



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Workshopping That Works

In theory, peer-editing in the writing class is a good instructional tool; but in practice, it has problems. Editing is inconsistent—some students are excellent editors; others are terribly inadequate. Lists of workshopping questions help somewhat, but the basic problem persists. Some students are reluctant to criticize, and problems cannot be fixed if they are not noticed. Stronger writers complain that their drafts do not receive adequate attention. Not all students have drafts ready on workshopping days—some have nothing or only a paragraph or two. I could grade every essay twice (once for the rough draft, once for the final), but the resulting workload would be demoralizing.

My solution has been moving to a large-group (entire-class) format. Although this method needs to be adapted to each individual class, depending on the number of students and course essays, it works.

Early in the semester, I distribute the course calendar that includes workshop dates—one for each essay. I briefly describe each essay assignment, throw numbered slips of paper in a hat, and conduct a lottery. Lower numbers are first to choose a workshop—usually three students per essay. I make a record and read it back to the class. The syllabus explains the workshopping system and then advises: "The most important part of your class-participation grade is being prepared for your assigned workshop session(s)—the whole class is depending on you. And being 'prepared' means having the photocopies ready, too."

Each essay follows a pattern. We spend a class period discussing the essay assignment, reading the assignment sheet, and looking at some models together. I announce the names of the students who are signed up for that workshop and get some acknowledgment from each that the assignment is clear. If a student has not been attending or misses the next class, I sometimes make a call. If I decide that a student is unable to perform for any reason, I ask for a volunteer to take the slot. Sometimes students will trade with others for original choices; at other times, I offer extra class-participation credit to students who will conduct an additional workshop. Overall, I expend far less energy badgering students, partly due to peer pressure. The entire class knows who has signed up; if a student

drops the ball, the teacher is not the only one who is miffed.

On the day of the workshop, we circle the chairs, and the responsible students circulate their drafts. At least every other student is to have a copy (students can share to keep costs down). We briefly recap the assignment and decide who will go first. That student reads his draft aloud (I'll sometimes read for seriously intimidated ESLs), and we read along. We then discuss the draft, using a PQS system:

- Praise—What's good here in terms of the assignment? (Putting praise first seems to reassure students.)
- Questions—What would you like to know more about? What don't you understand?
- Suggestions—What ideas do you have for improving this piece?

Incidentally, I encourage students to textmark, using the same system during the reading—a checkmark for something good, a question mark where they have a question, etc. We spend 15 to 25 minutes on each draft, depending on how productive the discussion is and how much class time I have and wish to invest.

The final draft is due about a week later. I usually give students a revision option after returning the graded papers (still far less work than grading double sets of essays for every assignment).

Not every student's draft is workshopped, but students learn lessons they can apply to their own. Students can stop by during my office hours and visit the writing center for individual attention.

Overall, for both teachers and students, the system's weaknesses are far outweighed by its strengths. As a teacher, I like it because it allows me to better model the way a writer reads writing. Students are able to see what questions need to be asked in response to a particular piece, learn how to mix praise and criticism, and so on. And if there is something that needs to be said about a paper and students are not saying it, I can be certain it gets said. So, the more teacher-centered method is actually an advantage. On the other hand, if the students are doing well on their own, I may let them lead—I can adapt my teaching style to the situation.

It is less work, too. Once students understand the



system, they tend to take responsibility for it. Recently, I had a class that had 21 drafts and photocopies ready for 21 workshop slots. It is a joy to come to class on a workshopping day, find the chairs already circled, and see the selected students distributing their photocopies. (Occasionally, without warning, a student will not be ready; but if we have at least two drafts, we can have a good workshop.)

In addition, students like the system. First, it allows them to socialize as a group in a mature, productive manner. (I often have 75% of the class comment at least once.) Second, they learn about the assignment. I regularly hear students say that these workshops really help. Third, they have some freedom regarding when

and how much to participate, and a bit less responsibility and anxiety since the teacher serves as sort of a safety net. Finally, they feel it is fair. Everyone does an equal amount of work. The complaints have become compliments. Lottery-based, whole-class workshopping is now a permanent feature of my writing class.

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Quilting Enhances Learning and Enthusiasm

African American Studies 101 has been taught at Richland Community College since the early 1970's. Enrollment has fluctuated from semester to semester, and until the last few years the majority of the students have been African Americans. We have achieved increased enrollment and an improved racial mix with two specific learning initiatives—making an African American Heritage quilt and presenting the quilt to the community at a Kwanzaa ceremony designed and sponsored by the class.

Fall 1995, the students were asked to design felt blocks depicting contributions made by African Americans. Three industrious students brought in their well-designed, beautiful blocks right away. These visual aids inspired and helped others design their own blocks. Students began to cooperate with each other in completing the task. Three students held sessions in their homes to help other students; students volunteered to sew the designs onto blocks for each other. As a result, 30 blocks were completed, and a few students made more than one. Two students solicited assistance from friends and work colleagues to do the quilting.

It was a mad rush getting the quilt ready for its presentation as a *zawadi*—gift—to the community at the Kwanzaa ceremony. Students volunteered to be on various ceremony committees: program, food, decorations, entertainment, and artifacts. Each student could invite seven guests and was responsible for decorating his/her own table. Students donated all of the food but meat and drink. They solicited enough artifacts to fill seven eight-foot tables. Many of the students wore African-ethnic attire or attire appropriate for the time period of the quilt.

Over 250 students and community residents attended the ceremony. The African-American Heritage

Quilt became a teaching tool and traveled throughout the community college district. Several of the students volunteered to travel with the quilt and make the presentations.

As a result of the success of the first quilt, a second quilt was made during fall 1996. A grant from the Decatur Area Arts Council supported an artist in residence. Students met at her home on weekends, stayed after class, and met at each other's homes to complete the task. Students brought their blocks to class and explained their significance. The quilting equipment remained in the Learning Resources Center so that students could work during their spare time.

The quilt-making exercises were successful; students and professor agreed that the task:

- a. developed collaborative and cooperative learning skills
- b. built an awareness of the contributions of African Americans
- c. helped build self-confidence in students who thought they could not accomplish the task
- d. demonstrated to the community the level of commitment and talent which exists at a community college
- e. established a tradition of passing on African American history, and
- f. established a learning community.

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