



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Help for the Dysfunctional Class

We've all had them: the classes from hell! Sometimes about three or four weeks from the end of the semester we think we simply cannot meet this particular group of students even one more time. Sometimes we just get burned out from the overwhelming responsibilities of our jobs, but more often the trouble is the chemistry of some particular class. Either students have become so "collaborative" that all they do is socialize and "bond," or they have fallen behind and refuse to respond to any of the motivational tricks in our bags. Whatever the reason, the class's integrity and climate have so degenerated that we feel no quality learning can take place. If we continue to meet the class as it is, we risk finishing it with little enthusiasm if not downright disgust, which, in turn, leaves students with the proverbial bad taste in their mouths for our subjects or, even worse, for our institutions. There is no reason to endure this torture. In fact, several creative solutions exist, but I want to offer one that has worked for me: **I dismiss the class for the rest of the semester.**

That is right. I dismiss the class as a class, and I arrange to meet the students for one-on-one tutoring for the remainder of the semester. This semester, I decided that I could not spend even one more day in my late-in-the-afternoon Monday and Wednesday developmental writing class. The students in that class were all fresh out of high school and extremely immature. Their social life revolved around this group of classmates; and try as I might with all kinds of collaboration and outlets for exuberance (not enthusiasm for the material of the class, unfortunately), I found myself shrieking at them to settle down, work (I teach composition in a computer classroom), and get assignments completed well and on time. I resented this group of students for I felt they took unfair advantage of my supportive and nourishing nature, and I felt hostile toward them for their lack of respect and motivation. I knew that if I continued to try to teach them anything as a group, we would all end up hating each other. So I dismissed class for the remainder of the semester. It is, of course, imperative to have administrative support for this type of creative solution. (I had it.)

Since three weeks of the semester remained in a four-credit-hour class, I decided to meet each student four

times for at least an hour each session in the remaining three weeks. I reasoned that one hour of quality time equals four hours of wasted time. I also designed written assignments that would require that students spend as much time writing outside of class as they would have spent in class. (That would not be hard to do since their productivity in class had dropped to almost zero.) Students signed up to meet with me in my office or in the writing lab during the same times as the regularly scheduled class. I also offered them other times: my office hours or my lab hours. An agreed-upon task was due at every session.

The results of this solution were amazing. Students I never had heard from in a classroom setting were, all of a sudden, vocal and articulate; they seemed to be thinking! Students who had put off assignments until they stepped into the computer classroom were now spending time in the computer writing lab, getting their drafts ready to present to me for their one-on-one conference. Students did not murmur backtalk under their breath because there were no cronies there to hear them. They did not act out for the same reason. They did not laugh off their errors, but rather took themselves and their assignments seriously, for now there were no high-school friends for whom to feign indifference. They looked at me when we talked. They treated me with respect. It is much easier to disrespect a teacher in a group than face-to-face. They responded to questions I asked them because there was no one else there to rescue them from the dreaded answer-the-teacher's-question ordeal. In short, they began behaving somewhat like the college students I had expected them to be all along. What a wonder these sessions became! I regained a love of my job. I felt smart and witty and wise. Mondays and Wednesdays were no longer hellacious times that made me rue the day I became a teacher! In fact, I preferred meeting my students this way to meeting my classes that were still functioning well as a class!

I can see this strategy working equally well in math, reading, foreign language, or any other course that does not require the delivery of lecture-based materials to large numbers of students at one time. Yet, these are not normally the classes from hell. In a lecture-based class, a



savvy instructor can perform well enough at least to amuse him/herself for the rest of the semester, even in a dysfunctional class. And large numbers of students more or less guarantee a distance that provides relief from direct student provocation. No, it is normally the small, collaborative classes that dissolve into disorder and dysfunction for some reason or another. If it happens to you, try dismissing your class!

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Self-Assessment in a Public Speaking Course

Assessment and student ownership of his/her own learning are components of a successful basic public speaking course. Students are involved in self-assessment of their own educational goals and objectives from the first day of class until the final exam speech.

During the first or second day of class, students are divided into groups. Once in their groups, they get acquainted and brainstorm about possible speech goals for the semester and in future classes and careers. They develop a set of behavioral objectives which will enable them to reach their goals during the semester. These objectives are personal behaviors to which they pledge themselves, such as attending class regularly, reading the text, preparing for speeches well in advance, etc. Each student then presents his/her goals and behavioral objectives to the class during a three- to four-minute speech. These speeches are not graded. However, I emphasize that the final exam speech will be based on the goals and objectives they set in this initial presentation. Knowing this, students rise to the challenge and make an effort to set realistic goals and objectives they feel that they can meet during the following 16 weeks.

This assignment has several benefits. First, it allows the students to get to know each other during the first week of class. It gets them on their feet in front of the class to make a presentation. Perhaps the greatest feature of this assignment is that it encourages them to think about their educational goals for the course and take ownership of their own learning. To alleviate the potential problem of this becoming an abstract exercise of setting unreachable goals without committing to personal action, students must set up their behavioral objectives. Here they must be fully, actively involved in the process.

During the semester students are required to keep a Speaker's Notebook. In this notebook, students log their own progress in meeting their goals and objectives. An additional component of this notebook is the students' critiques of all speeches they hear. Students may have

seen these speeches on T.V. or heard them in classroom lectures. Students have "share days" at designated times during the semester when they share their progress with established goals and objectives.

The students' motivation for constant assessment is the final exam, a self-assessment speech of five to seven minutes, discussing their accomplishments/failures in meeting their goals and objectives.

Students generally organize these speeches in one of two ways. They set up the first main point of the speech as one major goal and assessment of that goal, including the behavioral objectives they employed in meeting it. The second main point would be their second major goal and assessment of how well they reached that goal, etc. For example, the first main point might be a general goal, such as to become a credible speaker. The sub-points then might be minor goals leading to the major goal—i.e., to be knowledgeable, to be well-practiced, to be poised. The behaviors then would become the "how they did that" of reaching those goals—specifically, how many times did they practice, and how much research did they do? Or they can organize their final speech by making the first main point an assessment of their goals and the second point an assessment of how well they met their behavioral objectives.

Some superb speeches have been made during the final exams. As much as students object to the assignment in the beginning and complain that they will never have enough to say about goals to fill five minutes, they have much to say by the end of the term. Many are astonished that they made such progress in their speaking, and even more are surprised that they had so much to say about goal-setting.

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