



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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

## THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL: FROM BLUES TO ROCK N' ROLL

For me, the first day of school used to be an impossible waste. As class began, any number of my students were still roaming halls looking for the right room number, wandering the campus trying to locate the right building, scouting parking lots trying to find a parking space, waiting in the registrar's office to sign up, or just looking at the alarm clock and realizing they had forgotten to set it the night before. It was clear to me that whatever I did on that first day would have to be repeated for my wayward scholars during the next class anyway. So why try?

Thus, on that precious first day, instead of the great fanfare that ushers in a semester-long era of good feeling, I settled. I reviewed the syllabus; I threatened students that if they plagiarized, their lives would be doomed (with all the Internet resources now available, fat chance of catching anyone, but still, I made the threat); I assured them that if I am not an easy grader, at least I am a fair grader; and I said next time we would begin the course in earnest. And I reminded them to purchase the textbook! Class dismissed.

Of course, all of this took about 15 minutes. There was only one problem, however. The dean roamed the halls on the first day, and one day he encountered several of my students who had arrived after I had dismissed class and safely retreated back to my office—whence cometh the dean, who would remind me that I was paid to teach *every* class, for the entire *duration* of the class, and that certainly includes the very *first* class. Now there's a good first-day-of-school impression!

So, on that first day I now plan the following events to deliver some key teaching messages and set the tone for the semester. Fortunately, now with online registration, credit card tuition payments, and a more user-friendly campus, I have fewer stragglers. Here is what I now do and why.

I take three balloons into class, and with a stern look and voice, tell the students that we are not going to dive

into the course content that day, but instead use the hour for them to find out about the course and for me to find out about them.

First, I tell them that I am going to test their "interactive and cooperative learning" abilities. As I bat the first balloon into the crowd, I tell them that if the balloon touches the ground, I will fail them all. Then I throw out the second balloon and then the third. So now we have a classroom full of students batting these balloons around for dear life, fearful of letting a balloon drop, and having a good time in the process. If one of the balloons comes my way, I bat it back. *Message:* They are all in this together, and even the professor is here to help them achieve their goals.

Once the balloons are going, I say to students: "Now we're going to test your abilities while handling a little distraction." Then I pop a rock concert video into the VCR. I use the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up." So there we are, batting balloons around while Mick screams for dear life on the movie screen at the front of the room. *Message:* The lyrics and music are theirs and mine; we can all relate! This class is going to be different in ways they never expected.

After several minutes of this (while I pretend to be organizing my notes at the front of the room), the music fades; I tell students to stop and hold on to the balloons, and ask if anyone has a younger sibling or a child. When hands go up, I tell those students that they may take one of the balloons home. *Message:* This professor is aware of family, and that probably extends to students, as well. *Even larger message:* Since the balloons have stayed up, our first test in the class is a great success! And we did it together! So within the first five minutes of the semester, we have created a sense of community.

Now everyone is awake, happy, attentive, and ready to go through the syllabus. Before we do, I tell them this is their chance to be smart shoppers. If they went to McDonald's and ordered a burger with nothing on it and it came with mustard and onions, they would send it back and demand their money's worth by getting the burger they wanted. I tell them to look carefully at the syllabus, and since they are paying for the course, be



sure they think it's a worthwhile investment of their hard-earned tuition money. *Message:* The professor is not so narrowly focused on his discipline that he overlooks the needs and desires of his students. He also wants students to be responsible for their academic choices.

With that done, I tell the students they have learned about the course, and now I am going to learn a little more about them. Again, with serious demeanor, I hand out an impossible trivia quiz. I tell them it is an abbreviated IQ and informational awareness test, encourage them to do their own work, and announce that I will look seriously at the results.

Questions on the quiz are representative of most basic disciplines—e.g., math: *What's the numerical value of "pi"?* art: *Who painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling?* cinema history: *What are the names of the seven dwarfs?* anatomy: *Where's your uvula?* current cinema: *Who stars in a (currently playing) movie?* world history: *What event happened in 1588? or 1215? or 1066?* civics: *What did Rosa Parks do?* chemistry: *What's the notation for common table salt?* classical music: *Arrange Bach, Beethoven, Brahms chronologically.* philosophy: *Who came first, Socrates or Aristotle?* literature: *Who wrote Oliver Twist?* geography: *What river flows through Stratford-on-Avon?* children's literature: *Who wrote Green Eggs and Ham?* kid's TV: *Name 5 Muppets.* After about 30 questions, I always add: *"What's your favorite book?" "What's your favorite piece of music?" "How much money would you have to have to call yourself rich?" "What's the most beautiful sight you've even seen?"* and *"If you could ask God a question, what would it be?"* There are no right answers to these last five questions, to be sure, but they tell me volumes about the individual students.

After they struggle with this quiz for about 15 minutes, I tell them to stop, and then I ask, as though I expect many hands to go up, "How many of you got 100%?" No response. "One wrong?" Again, no response, as they nervously glance around the room to see if anyone was so brilliant. The best anyone ever does is about 50%, and they all exhibit some signs of distress about my high expectations.

Then I tell them I sense some concern that they didn't do so well. However, since this is the first impression they'll make on the professor, I'll put them into groups to try to figure out more answers and earn a higher score. The groups are assigned by having students count off from front to back of the room, never across the rows, which usually eliminates friends being grouped with friends and forces interaction with students they do not know. They also reconnect with fellow balloon batters.

Since they are still concerned about doing well on the quiz, they begin to interact immediately. As they help

each other, I roam from group to group and ask them about any questions that have their whole group baffled. I never give explicit answers, but I do give hints that point students to the correct answer.

When they seem to have most of the answers, I send them back to their original seats. We then grade the quiz, with each student grading his or her own quiz on the honor system. As I read each question, students call out the correct answer. After the grading is completed, I ask, "How many of your grades improved due to your group work?" They raise their hands. "What's that tell you?" After a pause, I say, "It tells you that there are valuable learning resources all around you in class. Everyone here can teach something." *Message:* Working and studying together can help you.

"How many of your groups benefited from my comments?" I continue. They all raise their hands. "What does this teach you?" There is a pause. "Remember, I didn't give anyone any exact answers. I gave little nudges that started you thinking in a critical and analytical way, that led you to discover the answers for yourselves." *Message:* Hey, we already possess the faculties of critical thought we need to be good students, and look what logical reasoning can do!

"What else did that teach you?" There is another pause. "Your professor isn't out to flunk you, but is on the same side as you, wants you to learn, and wants to help you learn." Looks of dumbfounded awe appear. *Message:* We all belong to this little scholarly community we have just created. We are all working toward the same goals.

This about concludes the first class. Instead of rolling eyes and thoughts of a long semester of impending boredom, my students leave with some important ideas about this course and a sense of family. They look forward to coming back and being part of a community of learners, all attuned to the same goals and willing to help one another in that effort.

**Gary Owens**, *Associate Professor, Philosophy and Religion*

For further information, contact the author at Harford Community College, 159 Fallston Hall, 401 Thomas Run Road, Bel Air, MD 21015. e-mail: gowens@harford.edu