



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## A MASTERFUL EXPERIENCE

I recently had the opportunity to attend the state-wide Master Teacher Conference at Northeast Alabama Community College with three of my coworkers. The primary objective of the conference was to motivate, rejuvenate, and teach us to become...well, Master Teachers. This goal seemed rather odd since we had been teaching for years. Weren't we already Master Teachers? Yes, we were and still are; but I, for one, was in dire need of a boost, a reminder of what being a Master Teacher really means.

Surprisingly enough, I learned this by becoming a student again. To be honest, I started out rather skeptical and, yes, nervous about the whole experience, not unlike what our students must be feeling as they enter our classrooms. I only knew a few people, so I was somewhat apprehensive. While the Master Teacher staff introduced themselves, I thought to myself, "I hope they don't call on me," and "Oh, no, do we really have to introduce ourselves?" Admittedly, I even glanced down at my cell phone, which was lying secretly inside my opened purse. I realized at this point that I was becoming the typical student—one who needed to be made comfortable before speaking and be convinced that time was not being wasted. I believe by giving us the role of students as we sat in an environment not unlike the one our students are in, the facilitators made me fully aware of what really makes a Master Teacher. Students know, but we, as instructors, often need to be reminded.

Marie Ponsot suggests in her poem "Not Academic" that "teaching, of course, is holding open the door and staying out of the way." I have to agree with this declaration. At the conference, I learned firsthand what happens when students are given guidance, but not strict instructions, on how to complete a task: creativity ensues, and learning takes place. Certainly, students want and need structure, but they also need room to be creative and have input into how learning will take place. They also need to have fun and feel comfortable expressing themselves.

I know that being flexible can be a worrisome idea for many of us who like to be in control, but it is true—flexibility is important. Many times, the Master Teacher facilitators moved over and let us take charge. It was during these times that we learned the most. We were a bit nervous and very excited. We shared our lesson plans, our best motivators, and our innovators. In short, we shared our ideas, our thoughts, and our problems—and we laughed. We simply had conversations. We learned creative teaching techniques as we watched Master Teachers teach, and we shared what we knew.

The most effective lessons, the ones that held my attention, were the ones that required our participation, which resulted in a great deal of laughter. We, as veteran teachers, sometimes resist the value and importance of fun, too often feeling insulted by the idea that we should be providing entertainment. The very thought of having to compete with MTV, reality TV, and similar forms of entertainment can be daunting. However, allowing creativity to take place is inherently joyful. It is challenging and absorbing, and it introduces laughter into what otherwise might be tedious situations. It engages attention and requires imagination; and when skillfully facilitated, it enhances communication. Simply put, learning takes place. At the conference, we felt comfortable with each other and became a community of Master Teachers.

As instructors, we must strive to create such a community in our classrooms by offering ways to organize the curriculum around essential conversations and by providing necessary intellectual environments in the classroom that will allow important discussions to take place. We must continue to improve and will do so if we embrace and reflect on our own learning experiences. Effective teaching challenges students to know and to care that they know. Master Teachers become mentors to whom the students go for informal guidance and conversation. Creating a classroom environment that is conducive to an active, participatory class is important.

Providing students with what they want to accomplish and requiring them to have to figure out



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how to do it is essential. Assigning work that makes students think about their own lives and the direction they are going is necessary. For example, in English classes, students can compare themselves to the characters in the books and stories they are reading. This comparison requires reflection on who they are and who they want to become. Good teachers also bring their own real-life experiences to the classroom and share them with their students. They give students the skills, knowledge, and power to change their own lives by awakening and empowering them to reflect and to act more responsibly in a multifarious world.

Who are Master Teachers? They are teachers who know and love what they teach, who through passion tempt students to read and learn the subject, and who make connections between what students are studying and real-life situations. Finally, and most important, I was reminded at the conference that all effective education is a conversation. We simply open the door and listen, interjecting ourselves and information only when necessary. We get to know our students and provide them with an environment that allows them to be comfortable and creative. If we are able to do this, we are truly Master Teachers, and learning will take place.

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