and handed out a questionnaire. They were to become part of an experiment. The questionnaire was worded much like any questionnaire involved in institutional research (e.g., anonymity, informed consent). I asked several questions but had time to work only with two of them (and some questions didn’t generate enough of a sample even for this ad hoc scientific effort): (1) Are you bothered when Prof. Tarzia mismatches his socks? (yes, no, never noticed; if yes, rate how bothered, on a scale of 1-5, five being most) (2) What is your sex?

I tabulated the results on the board. One class had a very uneven female/male ratio (although this allowed me to illustrate problems in data bias). Luckily, the second class that day had 10 of each. In both classes, most men never noticed mismatched socks, and none who did were bothered. Women tended to notice the mismatches, and only women reported being bothered by them (though only a few).

The class was livelier than ever. My initial fear that this would become a sexism fest never materialized, and the good-natured jibing added to the sense of fun without preventing analysis. However, I began losing a little confidence in the lesson because the whole idea had been serendipitous in the first place and hastily incorporated into the week’s schedule. By way of explanation, during the previous week, faculty advisors for the Psychology Club had asked all faculty to distribute a brief questionnaire to their students. The club had been involving students in psychological research, presented in student sessions at a professional conference. I had admired the project, and now the professors’ questionnaire inspired me, as well—I had rushed to get out a lesson in time to teach personal research for the next essay, but what about a follow-up?

My plans so far had been shortsighted: use a goofy example of personal research to get attention and teach the method. But then I said, almost offhandedly, “Well, it’s easy to collect information, but what does it mean? Information floats all around us, facts drifting like fireflies, but how do we

make sense of it all?" Immediately, discussion became animated as we brainstormed potential meanings behind information: men are less fashion-conscious than women; women are more detail-oriented than men; men are more laid-back than women; double-standards used to judge female appearance make women sensitive to fashion "rules"; teachers are naturally scrutinized given status and visibility in the room. The goofy lesson had blossomed into critical thinking. Of course, my weekly schedule was now out of whack; however, staying on the rails of a detailed course calendar is not my strong point, so I wouldn't lose any sleep over that development.

In the next class, I reminded students about what we had learned previously and handed out an assignment sheet about the day's peer-group assignment: "(1) Leave the classroom in groups of 3 or 4 students each (spend up to 40 minutes outside the classroom), (2) choose a topic from the list below, or devise your own, (3) make 'personal research' observations, and (4) write a one-page (handwritten) comparison/contrast essay to present in class when you return. Return in time to leave 20 minutes to read essays aloud and discuss." (The class period was 80 minutes.)

Most important, I reminded them to form a thesis, an interpretation: (5) "Interpretation is the hard part. Anybody can collect information. But what does it *mean*? What does it say about your topic? How has your research added to our knowledge (avoided the obvious)? Be sure you provide intelligent reasons that give your data meaning. Think of alternatives (meaning can be complex, so admit that there may be more than one explanation for a situation). Order your explanations from least likely to most likely."

This lesson was also a success, except for a couple of understandable glitches involving too much time spent choosing a topic. (Ruffled tempers and mediocre results help teach group dynamics; as a buffer, I use a loose group-grading scheme—check mark for an honest attempt, check-plus for good results, no grade lower than a check unless I catch a deserter.) The interpretation part was the most difficult. Still, two groups of the nine did well there; lesser results simply let teachers fill the blanks in discussion.

What worked best was the way some groups reflected on their process and results; they started out with a stereotypical assumption, and they told how research proved them wrong. One group asked 10 men and 10 women if they were following baseball. (A blank notes grid on the back of their assignment sheet encouraged observing 10 of this and 10 of that.) My scientists discovered to their surprise that more women than men were following the World Series. Another group studied the average number of years men/women wanted to date before marriage (women 1.8, men 4.2). A bold group asked a question relating to hotly debated sexual issues in "evolutionary psychology." The class whooped and was intensely interested in the data; I have not yet been called into any administrator's office for a "discussion," but time will tell. (I support academic freedom for all adults: teachers and students.) Yet another group correlated "sloppy dressing habits" and academic majors: people with declared majors dressed better than the undeclared. Here we discussed definition and subjectivity; they admitted problems classifying sloppy vs. well-dressed, leading to the topics of quantitative vs. qualitative information.

Fault the sampling problems, but not the goal and results. Teach active research, make it fun, and make it include different learning styles, from the group dynamic to teacher intervention and lecture (still useful even in our learner-centered pedagogy). To the student-centered generation and the testing of criteria (jargon for "smashing your own inherited or weak assumptions"), add the deconstruction of some of my own stereotypes. I generate a new set with each course: for example, the worry that a certain student will never break from his high school sports career for essay ideas. This time, my most ardent sportsperson awoke to become a "scientific leader." He was always awake; I just needed to send him off the bench to play. And "play" is the operative word here—in mud if you need to, or define your own mud. Exploit that ill feeling you get when staring down that tidy syllabus. Exploit envy, even jealousy, of a colleague's good idea. As does mud, ignition energy has many forms. That lesson on pronoun- antecedent can probably wait a week.

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