



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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TERRIFIED FRESHMAN AUTHORITIES: A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING EXPERIMENT

In my mind, I must have quit graduate school at least 500 times out of fear and frustration. I longed for a written handbook that went beyond the schedule detailing when drafts of my thesis were to be submitted. What I wanted was for a student who had already been through the same experiences to say, "I was as scared as you. Here's what really works." And then this imaginary friend would help me get my deadlines in perspective. Our students are no different. Here is one way I've found to retain "high-risk" students: Give them the chance to produce a document that would serve to orient and comfort other frightened freshmen; make them the authorities of campus survival.

"If you were a freshman who had never before been enrolled in a college-level course, or, for that matter, had never set foot on campus, would you pick this up and read it?" That is how I set the purpose, audience, and occasion for a newsletter my freshman composition students "published" last semester. The content for the newsletter was derived from their first four writing assignments. These were either short essays or long paragraphs, and they all pertained to and were directed toward allaying the fears of the "high-risk" student.

The first assignment was a description of their favorite instructor on campus who was teaching during the semester. In the second assignment they helped their imaginary freshman survive either pre-registration, registration day, or the first three days of class. In a third assignment, they argued for reasons to remain enrolled in college courses, using four benefits they were receiving or earning from college attendance. The fourth and last assignment, identified by my students as the toughest, was to decide which class they could recommend to their newfound friend, based upon the applicability of acquired knowledge or skills to situations outside of the class.

After I had graded and edited these paragraphs or essays, I asked students to type them in newsletter form, incorporating the suggestions and corrections I had made. These assignments were to be ordered in the newsletter in

much the same manner as the traditional argument, with the weakest sandwiched in the middle and the strongest on each end, thus exercising their evaluation skills. We, as a class, examined professional and student examples of newsletters, and I encouraged them to make use of resources available around campus: typing labs, photos from college catalogs, comic strips from old newspapers, and "fillers" such as snack bar menus, graduation dates, newly-acquired library material, skills development center hours, tutoring hours, and computer lab hours. Thus, students were able to seek out on-campus services to which they normally would not be exposed. They were not pushed to use these services, but now they knew they were the authorities as to what was available on campus. Although no real artistic talent was necessary, students used computer programs, stencils, cut-out magazine lettering, freehand, calligraphy, and even colored markers.

Once each student had completed and received points for his or her particular assignment, the newsletters moved into the "group mode." The students' job as a group was to create the "best" newsletter possible, using one paragraph from each student of each assignment type for a total of four paragraphs. They used a type of contract system in which they identified each other's strengths as writers/publishers/editors and then agreed to accomplish certain tasks related to the project.

When I graded the original individual newsletter, I awarded the students from 1 to 50 points, 50 being the highest. But when the newsletter went to the group members, they were put in charge of the grading. Each student rated himself or herself from 1 to 50 points, based upon the completion of agreed-upon tasks, cooperation within the group, and leadership. He or she then evaluated the other members of the group, using the same method. The numbers corresponded amazingly well. Even the student who awarded himself a low 10 points was in agreement with the group.

From all that has been achieved by the student in terms of higher-level thinking skills, development of community, heightened reader awareness, and task completion, it appears as though this project would be extremely demanding for the instructor. It is not. Both the highly motivated and the less-motivated students liked the idea



of a completed project they could take home to show their families, and it also served as a reminder of a semester past. From the comments I received, I could tell students were especially fond of the idea of helping other students who might be as terrified as they were when beginning their college careers. They were no longer just the passive consumers of information; they were the active producers of information.

The cooperative newsletter began as a critical thinking exercise; but now, after reading student comments, I find it has touched students much more deeply than I ever expected. An excerpt from one student's paragraph says it well:

[In our newsletter] we used our own experiences which are real, not only to us, but to others as well. My younger brother read ours and related to what each paragraph said. He won't be coming to college for a couple of years; but now he knows what to expect, and he looks forward to coming!

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**When this article was originally published, Laura Jorde was employed at Clovis Community College (NM).*

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