



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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BUILDING BONDS WITH STUDENTS

I begin each new semester by creating a “contract” with students. I ask them to help me generate a list of “what makes an excellent teacher.” My introduction goes like this:

“If you’re like me, you’ve had many teachers in your lifetime. A few have been excellent, most have been ‘okay,’ and some should probably be drawn and quartered. What I’d like you to tell me about is those excellent teachers—the ones that if you go to class and see that sign ‘class cancelled’ on the door, you scream ‘NOOOOO! I LOVE THIS CLASS.’ What makes those instructors so good?”

I keep the list on the positive side—that is, what an instructor should do, not what s/he should not do. The students generate, for the most part, the same list year after year, regardless of the level of the class and specific subject. The list contains several key student messages.

Don’t Hurt Me! (Examples: “nice, patient, kind, open-minded, tolerant”)

I believe many students are very concerned with being embarrassed or otherwise punished for “not knowing.” This message indicates that students will participate only in a safe environment; and although they may wish to connect with me, they will not do so if I appear unapproachable. This seems to be an acknowledgment of the power differential in the classroom and a fear of that power being used capriciously or punitively.

Keep Control! (Examples: “on time, organized, fair, prompt to reply to questions”)

In addition to safety demands (Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) is the desire to have a captain at the helm. Ambiguity in the classroom makes most students anxious and leads to feelings of helplessness (especially about their grades). In addition, many students indicate they want the instructor to take action about detracting factors in the class—e.g., aggressive or distracting students.

Inspire Me! (Examples: “passionate, interesting, funny, keeps things moving”)

“A sense of humor” always makes the list. One student put it bluntly, “You can kick me, you can punch me, just don’t bore me.” I think most students are open to almost any subject matter and appreciate any attempt to be entertaining and interactive. Students may not be able to connect the skills taught in a class to their perceived needs, which is understandable, but will invest energy in the class if they feel it is not a waste of their time. Simply expressing the desire to connect with them is enough for many students to feel heard.

Interestingly, an item that hardly ever makes the list is “knowledgeable about the subject matter.” This always tickles me because the focus *for the instructor* in “traditional academic settings” has been, in my opinion, exactly this. The notion of information-transfer is sometimes secondary to the academic pedigree of the instructor. I believe the students would be much more pleased, as consumers, with a “less qualified” (in that sense) but more dynamic and interactive teacher.

Throughout the semester, I schedule at least one “meet and greet” with each student—somewhere between a two- and five-minute interview. I invite them to tell me something about themselves and how they feel they are doing in the class. I end this interview asking, “How can I help you get the grade you want?” A majority of students take complete responsibility for their performance and tell me that they are going to read more thoroughly or study the guides I give them. A few savvy students say, “Just mark it down!” to which I can laugh and say, “If only I could!” The interview is designed to reinforce the message that the student and I are partners, that I want them to succeed, and that it is not “me vs. you” but rather “me and you vs. the material.”

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WRITING AN INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

NISOD's flagship teaching and learning publication, *Innovation Abstracts*, is written by practitioners, for practitioners, in community colleges, colleges, and universities around the world. Issues are mailed or emailed weekly during the academic year to NISOD-member colleges.

In any year, a full academic year's collection of *Abstracts* features a wide array of topics. Fortunately, we have discovered that each issue of *Innovation Abstracts* has something for everyone. Although individual issues are written from the perspective of a specific discipline or program, authors often include some flavor of the versatility of the strategies they describe.

Past issues of *Innovation Abstracts* are a potential author's best examples of format, language (avoiding jargon), and specifics of style and tone. However, some additional information may be helpful and is included here.

Innovation Abstracts are:

- Basic introductions to an innovation (a definition or description with practical suggestions for use);
- Descriptions of an innovative model program or project (a description of the program, identification of key elements in the model, and suggestions of variations on the model);
- Practical suggestions for managing use of an innovation (intended as a vehicle by which long-term users share techniques for transition from old practice to innovation with new users);
- Innovative variations on existing programs or concepts (a description of the variation; an explanation of how others can implement this improvement);
- Research-based analyses of innovations and their effectiveness in improving instruction (a discussion of the problem researched, the methodology and results);
- Issue-focus papers (usually speculative; factors affecting the teaching/learning process which are not innovations, per se: e.g., strategies for encouraging use of an innovation).

Each abstract should include a description of the innovation and a discussion of practical applications and/or implications. Additional guidelines include:

- Audience—Abstracts are written for staff developers, faculty, counselors, administrators, and special groups. This Abstracts, for example, is intended for any faculty member, staff developer, researcher, or administrator who might wish to submit a manuscript.
- Length—Drafts should be no more 1,800 words (one to three single-spaced pages). We request that articles be submitted as e-mail attachment.
- Style—Ideas should be expressed in a clear, jargon-free manner. Include definitions of special terms.
- Applicability—Innovations should have potential for application in a number of areas and, preferably, be implemented easily and inexpensively.
- Publication—Authors are identified by name, academic title/position, and discipline/program area. A "for further information" byline invites readers to contact the author. Provide college name, physical address, city, state, and zip code. The author's e-mail address, if available, should be included for easy access.

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