

A Collection of gifts



Issue 2 Fall 2006

Great Ideas For Teaching

2.1 In This Issue...

Denise Stephenson and Dana Smith

Following our call for this second issue of *A Collection of GIFTs*, **Tom Severance** wrote the faculty in his department inviting them to share their best teaching ideas with one another as well as this publication. In that exchange, many pedagogically innovative techniques were circulated. You'll see some of them in this and future issues. But we want to applaud Tom's support of GIFTs as well as his community building among his faculty. You'll see, in this issue, a similar invitation that Tom creates for his students through Blackboard.

This issue finds us beginning to offer GIFTs that incorporate technology into teaching in many ways. **Lisa Lane** offers a way of getting a "head count," in the on-line environment while also assessing students' abilities to access media rich websites. **John Turbeville** demonstrates how a virtual lab can enhance students' learning experiences on field trips.

Building on the theme of making diversity tangible in the classroom which Sharon Harrison raised in the last issue, **Mike Sperla** explains how having students create a Cultural Bag increases critical thinking and cultural awareness in the on-ground classroom environment.

In this Super-Size It world, we're ever more conscious of what we eat. But the complexity of understanding nutrition is not easy. **Susan Roberts** designed a series of activities which not only addressed multiple learning styles and created both fun and competitive situations, but also cut information down into bite-sized pieces. Do you experience that same pedagogical challenge? Susan's activities may help you generate new ways of meeting such challenges.

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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



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Sylvia Ramirez demonstrates how finely-tuned and oft revised goals can help students make progress, even when the subject matter—learning English—is difficult for learners to track. Could students set a specific goal for themselves in your course?

And finally, previous contributor and GIFT Panelist **Holly Ordway** presents a heuristic for helping students devise thesis statements that guide them in effectively preparing written

assignments. Her strategy of posing questions helps students understand an important distinction between topic and thesis.

Despite its place on the calendar, the start of an academic year feels like a New Year. We'd even wager you've made a few resolutions for yourself. We trust this second issue of *A Collection of GIFTs* contributes to the renewed energy and promise we feel at every new beginning. ❧

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2.2 High Powered Interactive Strategies for Learning Heavy-Duty Content

Susan Roberts, Nursing

This semester I taught the Freshman LVN students a 32 part seminar on Nutrition. Because the subject of nutrition can be a bit boring, I incorporated several interactive strategies to help them learn the content, to keep them interested in the material, and to allow them to do some learning on their own. An objective for the class was: determine facts relating to nursing measures that maintain, promote, and restore good nutrition. These are a few of the approaches I used:

- Brought a large container of sugar to class and invited students to measure out the amount of sugar in teaspoons that is contained in a variety of food items. The items included one large Coke from Carl's Junior, one piece of Duncan Heinz chocolate cake, one banana, 3 Oreo cookies, and one McDonald's strawberry shake. Students learned how to measure sugar content. They quickly saw how much sugar is hidden in many fast foods.
- Distributed 3x 5 cards and assigned the students to write up information about and definitions of the nutrient term on their card to share in a 30-minute group session. The nutrients included vitamins, minerals, triglycerides, electrolytes, Krebs cycle, proteins, and fats. The terms were included

on the final exam, and it was much more fun and interesting than a straight lecture. Students learned about the various organic and inorganic substances that affect body functioning and had an opportunity to share their research with class members.

- Compared the fat and calorie content of a selection of fast foods from local vendors, including McDonald's, Jack in the Box, Carl's Junior and Taco Bell. I have one student work with a "fat finder" wheel and as the calories and grams of fat are read from the Nutritional Information from each food item, we rate the overall percent of fat in the food item. In addition, we compare the kinds of choices that could be made at any fast food restaurant for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Students identified high calorie, fat, and sugar-filled foods and learned how to select menu items that are more nutritious.
- Described common nutritional problems and identified related disorders. Students went on a "field trip" to Tri City Hospital and met with a nutritionist who gave them a tour and discussed various kinds of diets and supplements for patients with a variety of nutritional disorders. Students identified types of supplements and their characteristics that are commonly administered in the acute care hospital setting.
- Showed the movie "Supersize Me" to illustrate liver toxicity from fat overload and extreme weight gain as nutritional disorders. Students saw how high calorie and

high saturated fat diets lead to liver enzyme disorders and increased risk for heart disease.

- Showed films on Anorexia Nervosa and Obesity in America and worked through case study discussions about who is at risk and how to lower the risk of these conditions. After viewing both films, students were able to relate how behavior and psychological factors impact eating habits, and how disorders lead to protein and calorie malnutrition.
- Assigned student groups to research a diet of their choice from a variety of client diets and present the information in class as a poster session. Students brought samples of the diet menu to class and prepared the food which was then shared and enjoyed. Students identified various hospital diets, and the rationale behind each type of diet.
- Played a Jeopardy game using PowerPoint that challenged them to remember and articulate nutrition concepts which served as a review for their final exam. Students enjoyed the game, working in teams and becoming quite

competitive. The game elicited lots of laughter and was really fun.

In summary, each of these activities engaged students. They were not only physically active, but they were verbally and mentally involved as well. Both the nutrition Jeopardy game and the hospital tour of the nutrition facilities proved to be favorites. In Jeopardy, students were actively involved in a stimulating game that helped them review for their test while competing and having fun; at the nutrition facility, students were able to view directly the types of diets and supplements they studied in class and which their hospitalized patients receive everyday. I'll admit, designing the activities took some time and thought, but the payoff of excited learners was well worth it. While not all content translates as easily into activities, I plan to use similar strategies in other courses, and have already shared some of my ideas with new faculty in the program. I was fortunate to have received the Jeopardy template from a colleague and it has proven invaluable. Now the students want to play Jeopardy as a review for all of their examinations. 🎁

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2.3 Virtual Labs Improve Fieldtrips

John Turbeville, Physical Science

Most science fieldtrips are taught by giving students a brief written introduction, showing them the features in the field, and then having students turn in a write-up. Although this is the standard practice, student comprehension and learning outcomes using this technique can be improved significantly. The main problems are the distractions in the field (noise and other people) and the fact that students typically only have one opportunity to see and hear an explanation of the features first hand.

In our oceanography lab sections, we have added pre-lab exercises for most of our fieldtrips. Before participating in a field trip, students first

read and look at pictures on the virtual lab, then complete the pre-lab exercises. The pre-lab covers most of the primary concepts and scientific observations we will be making on the actual field trip. After familiarizing themselves through the virtual lab, students can then see the features and hear an explanation in “real life” on the fieldtrip. After the fieldtrip, students continue to have access to the virtual lab, so they can add more detail to their exercises as needed.

These techniques use technology in a way that students understand and appreciate. Furthermore, this virtual experience has been shown to increase student comprehension and learning outcomes. Final exam grades have improved 12.5%, from 33 to 39.3 points out of 50 points. (These statistics were taken from 9 sections before and 4 sections after the pre-lab exercises were introduced.) ❏

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2.4 Checking Student Preparedness for Web Technology

Lisa Lane, History

The Internet is a wonderful place, and one reason is because we can expose our students to particular websites, some of which have “rich content” (images, audio, video, or animations). These resources can be used by online teachers, those teaching in Technology-Enhanced Classrooms, and for out-of-class web assignments. Unfortunately, some students just aren’t ready for such richness!

In an online class particularly, I like to know at the beginning of a class who’s technologically prepared and who isn’t. Before we had Blackboard, I used to develop an online survey that students would send to me by email. I created a web page with a simple well-known image (Winnie the Pooh or the Eiffel Tower), a link to a short audio clip on the web, and a link to a short video clip. I also asked other questions to help me

teach them, including what name they would like me to call them, what browser they use (to see if they knew what a browser is), and whether they’d had an online class before.

Now, in Blackboard, I can use the Testing feature to do this. I put everything I want into quiz format, and let them know in the first Announcement that they have to take the “sign up exercise” by the first Wednesday of the semester to stay enrolled in the class. This exercise makes sure that they are technologically prepared, but it also acts as a way of taking first-day attendance (always an issue in an online environment!). I contact all students who don’t do the exercise by the deadline.

For instructors who don’t teach online, but who like to create web assignments for students, send students to any “rich” website and then ask questions or give them a quick quiz about it. Devise questions that can be answered correctly only if students are viewing the images, hearing the audio, etc.

Of course, accessibility may be an issue both online and on campus, so I include a disclaimer asking students to contact me if for any reason they should not be expected to see or hear certain content. That gives me a disability heads-up, too! ♿

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2.5 That's My Cultural Bag

Mike Sperla, Communication

Critical thinking is a big part of my daily classroom activities. I use the Cultural Bag assignment for both my Group Communication and Interpersonal Communication classes to get students thinking more carefully about themselves and each other. Today there is much media coverage/attention on illegal immigration and racial/ethnic/religious divisions (terrorism). Even without these issues coming to the forefront, their existence can be an underlying source of tension throughout the semester, especially when students work on group projects. In this era of multicultural diversity, I believe it is important for all students to recognize the rich lifestyles that each and everyone can contribute to a classroom environment.

I begin with a lecture on culture to help students better understand what culture actually is. Then I present them with the Cultural Bag assignment. It helps students explain their personal identities to fellow classmates, allowing them to name the ways they identify themselves. It brings the language of culture into the shared classroom space, significantly reducing the prejudices/stereotyping that our mass media can sometimes foster. It is important for all students to recognize the rich lifestyles that each and every one can contribute to a classroom environment. Also, this dispels the myth that mainstream students of European descent do not have culture. This assignment helps students who believe that

they are different from each other, recognize that they actually have much in common.

Cultural Bag Instructions

- Bring in a small brown paper bag and paste/tape some pictures on the outside of it that represent you and your lifestyle.
- Inside the bag place 3-5 items (more if you like) that you believe represent your culture.
- These items can represent activities, family, work, friends, relationships, values, hardships, and meaningful life experiences. If you can think of a few of your own not listed here, please include it.
- Explain what each one means to you and why you believe it is tied to your culture/lifestyle.

Remember: Everybody has culture! This assignment/presentation is designed to show that all of us are important in the group and interpersonal process and that our voices must be heard; that our backgrounds and experiences will be useful and meaningful for successful, effective groups and classroom dynamics.

As a result of this activity, students can identify with students from diverse backgrounds on a personal level, "breaking down the walls" that can distance ethnic groups: European, African-American, Latino, Asian, Arab, etc. I assign this very early in the semester because I have found that the classroom environment

becomes more open and dynamic afterward. Students also enjoy this assignment which lacks the pressures that students face with assignments such as term papers or exams. The Cultural Bag also provides a benefit to me as an instructor because it has allowed me to creatively

incorporate the knowledge I have gained about the students into my daily lesson plans. In essence, every semester has a fresh perspective, constantly challenging me to get the most out of each unique classroom environment. 🎁

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2.6 Creating Community and Student Engagement through Blackboard

Tom Severance, Business

In both online and on-campus classes, I use Blackboard for course management and use the Discussion Board each week. Students want to feel comfortable at the first class or during the first week, so I usually post two questions to promote introductions and familiarity. Introduction questions on Blackboard allow students to “see” the other students in the class and hopefully find many things in common. I leave it open-ended because some students are more comfortable sharing personal information.

Basic Introduction Prompt

Please introduce yourself to the class. For both the online and on-campus classes, we will be discussing important issues each week, so it is helpful to know something about each other through this forum. You may find common interests, background, classes, etc.

Feel free to share anything you feel comfortable with such as: where you live, where you work, where you’re from, what other MCC classes you are taking, your family, your hobbies, etc. Find something in common or interesting from the other students’ comments and reply to as many as you can.

Students also want to see how the class is relevant to them. One way to help them find relevance is by having them share a favorite class or teacher, or other knowledge of MCC or online classes. Further, asking them to reflect on that also helps them find things in common, gives them immediate practice in class discussion, and gives me, the instructor, some useful information.

Types of Questions:

- 1) If the subject lends itself, I may ask a question that gets students thinking about the subject in their lives. For example:
Law: Prior experience with the law (and not just traffic tickets!)
Personal Finance: Good/Bad financial decision and what was learned
Marketing: Good/Bad customer service experience
- 2) Think back to your high school and college classes. What was your favorite class? What class did you learn the most from? What class gave you the most “lessons” you still apply in your life? Select one of those classes, describe it, and respond to the following: What was it about the class, subject, teaching techniques, instructor, etc. that makes it stand out?

I learn a lot from these comments and often students mention a MiraCosta class and instructor. If the comments are appropriate and if I can keep it anonymous, I often forward the comments to the MiraCosta instructor with an explanation and congratulations. It’s always nice to get this kind of positive feedback.

- 3) Assume you are advising a student who is new to MiraCosta College. What is the best thing about MiraCosta? What is the worst thing about MiraCosta? If you could, what one thing would you change about MiraCosta?
- 4) If you have taken an online class before, what suggestions would you give a student new to online learning?

And finally, at the end of semester, I often like to pose these anonymous survey questions to get valuable feedback:

- Assume you have been hired to teach this class next year.

- Suggest at least one class activity that you would keep and explain why.
- Suggest at least one class activity that you would delete and explain why.
- Suggest at least one class activity that you would change or modify and explain how and why.

Students do get to know the others in the class and often find many common bonds. They immediately see how the class subject area has already affected their lives, making them more invested in the class and its content. Further, they learn valuable tips for classes and their education at MiraCosta, both online and on-campus. 🎁

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2.7 Goal Setting Made Realistic

Sylvia Ramirez, Noncredit ESL

Recent research on learner persistence emphasizes the importance of working with students to set short and long term goals. In ESL we ask our students, “Why are you coming to school?” and they inevitably answer “to learn English.” However, this answer does not help them focus on specific steps they need to achieve that nebulous desire. Goal setting helps students identify realistic goals that are achievable within a certain period of time. Then students can move step-by-step through the activities to achieve the goals. They own the process and the results.

I use a Goal Form developed by Ron Fujijara at Long Beach Adult School. (To learn more about what Ron’s goal-setting process, go to <http://www.m-z.biz/goals/goals.htm>) In my class, I take digital photos of all the students and help them complete the Goal Form. I work together with students to perform the following:

- 1) Brainstorm realistic and attainable goal statements. For example: “to learn English” is too general, and “to learn 5 vocabulary words” is too specific
- 2) Complete the Goal Form, and after revisions, type the information and insert the digital picture
- 3) Present the Goal Form information to the class, sign the form, and post it on the classroom wall

- 4) Review Goal Forms periodically and make changes as needed

At the end of the term, students are required to report their progress towards the attainment of their selected goals. They respond in writing to the following questions:

- What were your two goals for this term?
- What was your plan to meet these goals?
- In your plan, which activities did you do well? Why?
- Which activities were difficult? Why?
- Did you accomplish your goals? Why or why not?

I provide my students with sample answers and a model paragraph to assist them in developing their individual progress reports. During the last week of the term, students read their individual reports to the class.

My experience has shown me that students are often very insightful about their progress. One student wrote that he didn’t complete all assignments because he missed too many classes. He realized that he had to make school a priority in order to learn more English. Another student wrote that it was impossible to write in English for 20 minutes every day. In the future, she plans to set a more realistic goal of 5 minutes every day. A third student told the class he couldn’t watch TV in his native language with English subtitles because his television didn’t have that capability. He is now looking for a newer TV that displays subtitles. They also reported many success stories. A young woman wrote she would try to only speak English with her husband, a native born English speaker. She said it was extremely difficult in the beginning, but they

have made progress. He now understands he has an important role in helping her learn her new language. An older man said his goal was to read English better. He read English stories to his grandsons every week. They loved the extra time with their grandpa, and he says he now feels more comfortable reading in English.

I believe creating a plan with specific goals is powerful for students. Because they identified their own goals and constantly reviewed and

revised them, the process allowed them to think critically about what they needed to do in order to learn English. It promoted responsibility and documented progress. They were so proud to read their initial Goal Forms and, then, report their progress through their final paragraphs. An example of a student goal form from my class can be found at <http://www.miracosta.edu/home/sramirez/2LeeC.pdf> ❏

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2.8 Thesis Generation through Questioning

Holly Ordway, Letters

How can we help students successfully use critical thinking in their essays and research projects? One way is to help them create a thesis statement that is clear, appropriately focused, and relevant; the thesis can then serve as a guide to keep students on the right track as they complete the project. Working on thesis generation early in the writing/research process has a substantial payoff in terms of the amount (and quality) of critical thinking that appears in the final product.

When to use prepared theses...

Though in this article I'm going to explain how to help students develop their own theses, I have found it's important to point out that there are occasions in which it's both useful and productive for students to write using a thesis that has been prepared for them.

When the objective is for students to directly engage with a specific topic in a particular way, providing a thesis can help students focus in the appropriate way immediately. For instance, early in the semester in my English 201: Critical Thinking, Composition, and Literature course, I have students write about a poem using a canned thesis that guides their writing toward analysis and away from summary.

It can also be very useful to provide pre-generated theses for in-class writing on particular subjects, especially if the thesis can be phrased

to allow for different approaches. For example, in English 100 I've used the prompt "Colleges should/should not notify parents of students who are experiencing emotional difficulties." One of the benefits of doing short in-class writing sessions using pre-generated theses is that students get to see what a strong thesis actually looks like.

...and when not to.

However, I don't use prepared theses exclusively. One drawback of supplying theses is that it can diminish student involvement in their writing. Student engagement with the content of their essay is one of the best predictors that it will be a productive assignment; even seemingly unmotivated students can become energized by the opportunity to work on a project that they've developed from scratch.

Providing students with canned theses—no matter how good—also deprives students of the opportunity to learn how to create their own. In the short term, it is easier and faster to supply theses; in the long run, students learn from the opportunity to create them, even if it's a struggle at first.

Topic vs. thesis

When students are directed to come up with a thesis for an essay or research project, they almost always think of a topic rather than a thesis. "Pollution," "the rise in gas prices," or "the stem cell issue" are examples of topics masquerading as theses; if a student were to write about any of these, he or she is likely to generate either a generic "all about" essay full of regurgitated information, or an ungrounded personal opinion piece.

Topic generation is actually a perfectly acceptable first step, as it gets students to think of and choose a subject area that is interesting to them in some way. The question, then, becomes how to take the next step. How do we get students to move from topic to thesis?

The questioning strategy

The basic method that I use to help students build good theses is questioning. It is best summed up in a sentence that I repeat to my students often: “A good thesis is the answer to an interesting question.”

An interesting question generally takes one of the following forms:

- Why?
- How?
- What are the causes?
- What are the consequences?

At the beginning of the thesis-generation activity in class, I draw a large box on the blackboard, subdivide it, and label the boxes as follows:

Why	How
Causes	Consequences

Then I choose a sample topic and ask students to help me generate as many questions as possible to fill up all the boxes. Depending on the energy level of the class, I may do this as a whole-group activity from the start, or I may ask students to take a few minutes to write possible questions so that they’ll have something to offer when I ask for suggestions. In either case, I’ll write their questions in the appropriate spaces in the large

box on the board, making sure to have some for each type of question.

Questions for the topic of “pollution” might look something like this:

- Why do people pollute?
- Why do we need to preserve San Diego beaches?
- Why do some people care about clean air and water but others don’t?
- Why are some beaches cleaner than others?
- How do oil spills affect us here?
- How can we stop pollution?
- What are the causes of air pollution?
- What effect does pollution have on our quality of life?
- What effect does pollution have on businesses in San Diego?

Once students have seen a complete example, I ask them to do the same with their own topics. I emphasize that there’s no quality control here: the idea is to come up with as many different questions as possible.

While it’s possible to generate questions without drawing the box, I find that the box adds a productive visual dimension to the activity. The box’s empty spaces also encourage students to fill in something for each type of question, thus expanding their options.

After students have generated a lot of questions, I have them look over their questions and pick out the ones that seem most interesting. Often there will be clear groups of questions that can be combined into a single, more complex question. For instance, a student working on “pollution” might notice that he has several questions touching specifically on San Diego, quality of life, and beaches. He might end up with the question: “How can we keep San Diego’s beaches clean so that people can enjoy them?”

The interesting question that the student finally chooses or constructs becomes what I

call the thesis question. The final stage in the questioning strategy is to turn this question into a real thesis. That's easy to do: just answer the question!

In some cases, the student may not be able to answer the question until he or she does research; thus, the thesis question becomes a guide for the research process. In other cases, the student can frame an answer right away and begin working on making it convincing.

I have found that asking the thesis question is an extremely useful intermediate step between generating topics and generating solid, college-level theses. Coming up with a solid thesis is no longer a mysterious and intuitive exercise; instead, it is something that the student can tackle with the heuristic: Why? How? What causes? What consequences?

In class or out of class?

While I've described my approach to thesis generation as an in-class activity, it also works as an out-of-class activity. The initial stage of modeling questioning with a sample topic is most productively done in class, but students can be given the task of coming up with their own questions as a homework assignment. In this case, I believe it's important to provide feedback on the

questions that students generate; this can be as simple as circling the one or two most productive questions on a student's paper, or writing a few of the best questions on the board and discussing why they are good questions. As students become more confident with their ability to generate good thesis questions, the question-generating activity can be assigned without specific follow-up work in class.

Questioning in context

The questioning strategy is more than just a one-shot activity; I use it throughout my course to stimulate critical thinking. When we read an interesting essay or article, I'll ask "What is the question that the author seems to be asking and answering?" When students tell me their thoughts for an upcoming essay, I ask them "What's your question?" If a student offers a thesis that I think is likely to lead to a dull, information-dump essay, I'll ask, "Is that really an interesting question?"

The results of working on thesis generation are well worth the effort of incorporating these activities into class. The repeated emphasis on asking tough, interesting questions helps my students learn to be critical thinkers and active learners; it also encourages them to be engaged with their own writing and research. ❏