



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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In the Pursuit of Trivia: Improving Student Performance

After teaching college chemistry in Ohio for 25 years, I opted for early retirement. My objective was not to abandon teaching but to escape the cold northern climate. I found similar employment in sunny Florida and adjusted to the weather and the new position, but experienced one annoying situation—about half the students in my early morning pre-general chemistry class were either absent or late. Colleagues observed that this situation is not uncommon in large urban community colleges, but tardiness and absenteeism were definitely contributing to poor performance for many students. Appeals on the importance of attending lecture appeared to fall on deaf ears, and I became obsessed with reducing tardiness and absenteeism.

As often happens, an idea surfaced in the middle of the night. My teaching style includes using anecdotes, historical events, analogies, personal narratives, as well as obscure facts. While such tidbits usually do not find their way into students' notebooks, they appear to be remembered. My new strategy called for adding a few trivia questions, worth one point each, to exams. Since students could answer these bonus questions only by having come to class, I reasoned that attendance would soar.

Although past experiences have taught me that terrific ideas at three in the morning have a way of fizzling out when put into practice, I was determined to proceed with the plan. So, I announced my intent and began recording potential trivia sources immediately after each lecture. For example:

Lewis is the greatest American chemist not to...? (win a Nobel Prize)

The "tiger of chemistry" is...? (fluorine)

Who was Gilbert? (lowest pressure hurricane to hit western hemisphere)

What is the analogy between shell/subshell/orbital/spin and ticket to Jaguar's football game? (gate/section/row/seat)

Who was the grandfather of Olivia Newton-John? (?)

Did trivia reduce tardiness and absenteeism? Of course not, but certain other changes were apparent. Students attending regularly were amused by the questions, took delight in earning bonus points, and

often suggested prospective questions. On the other hand, students with sporadic attendance would leave responses blank or make outrageous guesses.

Sometimes the trivia generated more interest than did the actual exam questions. One case comes to mind. To demonstrate how we accumulate knowledge of the atom without seeing atoms directly, I passed a sealed box around the room. Students were allowed to manipulate but not open the box. On the next exam, a trivia question asked students to cite a demonstration utilizing a shark's tooth. As soon as the exam ended, students converged around me wanting to know whether the small mysterious box contained a shark's tooth.

I still combat tardiness and absenteeism, and my syllabus includes this requirement and potential penalty:

Anyone late or absent must obtain class notes and meet with the instructor to review these notes. Failure to do so within one week results in a deduction of two points from the course average.

This strategy has worked; students prefer to attend class rather than endure the "dreaded" meeting with instructor. Students are not forced to attend class but are forced to obtain help when they have been absent.

At last, all is well with my second teaching career—the annoying attendance problem has vanished, and trivia have emerged as part of my repertoire in all courses. By the way, Max Born, the Nobel Prize winning physicist who coined the term "quantum mechanics" and co-developed the Born-Haber cycle, was also the grandfather of singer Olivia Newton-John.

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Content-Based ESL Instruction

A fortuitous congruence of learners and learning materials made for some particularly rich content-based instruction in an advanced English as a Second Language course. Having completed an apparently useful, if unremarkable, review of a writing technique—variously known as reported speech, indirect discourse, and hearsay—I proceeded to read an essay on the Vietnam War to a class of 26 international and immigrant students. Knowing that the oldest member of the class had held a position of some importance in the South Vietnamese army and had been imprisoned in the North for 14 years, I asked if he would serve as informant and submit to an interview by his classmates. Some of these students had emigrated from Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia at such an early age that they knew virtually nothing about the war that had profoundly altered the course of their lives. To my relief, the retired officer was pleased—even flattered—at the opportunity to reveal his reaction to the essay we had just read and to inform his young classmates about a significant historical event.

In order to support the quality of the class discussion, I asked each student to compose a few questions based on either the essay in the textbook or an area of personal interest. (Thus, a Laotian teenager whose father had also been a soldier chose to ask whether the Vietnamese officer had any knowledge of the war in Laos.) After devoting part of the class period to self- and peer-editing of the questions, I collected, collated, and put them on an overhead transparency.

The next day, as the war veteran stood before the class, I projected his classmates' names and questions onto a screen. Then, I asked students to restate, in indirect form, the original questions that appeared on the screen. For example, one student said: "Sanae wants to know how Colonel Luat kept from becoming depressed while he was a prisoner of war." Another pursued a controversial topic: "Nathalia asked Colonel Luat if he resented the American interference in his country's internal politics." As the dignified septuagenarian delivered patient, measured answers, his classmates' polite interest evolved into hushed awe. When he came to the end of the list of questions, there was a round of applause, motivated not only by simple civility but by spontaneous appreciation for a real lesson in public history and personal stoicism.

Having recorded the interview on audio tape, I transcribed some of the colonel's answers to make a second transparency, which we used in class the following day. Students used them to clarify certain

facts surrounding the war and further refine their English usage with respect to direct and indirect discourse. The learning activity was so successful that word of it spread to another class, where students demanded and were allowed to repeat the exercises.

Applied linguists have long recognized the virtues of authentic texts and content-based instruction. When combined with a wise informant bearing a sober message, they may help classroom instruction realize its full potential.

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