A Collection of
gifts
Great Ideas For Teaching

Issue 1 Spring 2006

1.1 Envisioning the Art of Education

Denise Stephenson and Dana Smith

It was about eight months ago when Denise began to think about a faculty newsletter that would be a forum for sharing great teaching strategies. She dreamed of a collaboration between the Writing Center and Teaching Academy. Then she approached Dana who saw an opportunity to capture the flex GIFT panels in writing and provide a permanent reference. When we went to the PDP, the members of the committee helped us envision a new vehicle and venue, in both hard copy and online formats. Now, after the writing of many generous faculty, the design and layout of a talented artist (and Writing Center lead consultant), and the minor editing of the two of us, we have for you this inaugural issue. We hope you'll find the contents helpful in your teaching and that you'll recognize the talent all around you here at MiraCosta.

In this issue of *A Collection of GIFTs*, we bring you a provocative array of great ideas for teaching. Steve Eso's article offers a unique way of lecturing which increases attentive and accurate listening while also engaging critical thinking. In Sue Simpson's piece on mind mapping, you'll discover not only the benefits of students learning to see complexly, but also ways to share the responsibility for course knowledge with students.

If you find that your students don't organize their papers in comprehensible ways, or if you're frustrated by the lack of content connections in student papers, Holly Ordway's text provides an activity which will increase student knowledge of structure, while filling your reading/grading time with more satisfaction and less strain.

Submissions
Submissions are always welcome; the deadline is April 1 for the Fall issue and October 15 for the Spring issue.

Please submit work to M/S 9 or dstephenson@miracosta.edu

Teaching Academy

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You want your students to communicate their knowledge clearly. You'd like them to be able to do so in front of their peers, and yet oral class presentations frustrate you. If this sounds familiar, read Lynne Miller's article on the use of poster presentations. She'll reveal a personal struggle with a "class presentation" she had to make and her newfound success with posters as a communication medium.

Robert Kelley reveals how he increased student presence and engagement at office hours by holding them in a new venue. And finally, Sharon Harrison provides a workshop to help students connect with classmates while being self-reflective about their own family backgrounds. Her exercise sets out to make a safe, inclusive environment for discussing social diversity.

How's that for a first issue? Thanks to all of our contributors! In the issues ahead, we look forward to presenting more favorite teaching activities. We want to know about your successes in teaching. How do you present, facilitate or organize a particular activity? What does it yield for your students' learning? Don't hold back. In sharing your knowledge with your colleagues, you contribute to a passion we all hold dear: envisioning and enacting the art of education.

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1.2 Catch Me if You Can

Steve Eso, Psychology

Have you ever faced the daunting challenge of presenting a complex and unfamiliar conceptual process to students, knowing that it may be a rather tedious or dry, albeit necessary, presentation? Well, I have. To meet this challenge, I have tried a rather novel approach, and I have been pleased with the results.

I required students to read about a particular process in their textbook, write a description of that process, and then bring their write-ups to the next class meeting. (In this case, we were studying neural communication.) In class, I broke students into groups of three to four and told them to make notes of any mistakes that they heard me make in the upcoming lecture. Then, I described the process they had read and written about, but I purposely made mistakes in the terminology and progression. After I finished my faulty description, the students immediately turned to each other and began discussing the incorrect parts of the account and compiling a complete list of errors. After a few minutes of group work, I asked volunteers to highlight the errors their group had found, and as a class, we discussed why each error was incorrect and what the correct answer was. Finally, in order to reinforce the CORRECT process, as a class we described the entire process again, but this time correctly.

In general, I found the students listened more carefully and actively and were very motivated to catch me making a mistake. The technique really made the learning of a complex and terminology-laden process much more enjoyable and interactive for the students. For me as the instructor, it was a pleasure to see the sparkle in their eyes as they listened intently--even if they were listening for my errors.

I don't believe that this technique would be appropriate for all topics because the novelty might wear off, and because there might be concerns regarding regularly reciting incorrect information; but as a change of pace, it worked quite well.

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1.3 Seeing Complexity Leads To Responsibility

Sue Simpson, Nursing

Mind maps are certainly not new, but they can provide a conceptual picture of important information that can't be visualized as effectively by any other means. While writers often use mind maps to brainstorm or to get a visual picture as they organize their thoughts, in Nursing we use them to provide a novel approach to understanding complexity. We also use them as we introduce a new process or procedure to impress upon Nursing students how they must be responsible and accountable. Let me tell you a bit about how it works.

In the beginning, students often confuse mind maps with poster board presentations. The latter are very linear and compartmentalized; mind maps are not. Instead, they allow students to identify and illustrate multiple interdependent connections.

One of my favorite uses is with medications. For example, I have each student research a particular kind of medication. Then they create a mind map: they name the medication at the center of the page; then surrounding it, they must identify the uses, side effects, nursing implications, interactions with other medications and foods, possible alterations in lab values, and what toxic values would be. Soon the entire page is filled with the many ways a single medication can be viewed. This visual image helps students realize that giving a patient a single pill can cause multiple effects for both the patient and the care giver.

After students have completed their research and created their mind maps, they individually present their maps to the rest of the class. Each student is now the "expert" on a particular medication and serves in that role for the rest of the semester; when questions arise regarding that particular type of medication, "the expert" is consulted. The mind maps hang on the wall as resources. Any student can refer to them, as a visual means for learning more about a medication, its interactions and implications.

In the dual processes of creating mind maps and fulfilling the expert role, students develop a respect for medications, a new level of responsibility regarding their position in health care, and a growing recognition of the accountability they have as nurses.

Two of my favorite web pages can be found at <http://www.peterussell.com/MindMaps/HowTo.html> and <http://www.peterussell.com/Mindmaps/Advantages.html> which explain mind maps and their multiple uses.

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1.6 Meeting Outside the Box
Alternative Office Hours

Robert Kelley, Psychology

This semester I joined a growing group of instructors who are holding their office hours *outside the office*. The decision to do so was motivated by my wanting to be more accessible to my students, both to help them and to get to know them. The students who attended these "outside the office" hours are now performing better in class; I notice that they have become more comfortable with participating in discussions and asking questions.

My interest in holding office hours outside the office began with my Behavioral Statistics class at San Elijo. Taking a small step initially, I held my first "outside the office" hour right before an exam, when I knew students would be most interested in getting additional help. In class I asked my students if they would be interested in attending an office hour held at the Student Center, and shared with them that during the hour I would focus on helping students help each other, answering the tough questions, and raising their level of critical thinking. There was a great turnout with nine students attending. I brought brownies, the students brought questions, and we had a fun and productive time. I later received several thank you's and e-mails from students, telling me how much they appreciated the opportunity. I greatly enjoyed it, as I met with students in an open atmosphere, away from the classroom and office, in an environment the students and I found relaxing and supportive of dialogue.

I continue to meet with students outside the office, where they find me more accessible. While this started as a pre-exam study session, I continue to meet with students for more than just exam preparation. My students clearly appreciate this opportunity, and I have found it to be a great way to get to know them, to get them more involved in the class material, and to build a greater sense of community within the classroom.

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1.5 Poster Presentations of Research Projects

Lynne Miller, Anthropology

I want to share the idea and process of having students present research projects in the form of posters rather than oral reports. However, I want to start with a quick story that suggests some of the benefits of this approach and why I'm enthusiastic about it.

I had an interesting experience toward the end of last summer. While attending a several-day workshop on outcomes and assessment, I found myself part of a small group of professionals who were asked to discuss a specific topic and then work up an oral presentation about our conclusions. We were told that we would be "graded" not only on our content but also on *the creativity of our presentation*. Yikes! Soon I found myself embroiled in the development of a campy skit with silly dialog and the possibility of costumes. How had such a simple assignment escalated to this degree?

The next morning it was time to perform. As the session got underway, I remembered what it was like to be a student preparing to make an oral report to the class. My heart was pounding, my palms were sweating, and I couldn't hear a word of the presentations that preceded mine. I was sure that my colleagues had done good work and had important ideas to share, but I couldn't focus on anything except the torture I was about to experience. And then, I was on. Our presentation went okay, I guess. However, once I realized I had survived, it took another hour before the adrenaline subsided, and those pumping proteins prevented me from hearing any of the reports that followed mine. Thus, I had learned *nothing* from the morning session because of the agony of having to perform.

And it was at that moment that I went back to my developing syllabus and deleted the oral report. Don't get me wrong: I know that oral presentations are important assignments in many contexts. However, if one objective is for students to learn something from one another's research, then oral presentations might defeat the purpose. Students might find themselves – as I did – unable to think about anyone else's information because of their anxiety about their own performance.

Poster sessions allow my students to share their research, to learn about the projects conducted by their peers, and to participate in a type of learning experience that few classes offer, all with lower anxiety than is caused by standard oral presentations. Although few of our MCC students have ever produced a research poster, most of them (and most of you) have the mental image of a grade school science fair, where students set up their tri-fold cardboard displays with text and graphics that describe their objectives, methods, results and conclusions. This presentation format can be modified to serve a variety of classes. For example, in Primate Behavior and Ecology, my students attract our attention with images of the animals they studied, present their conclusions in multicolor histograms, and support the rest with a modicum of text. In Archaeology, there are not only text pages and full-color photos (often found on the internet thanks to www.images.google.com), but also the results of a hands-on project (a mock-up of an Egyptian funeral barge, a replica of a Mayan

temple, or a recreation of Upper Paleolithic cave paintings). I spend perhaps an hour of class time talking with students about how to prepare their posters, including both aesthetic and practical concerns. I show them models of "bad" and "good" posters, and we discuss what makes them bad and good.

On the day(s) of the poster sessions (sometimes during final exams week, sometimes during the last week of class), a few students at a time "show" their posters, which means standing nearby to answer questions, while the rest of the group wanders from station to station, reading and learning about their peers' work. We switch presenters every half-hour or so. I ask students to do written evaluations of one another's work, including the content (thus encouraging them to learn about the various projects) and also the presentation itself (so that they further consider what qualities create a good or bad poster). And finally, I encourage them to invite their friends and family to the poster sessions, and I welcome members of the MCC community to come and applaud the hard work and accomplishments of these remarkable students.

Virtually every student has found this to be a positive experience. They walk away with something tangible to show their parents, their friends, or their children. They swell with pride when a professor from another class comes by to see and praise their work. And, of course, they learn about a variety of research topics that class time didn't allow me to address. Altogether, the poster sessions have served me well on a number of fronts, and I would welcome emails from colleagues who want to know more about how to put posters to work for them.

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1.7 Identity Exercise
Modeling Diversity by Shaking Your Family Tree

Sharon Harrison, Letters

While creating or agreeing on the correct vocabulary of identity is seldom the primary goal in any of our courses, discussion and open communication can be hampered by students' fear of offense or impropriety regarding word choice. Rather than risk a comment that might be perceived as racist or insensitive, many students choose to remain silent in the classroom, losing the opportunity for discussion on a variety of subjects and for responding to current world events.

In particular, our newest college-level students may lack the vocabulary to address aspects of identity with any confidence. To accommodate this, some instructors prefer to lay down ground rules for in-class discussion and writing, emphasizing tolerance and mutual respect. Yet students who have never discussed issues of gender, race, sex, ability/disability, poverty/wealth, religion, politics, and education in the classroom may continue to hesitate joining in for fear of offending colleagues or instructor.

As a brand-new composition instructor, my own coursework was about to cover the African roots of rock and roll music and the black diaspora, and I had concerns about the sort of environment this could create for my sole black student. Moreover, our coursework would be traveling from modern issues of race and identity into sexual identities. Would we be able to discuss the texts' complicated and multiple sexualities in a way that still created a safe environment for my gay, lesbian, and bisexual students? I was also concerned that our discussions of poverty and lack of education could marginalize students whose lives are affected by these factors. While I knew it was important for me to continue to model the language of diversity in the classroom, I felt I was still lacking a specific example or exercise that could demonstrate the language of identity on many levels. I wanted to welcome everyone's participation in our classroom discussions and writings—how can you welcome someone who hasn't been invited?

I admit to fretting some over this issue. How do I show instead of tell? What can I do that isn't seen as simply some way to negotiate the classroom in the era of political correctness, but as a way to include all people and identities in the classroom as well as in academic discussion?

It's not often that the answer to a quandary appears in a dream, but I took full advantage of just such an inspiration by creating a new exercise for my classroom in about the third week of class. By this time the students had revealed a bit about themselves in their writing—particularly relating to employment, income, and ethnicity. (I had mentioned some of my work experience, but not much else.) So, in class, I wrote "Identity" at the top of the chalkboard, and I drew a dot on the board and labeled it "me." Then I drew two branches from the dot and at their ends wrote the names of my parents; I added four more branches and named my grandparents. I tried to make it entertaining—not a difficult task considering the variety show that is my family: "My Irish grandpop had organized crime ties and changed the family name when he came to the U.S. He

bought a farm in Kansas, but after battles with alcohol and depression, he killed himself when my dad was young. Coahuila Indian Great-Grandpop was a cattle rustler—killed by hanging in Tejas/Texas. My Mexican granny and her sister were both single moms and so combined households to raise their kids together." Then I added the step-parents—my Mexican stepmom, my Filipina stepmom (a cheer went up from the in-class Filipino section), and my Native Hawai'ian stepdad.

None of my family can be traced back very far—not a problem as this wasn't intended to be a genealogy lesson—but the diversity was readily apparent. I added the likely Arab/Moorish background on my mother's Spanish side due to her last name—Alcaraz. I showed that even the "pure" Hawai'ian side wasn't: it's now speculated that menehunes, "little people," likely refers to a small-statured native race already in Hawai'i when the newcomers arrived from the Marquesas a thousand-plus years ago. Then I "shook my tree" for trends, all while tracing these trends through the lines on the board: religion (Jews, Catholics, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, born-again Christians, atheists), education (few college attendees until my generation), wealth/poverty (mostly poverty until my parents' generation), sexuality (many more Hawai'ian gay and lesbian cousins, aunties, and uncles, likely due to lack of stigma in that culture; sexual ambiguity on the Mexican side includes oft-changing roles and identities), mental illness (bipolar disorder/manic depression runs like a river through the Irish side), disability (congenital deafness on the Hawai'ian side), and criminality (prevalent in all sides of the family). I noted the tendency of my Irish and Mexican ancestors to migrate west toward more tolerant societies.

The first class I used the family-tree exercise with remained noisy and engaged, shouting out surprise and calling encouragement to me throughout. Perhaps they were enjoying the complications of my family, or the fact that I was willing to reveal so much. When I felt I'd gone far enough in my own family tree, I invited anyone from class to come take a try at creating their own. I had no takers that first class but have had many since, including students last semester who traced their families back only a couple generations to slavery. Every time I've used this exercise it's led to lively class discussion about identity—how it can be a choice as much as what's dictated by inheritance and circumstance. We've discussed word choices such as "ethnicity" and "race" and what they mean in academia. And I think for some of my less experienced students, I was able to model that there is no need to be shy or self-conscious or ashamed of the many identities in our families, that they are what they are, and they are part of what makes us who we are.

Personally, after the first time I tried the family-tree exercise, I felt a weight lifted from me. I'd been so nervous—I was afraid that I might appear to be overeager to assert my non-whiteness, because I have my own identity issues with appearing white while feeling "other." But I believe this same exercise can work for any teacher: it's not only about ethnic diversity, but cultural. Surely everyone has different nationalities, economics, religions, educational levels, ambitions, sexualities, locations/relocations, and abilities/disabilities in their family, right? All you have to do is dig and shake a little.

I'm aware that many instructors hesitate to reveal private facts about themselves or place themselves at the center of attention in the classroom, and this exercise is not so self-involved as it might first appear. I see it more a case of leading by example. Not only was I able to speculate about branches of past family that are quite vague due to lack of records, but I shared trends I've noted in my family regarding identity issues without making myself the focus and

without making value judgments—all the while modeling language my students can use in the future.

I have implemented this exercise three times now in first-year composition classes with what I consider a great deal of success. When I've asked for volunteers who'd like to trace their own family trees on the board after me, these have led to so much discussion and interest that I have had to make time for continuation in following class meetings. Students and instructors who are adopted or have no ties to biological family are not excluded from the exercise, as the point is not so much blood ties but identity within the group you call "family."

The family-tree exercise takes about fifteen to twenty minutes on my part, but with class participation it can go easily to an hour or more. I'm certain the exercise can be adapted in many ways to suit each instructor and classroom. I think using the vocabulary of identity during this exercise loosens the class up considerably by removing fear of offense; each person chooses their own vocabulary for their family tree, and so far no one has resorted to terms that offend the rest of the class or me. And subsequently my first-year students have addressed complex identity issues in their discussions, papers, and presentations. I'm convinced that this exercise is freeing for my students, and so am happy to share it with my colleagues in the hopes that it can make modeling the language of diversity an easier and enjoyable task.

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1.4 A Writing Activity for Organizing Ideas

Holly Ordway, Letters

Objective

Students in my literature and composition classes often have excellent ideas but have difficulty organizing those ideas effectively. In this writing activity, students take apart their essays (literally!) to get hands-on experience with analyzing structure and reshaping content into a more effective organization for the essay. This activity would work equally well for a content-based class with a medium-length or long essay assignment.

Implementation

Step 1

Materials: a generous supply of index cards (preferably in two different colors) or alternately, regular paper cut up into slips.

Students bring a draft of an essay they have written.

Part A. Students write a one-sentence summary of each paragraph in their essay, putting each sentence on a separate index card. Students should number the paragraphs and the corresponding cards so they can match summary with source later on. I encourage students to break very long paragraphs into several smaller paragraphs if they discover more than one main idea.

Part B. Students trade essay drafts with a partner and repeat the task with their partner's essay, writing their summaries on a set of different-color index cards. There is no evaluative feedback at all in this exercise; the focus is exclusively on the "sayback" of content.

Part C. Students return the essays to their authors, who now compare the two summaries.

The question I ask them at this point is: "Are there any areas where your idea of the paragraph's main idea doesn't match up with your partner's idea?" These mismatches are a sign that the idea hasn't been explained sufficiently well and serve as a starting point for revision.

Total time: about 30 minutes.

Step 2

Students take out their set of index cards with their paragraph summaries from Step 1 and experiment with different forms of organization by moving around the index cards to see how their ideas could be arranged in different ways. I sometimes give a short lecture between Step 1 and 2 if I want to point out specific essay structures or rhetorical structures for them to be aware of as possible organizational strategies.

The focus of this part of the exercise is to answer the questions: "What different possibilities do I have for organizing my essay? Can I find something that is more effective?"

The specific instruction is to create one alternate outline for the ideas in the essay. Students are encouraged to talk to each other and compare notes, especially with the person who read their essay earlier.

It's important to allot enough time for this part of the activity, so students feel that they have time to experiment with possibilities. (If students seem to be settling on a new organization too quickly, without exploring the options adequately, you can require them to create two different alternate outlines or trade index cards with another student

and create an outline for the other student's essay.)

Total time: about 20 minutes.

Step 3

The final step is to revise the essay, using any insights gained from this exercise as well as feedback from other exercises.

Results

This exercise incorporates a variety of learning styles all in one session (particularly visual and kinesthetic) as well as both group and individual work. As a result, it makes the structural concepts accessible to a wide range of students. As the essay becomes demystified, it helps improve students' understanding of global revision and confidence in their ability to do it. They come to understand that the essay is not something that you write perfectly and sequentially from beginning to end, but something that you put together with different building blocks (and can take apart and rearrange if you're not happy).

Specifically, it helps students revise their essays so they can present their ideas in a more effective manner. The effect is particularly positive for my less academically experienced students, who tend to have the hardest time visualizing structure in the abstract.