



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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WRITING CENTERS: CHANGING THE CULTURE OF A COLLEGE

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) at Itawamba Community College is “Raising the Bar: Improving Student Writing Through Early Intervention.” The primary modes of intervention are Writing Centers—one for each of our two campuses and one online.

The quantitative measures of success for the centers include results of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency Test, student and faculty surveys, entrance and exit essays in English classes, student retention and success rates, and collegewide writing samples. While results from quantitative evaluations are essential in validating the contributions of our writing centers, a more important long-range consideration is the degree to which the faculty come to value writing and incorporate it into courses. As instructors appreciate the value of writing and recognize that good writing skills must be required in all classes, the culture of a college is changed and enriched.

Before the Itawamba QEP was implemented, instructors frequently commented about their students’ poor writing skills. A 2006 in-house survey revealed that faculty considered 85 percent of their students to be poor or very poor writers, but the same survey showed that the respondents were doing little to rectify the problem. Faculty blamed the college English department or the area high schools for students’ shortcomings. *A serpent was in the house, and few seemed willing to confront it.* While a full-blown writing-across-the-curriculum initiative would have required that the entire faculty become responsible immediately for student writing, QEP developers felt that the long-term fate of teaching writing-across-the-college depended upon conviction, rather than edict—conviction that writing is a powerful tool for learning and that students must learn to write well in order to demonstrate effectively what they have learned.

To achieve the desired results, Writing Center staff touted the effectiveness of writing-to-learn initiatives

for all disciplines. Newsletters and group presentations described writing-to-learn methods and their advantages. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness requested that each instructional planning unit include an objective aimed at supporting the QEP. This meant that each division was expected to add an objective related to the use of writing to enhance instruction. A College Writing Committee, composed of one faculty member from each division in the college, provided support in all instructional areas as writing-to-learn strategies were being added. Committee members included writing-to-learn activities in their own classes and shared the results with fellow division members. The Writing Centers’ newsletter, “The Writer’s Link,” featured additions of writing-to-learn activities as instructors implemented them. Moreover, workshops presented by writing center staff from senior colleges across the state were provided as support for faculty who were revising their syllabi to use writing more efficiently.

Faculty members across the college have assumed the responsibility for teaching students to write. For example, when a student cannot write an acceptable sociology paper, faculty agree that the fault belongs partially to collegewide instruction and is not the student’s alone. When we emphasize the importance of writing enough, demand good writing in all our classes, model writing to learn, and demonstrate a love of writing ourselves, we will have done our duty in helping students succeed wherever clear thinking and good writing are required.

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USING MUSIC TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS

Nearly everyone enjoys music, and recently I discovered how music can contribute to creating a positive learning environment in my government classes. Through trial and error, I discovered a strategy to use music to build community, prepare students to engage in the work of learning, and simply make class more engaging, unpredictable, and fun.

At first, I selected all the songs myself. To bring students out of their small-group conversations, I played brief portions of songs that had some witty connection (or so I thought) to the topic we were discussing. We segued out of a conversation about the separation of church to the sound of Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky." And, for something really edgy, we listened to Rage Against the Machine's "Bulls on Parade" after a conversation about the Iraq war. My students seemed to enjoy hearing music in class, but I could tell that the songs I chose were not always very meaningful to them.

This changed when I started asking my students which songs *they* would find fun and relevant to class. My first hint that we were really onto something came when we lightened the mood of some heavy conversations about terrorism and war with the Black Eyed Peas' "Where Is the Love?" This was literally a "let's everybody put their hands together" moment, with nearly every student smiling, clapping, and having a better time than I can remember my students ever having together. Instantly, this group of students turned into a single community. By the time the verses of the song ended, we were refreshed, energized, and ready to return again to the work of teaching and learning. Even more important, this moment changed the way that I and many of the students felt about the class for the rest of the term. From that point on, we were all on the same team, working together toward achieving our common goals of student learning and success.

Other songs became opportunities for further conversations: Why are the lyrics of "Bullet with Butterfly Wings" and "Man in the Box" so dark? These songs provided us with new ways to approach course material concerning personal choices and their consequences for ourselves and others.

Before long, I looked for other opportunities to play the many songs that students requested—in the moments before class began, during breaks, and at the end of class. Sometimes, I still found it effective to select songs of my own. For example, I returned a batch of less-than-satisfactory mid-term essays to the ominous

sounds of Dimitri Tiomkin's theme for "Rio Bravo." Yet the greatest successes clearly came from the songs that students suggested. Whatever songs we played—from the sweetest jazz and pop to the heaviest hip hop and heavy metal—this strategy energized us, helped set the mood for our time together, and caused a greater number of students to feel like they were a significant part of the class.

To gain student input, I set up a new forum on the online discussion board that I ordinarily used for our political conversations. Students were encouraged to suggest and write about songs that they would find meaningful to hear, and they received credit for their posts (as with other forums). At first, only a few students took advantage of this opportunity, but once the class discovered the power of playing these student-selected songs in class, more and more students began to contribute. This forum soon became the most popular of all, with nearly twice as many posts as any other. Students who did not contribute easily to other conversations suddenly came to life when asked to talk about a favorite song, providing an opportunity to connect with me and other students.

Once again, I am reminded that the best way to make class more worthwhile for students is to ask for suggestions from the students themselves. Note: I found that most every song my students suggested was available for use in class on grooveshark.com.

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