



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

LEARNING TO THINK CRITICALLY

Society and the job market are demanding that schools produce future citizens who are able to think critically by analyzing information, not just reciting material they may or may not understand.

As a Native American attending school in the late 1950s, I had a difficult time; I was quiet, withdrawn, and confused. Since English was not my first language, I did not understand what my teachers were trying to teach. Although I was an excellent artist and could draw well, my instructors ignored my artistic ability and used a more traditional approach to teach me subject matter. Consequently, my parents, sensing my frustration at not being able to learn to write or add numbers or understand the differences between a cumulus and a cirrus cloud, decided to withdraw me from school because the effort of taking me to school and having me sit in the corner of the classroom was wasting their time and the school's time, and the experience was frustrating me.

Years later when I was an 18-year-old migrant worker, I decided to return to school. I enrolled in the eighth grade and was labeled learning disabled. I was illiterate and so far behind in my studies that the teachers felt sorry for me. At the end of the year, they passed me to the next grade. Being socially promoted did very little for my self-image.

When I was 21, I enrolled in high school. I continued to have a difficult time with my studies. I was reading at a third-grade level, and my handwriting was little more than scribbles. Nevertheless, despite not being able to read at grade level or write a complete sentence, I graduated high school when I was 23. The idea of using different learning styles (that focused on other intelligences) to help me with my studies might have been around when I was attending school, but my instructors did not use alternative strategies to motivate me to learn. I spent the first half of my educational experience not understanding what I was supposed to know; when I entered the military, I was barely literate.

When I graduated from college, I made a promise to myself that as a teacher I would prepare my lectures and materials using different learning strategies to ensure that *all* of my students learned. I have kept that promise.

I have spent more than 28 years in education (teaching at elementary, middle, high school, technical college, and university levels). If I have learned anything from the experience, it is that there is a need for instructors to address the multiple intelligences and the creativity of students. This is especially true at the college level. Instructors at the university or college level have been exhorted to use creative strategies to teach students so that when they graduate they will be able to learn on their own.

I am currently teaching adults between the ages of 18 and 60, at an American Indian college in New Mexico. Working with Native students is always a challenge because they have a tendency to be very reticent about classroom participation, especially oral discussion. I have discovered that adult students respond enthusiastically to working on projects that employ strategies that allow them to experiment with their individual learning strengths (multiple intelligences).

My English classes work on eight different projects. These projects have included poster/oral presentations on Native issues, "how to" demonstrations concerning current events, developing and writing a newspaper/magazine with individual sections, and mathematical projects where students produce a short story and develop a graph to show a 1, 2, 3 formula for developing a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion. I have had students rewrite *The Great Gatsby* in a children's pop-up book format. Once I asked students to create a newspaper with individual sections (photos, commercial ads, editorial pages, advertisements, horoscopes, cartoons, and classifieds). The first newspaper assignment focused on the legal and moral issues of Indian gambling.

When my English 100 class read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, I asked students to research the subject of imperialism and the effect(s) it had on society, relate the subject to the past, and present imperialistic practices that the United States has used in dealing



with American Indian tribes. Also, as part of the project they were to compare how the United States has treated African Americans (and other minorities) and decide whether there is a correlation with treatment they documented with Native Americans.

The projects that I create each trimester introduce students to the idea that there is more than one way to learn. When creating a project, I emphasize individual development. I give students opportunities (working alone or in a team setting) to use one or more of the eight multiple intelligences to complete assignments. Each project is experimental. Often, when beginning the project, students resent the change in the conventional atmosphere of the classroom and feel lost without specific instructions and directions. As a result, during the first stage of a project—team-building—many students lack motivation. There is little competitive spirit and contribution to team effort.

However, with time, patience, and practice, students' attitudes change. I no longer have to look over team members' shoulders. I no longer have to remind the class about the difference between active and passive

learners. Especially gratifying is that I no longer have to tell my students to take responsibility for their actions. Using a team-based approach to learning (having time constraints and assignment deadlines, working in teams, researching information) introduces critical thinking skills in problem solving. What I have discovered after collecting, evaluating, discussing, and commenting on each project is that the initial phase of resentment when the project is assigned is replaced by a feeling of empowerment. Students became more attentive, resourceful, energetic, and responsible active learners.

Joseph Mitchell, *Instructor, English, Adult Basic Education Program*

For further information, contact the author at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, 9169 Coors Rd NW, Albuquerque, NM 87120-3101.
Email: jmitchell@sipi.bia.edu

NISOD
31st annual
International Conference on Teaching & Leadership Excellence • May 24-27, 2009

Join us in Austin, Texas—Live Music Capital of the World!

CALL FOR PRESENTATIONS

We invite you to submit presentation proposals for the 2009 NISOD International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence. This conference attracted more than 2,300 professionals in 2008, representing more than 450 community colleges and other institutions of higher learning worldwide.

Submit proposals by December 1, 2008 at
WWW.NISOD.ORG/CONFERENCE

We invite all past recipients to join us in celebrating the 20th anniversary of the NISOD Excellence Awards at this year's NISOD Conference.

The deadline for submitting names to receive the 2009 NISOD Excellence Awards is December 1, 2008.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

October 3, 2008, Vol. XXX, No. 21

©The University of Texas at Austin, 2008

Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER institutions for their own personal use.

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, 1 University Station, D5600, Austin, Texas 78712-0378, (512) 471-7545, Email: abstracts@nisod.org