



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## DO I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION?

### Introduction

When teaching rigorous or abstract content, it is common for students to become disengaged from the lecturer. Frequently, instead of asking questions to dispel their confusion, students choose to mentally separate themselves from the situation. While faculty and educational researchers often speculate as to why such divides exist, the real issue is how teachers can engage their students better and secure their attention while covering difficult content? My personal solution was to start singing.

### Description

While teaching a section on logarithmic equations (a rather abstract content area in College Algebra), I noticed the sullen faces of students as they exited the classroom. Even the more articulate students seemed doleful about participating. When I arrived home in the evening, my husband was watching the movie *Footloose* (1984), and I was struck by inspiration. I proceeded to write a parody version of the song *Footloose* by Kenny Loggins that applied to isolating the variable in a logarithmic equation (i.e., "I gotta cut  $x$  loose"). I am not a particularly gifted singer, nor do I claim any measurable amount of success as a songwriter. However, during the next lecture, as I bounced around the front of the classroom attempting to stay in tune, the students' despondent expressions transformed into riveted smiles.

Once my performance was complete, I distributed a worksheet of problems and divided the students into small groups. Each group was instructed to select a problem, solve the problem, and develop a creative method to teach their solution to the class. The groups quickly went to work. All of the groups were able to solve their selected problem accurately; however, many were reluctant to formulate an innovative lesson. Some students claimed they were not "creative people," while others expressed concern over being embarrassed. I simply reminded the students that everyone needed to participate; so everyone could be equally embarrassed. Furthermore, I noted my performance could hardly be considered first-rate, but I would never let a lack of talent stop me from singing publicly. The light-hearted

and jovial response seemed to ease the concerns of the more worrisome students. By the end of class, all of the groups completed an original lesson for teaching their respective problem, and all group members participated in the presentations.

### Results

Each group began by writing their problem and step-by-step solution on the board. Next, the group explained the solution in a traditional lecture manner. Finally, each group presented their original lesson. There was a surprising amount of variation in style and form of presentation. Only one group opted to follow my example and write a parody version of a popular song by converting *Alone* (1983) by Steinberg and Kelly (popularized by Heart in 1987) to "*How do I get  $x$  alone.*" Most groups chose to write original short stories or poems to express their problem-solving procedures. One group described the variable expression as a child who was trapped in a "log jam." Another group created a story about the "Princess and the Log." A group comprised primarily of cheerleaders included a brief dance routine with their solution. Yet another group performed a short skit in which the numbers and variables were getting "married" and "divorced" through various algebraic operations. Each presentation lasted for approximately five minutes, and all of the groups were able to present before the end of the designated class time.

In the lectures following my performance, I found the students to be more willing to participate in classroom discourse. Concerns over "looking stupid" seemed to dissipate and students were more inclined to ask content questions. The "singing teacher" became a running joke amongst the students as I would threaten to start singing again if they remained unresponsive. Additionally, I noted higher performance scores over previous semesters on test problems involving solving logarithmic equations. Whether the higher performance can be attributed to my singing, requiring the students to complete their own lecture, or some other outside factor, I cannot say. However, the exercise did succeed in creating a more relaxed classroom environment where the students felt emboldened to take on the role of active learner.

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### Suggested Variations

One must remember the original purpose of my parody performance was not to introduce new content or dispense information, but to engage the students in the learning process. While giving students access to content information is instrumental to their success, allotment of such access does not guarantee student learning. Textbooks can be filled with valuable information, but they serve no purpose if the students refuse to open the book. Teachers, however, are not simply repositories of valuable information. They have the far more complex task of inspiring students to learn content that may not necessarily align with the students' interests.

The parody performance served the dual purpose of surprising the students to arise their fascination and demonstrating that perfection is not a necessary trait for classroom participation. While it is important for faculty members to remain the authority figure in the classroom, offering the students some form of reassurance that teachers are not flawless entities can persuade otherwise shy students to voice their questions. Moreover, the concept of a parody performance can easily be altered and implemented in a variety of disciplines. Anything from a rap about Shakespeare, to a punk song about Plato, or an awkward Abraham Lincoln dance can be used to acquire students' attention. Once the students have fixated on the topic, the instructor can begin truly focusing on the content. Who would dance with Lincoln? When and where would Lincoln dance? If Plato were a punk rocker, what would Socrates and Aristotle be? Would Shakespeare like rap, or would his timing always be a little off? Instructors can use questionnaires, classroom discourse, or small group projects to ensure the course content is still thoroughly covered, just in a more distinctive way.

### Conclusions

Developing a classroom environment in which students actively want to participate can be a difficult task. Furthermore, requiring students to learn rigorous and abstract content that has no direct link to their daily lives may make instructors seem unapproachable. Many students fail to recognize that their teachers are kind, understanding individuals who believe in improving the lives of others through education. By presenting troublesome content areas in unique and humorous ways, instructors can generate an affable learning environment that intrigues students and encourages participation.

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