



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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The Responsible Student

I have always hoped to encounter an ideal class, a class consisting entirely of motivated, responsible, and dedicated students. Unfortunately, I have never encountered such a class. Many students do not meet my idealistic expectations. Are these students really irresponsible and not dedicated to the educational process, or are they simply unaware of what is expected of them at the college level? Being the eternal optimist, I have concluded that the actual problem is that many students really do not understand what is expected of them, perhaps not only in school but also in the workplace.

Desiring to more fully and clearly explain my expectations, I now include a "Letter to the Student" in my syllabus. This letter not only describes my classroom expectations, it also describes workplace expectations to the student. The first semester that I included my letter in the syllabus, I was amazed by the number of students who said this was the first time that an instructor's expectations were so clearly expressed. While this letter may not guarantee the "ideal class," my students are now more aware of my expectations and, as a result, are more willing to try to meet those expectations.

An Open Letter to My Students

Attending college is analogous to being employed. Success on the job is achieved only with hard work and effort. This is also true of college.

Your employer expects you to be on the job everyday and to be on time and prepared to work each day. You are allowed only a specific number of sick days each year after which your pay is "docked." This is also true of economics class. Regular and prompt attendance is essential, and your "sick" days are limited (see syllabus). Excessive absences will result in a loss of "pay" (grade).

Meetings are an essential part of the workplace, and everyone is expected to attend regularly and contribute to the discussion. If you miss an excessive number of meetings and/or do not share vital information, your employment success is in jeopardy. The same holds true for this class. You are not only expected to attend all of our "meetings," but you are expected to contribute to our discussion and analysis of issues. This requires that

you come to each class prepared to discuss the assigned material. Failure to do so will put your success in jeopardy and can result in a reduction in your "salary" (grade).

Your employer requires you to submit all reports on time. Failure to do so will endanger your employer's business and your success. The same is true for this class. All "reports" (tests and papers) are due at the scheduled time (see syllabus). If, for a justified reason, you will not be able to meet the time schedule, you must notify me, just as you would contact your employer if you needed an extension. However, as in the workplace, such extensions do not come without a cost. Extensions result in a decrease in your "salary" (grade).

Performance reviews occur periodically in the workplace, and your employer determines the degree of your success during these reviews. Such is the case in this class. The "performance reviews" for economics class are quizzes and exams (see syllabus). These reviews require you to show not only your knowledge of the material, but also your ability to use this knowledge in real-world situations. Your "pay" (grade) depends upon the magnitude of your performance.

If you attend class regularly, participate in class discussions, and submit all materials, well-prepared and in a timely fashion, you have the potential to excel in this class. I am looking forward to working with you and to learning with you. I am always available if you need assistance. Welcome and good luck!

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An Organizational Puzzle and Discussion

While students can easily memorize structural styles for different essay types, particularly in courses using a modal approach, they do not always appear to grasp that the organization of ideas should develop from the relationships between those ideas within a given structure. Thus, an early draft of an essay based on the structures of cause and effect may be a loose list of causes and effects with very little treatment of the relationships among the various items on the list.

In recent years I have experimented with several versions of the following activity in an attempt to deal with this apparent missing link in teaching organization to beginning college writers. Of the different constructions of this activity that my students and I have used, the following has been the most useful for the immediate needs of the students and for the student-centered focus of my classes.

After students become comfortable with peer-editing in my introductory writing classes, I choose one essay from a recent set of rough drafts, copy it, and physically separate it into paragraphs. This may involve a few minutes with a copy machine and paper cutter (or with a computer and printer if the essay is on disk). Once each paragraph of the essay is on a separate piece of paper, I make copies so that each peer group in the class will have one set of the now-disjointed paragraphs that made up the original paper. I also put one set of these disjointed paragraphs on overhead transparencies.

The goal of each peer group is to reach a consensus concerning the most useful organization for the paragraphs they have been given. This forces them to look at the ideas and rhetorical moves each paragraph employs and to look at the transitional devices used at the beginning and end of each paragraph. In addition, they must find and evaluate such aspects of the essay as its thesis and conclusion as they search for the relationships among the ideas presented in the essay. When the groups have reached their various decisions, I ask a group volunteer to present its ideas to the class. One or two members of this group use an overhead projector and the transparencies of the paragraphs to show the organization which they propose. At each step, we stop and discuss the decisions, a rather freewheeling discussion of the organization of the paper as well as the ideas that it presents.

Obviously, the original essay's author knows the organization and its motivations, so I approach her before the activity begins and ask that she let her peer group discuss freely without becoming a litmus test for their decisions. Later, after the entire class has discussed

the essay for a few minutes, I will invite the author to join in if she has not already.

At other times, we have used published articles or essays. This method works well because it reveals the thought and care that accomplished writers employ in word choices, organization, and rhetorical strategies. Sometimes, however, students are paralyzed by their awe of the published word; they are not eager to question writing that has been cleansed in the fire of the publishing process.

Making student drafts the focus of the activity adds a dynamism to the exercise; students recognize that the exercise may actually cause an immediate change in their writing. They may see their peers wrestling with the same problems they are experiencing. Students also seem more willing to question choices the author has made and to discuss organizational issues rather than merely fit the pieces together. With a published article, students tend to look for the "right" way to organize a piece of writing—the way it has been organized by its author. With a student draft, they are more willing to look for the best way, as they see it, to relate and organize ideas. In this respect, this activity almost always generates a great deal of energy and discussion, and it often works well as a confidence-booster because it gives students a clear opportunity to flex their writing knowledge and rhetorical savvy.

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