

A Collection of gifts



Issue 8 Spring 2010

Great Ideas For Teaching

8.1 2010: A GIFT Odyssey

Denise Stephenson and Holly Ordway

Whether in the classroom, or preparing for it, good teachers demand much from their students and themselves. In this issue, you'll find ways of working with groups and an idea about using props, both of which can add dynamism to the classroom. You'll also find several strategies for assisting students in engaging actively and productively with assigned reading. And while we're talking about reading, if you find that your students need to read a great deal for your courses, but they do so without the requisite comprehension, a current flex workshop and upcoming ones will focus on how to make reading more effective for students across the disciplines. Have questions? Contact Luke Lambert, our new reading instructor in Letters. Or jump in and read **Kelly Hagen and Luke Lambert's** article in this issue which offers a structured multi-step reading assignment that you could use, especially early in a semester, to help students learn to read difficult material for your courses.

Along similar lines, **Holly Ordway** offers an adaptable reading response form. The goals: 1) keep students actively engaged and 2) prepare them for in-class work. Similarly, **Jamie Clopton** has a creative project using vocabulary which not only helped students learn course content in a fun way, but also increased their test scores.

Once students have done their reading and learned their vocabulary, they come to class, prepared to put their knowledge into action. **David Detwiler** suggests that we bring props to class not only to keep the students focused, but

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Submissions

Submissions are always welcome. There is rolling on-line publication and print distribution during FLEX week.

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



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www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter

also to help connect course material to daily life.

Dara Perales focuses on how group work can help students to successfully share their learning experiences by ensuring that they present a final product to classmates. She has recommendations on the size and creation of groups as well as the use of quiet students as sheriffs.

All in all, an issue filled with Great Ideas For Teaching which can be used right away—Spring 2010. With a decade already gone in the new millennium, don't let time escape without offering

a GIFT to your colleagues. As you head back into the classroom, pay attention to the assignment that works, the PowerPoint that held their attention, the group activity that went beyond your expectations, the student presentations that kept the whole room engaged. And when those moments happen—record them for all MiraCostans by submitting them for publication right here, next issue. 📁

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8.2 Promoting Active Reading for Better Comprehension of Difficult Texts

Kelly Hagen, Letters and Luke Lambert, Letters

Quotes from MiraCosta students reflecting on their experiences with reading:

- “I feel overwhelmed by my doubts of my capabilities as a reader.”
- “I want to be able to respond to a reading I am uninterested in and learn how to gain an interest in it.”
- “Each semester, time after time, class after class, book after book, I struggle to get through the class and cry when I ‘can’t’ do the assignment or feel like I’m doing it incorrectly due to the lack of understanding I had of the book or even the assignment itself...my ‘fear’ of the amount of reading we would have to do, rated higher time after time, class after class, semester after semester.”

Do the above quotes sound familiar to you? As instructors, we’ve often observed that our students seem to struggle with the readings we assign, and that they may in fact fear reading itself. Many of our students tend to “shut down” when they encounter difficult texts rather than embrace that difficulty and strategize ways to understand what they’re reading. Students need

to become more aware of themselves as readers and what they do during the reading process. The Difficulty Paper is one assignment to help students identify when texts challenge them and actively strategize ways to tackle the difficulty, thus gaining more meaningful understanding of the text at hand. Adaptable to all levels and disciplines, the Difficulty Paper is a useful assignment for instructors to support student reading. *See assignment.*

Students seem to respond positively to this assignment, as seen in these excerpts from Reading 830 students’ Difficulty Paper reflections:

- “Originally, I thought this assignment was ‘difficult’ even after having the directions. Once I put the steps into action, everything just flowed nicely. I now think this paper/assignment was of great purpose and that it helped us to find better ways to enjoy reading. It also helped us to understand that there are many ways to do this, and the best way may include not using one specific strategy, but a combination of multiple ones, and I think it worked. Thanks for assigning it!”
- “I didn’t want to do a difficulty paper because I didn’t want to try something that I struggled with again, but when I did, I embraced the difficulty and learned what methods are best to use in certain subjects and readings.”
- “I couldn’t even believe that a method like this could change my way of thinking and understand what the story, text, or other reading might have to say. I never even thought that just a little reading strategy could help me solve a reading problem.”

Our Reading 830 students frequently use this assignment to better understand readings in their other courses. We invite you to incorporate this assignment in your classes as one means to

support student literacy. An electronic version of this assignment is available on the GIFTs website. Please contact us if you would like sample Difficulty Papers.

Difficulty Paper: Assignment Sheet

The purpose of this assignment is to help you pay greater attention to what your mind does as you read and to allow you to explore a text in greater depth. In particular, I want you to learn about difficulty in reading—to recognize that in difficulty lies rich promise for interesting discoveries. All readers encounter difficulty, and we are exploring how to recognize it and use it to revise a reading.

Part 1 (Initial Observation): DUE _____

Read through the text and notice any places that make you stop and think. Look for sections that particularly confuse or interest you (it might help you get started to look back at your annotations). What was confusing about the author's message? What other aspects of the text were difficult to understand (i.e. vocabulary, ideas, evidence, author's style, language, etc.)?

Now write a 1-2 page detailed description of your experience: what, specifically, did you focus on as you read? What, specifically, did you find challenging about these sections? What might you want to know more about? Try to be as specific as possible about which sections have you focused on and what your mind was doing as you read these sections.

Part 2 (Question and Plan): DUE _____

1. Looking back at what you wrote in Part 1, clarify one main question you want to investigate further.
2. Formulate a plan of action (1 page) in which you devise some approaches* you will use to answer your question, such as rereading a previous chapter, reading with a dictionary, reading with lecture notes, and/or using annotation**. Be sure you explain not only what the strategy involves, but also what you hope to accomplish by using it.

Part 3 (New Insights): DUE _____

Here's where you put your plan into action. First, re-read the text—all the way through—using whatever approach you have chosen. Then write approximately 2 pages in which you reflect upon the text with a fresh perspective. What new insights did you gain? In what ways did your understanding change or shift after re-reading the piece?

Note: please include at least 3 quotes from the text to support your ideas.

Part 4 (Reflection): DUE _____

In this section (approximately 1 page), please reflect on the effectiveness of your approach. You might wish to consider questions such as the following:

In what ways did your strategy help you to revise your initial reading? How might you change your approach, if you were to do the assignment again? Did your inquiry lead you to ask additional questions? What do you see as the value or purpose of this assignment?

Thanks to Jen Levinson, City College of San Francisco, for this modified assignment based on Mariolina Salvatori's 1996 "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition." *College English*, 58, (4), 440-454.

*Some different types of reading strategies may include: writing short summary notes of each paragraph or section, comparing and contrasting the author's experience with your own, making stars next to ideas which you understand and question marks next to confusing ideas, recording predictions about the text and ideas, and identifying a central theme throughout the text.

**Some additional reading strategies include:

Foggiest and Clearest Points, in which students record notes as they read about which points were confusing to them and which points are clear. Students should also make connections between foggy and clear points to help improve their understanding of confusing aspects of the text.

PPPC (Preview, Predict, Pre-read, and Code), in which students preview a text for main ideas, make predictions about those ideas and what message the author will make, read the first line or so of every paragraph to get the "big picture" of the text, and code (take notes) their responses to the text.

KWL+, in which students activate schema, improve their comprehension, set a purpose for reading, and improve reading motivation by asking the following questions as they read: "What do I know about the topic? What do I want to know? What did I learn from the text? What do I still want to know about the text and topic?" The students record their responses as they read the text. (See GIFT 7.2 also.) ☺

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8.3 Reading Responses Redux

Holly Ordway, Letters

If you assign reading to your students, do they complete it? If they complete the reading, do they understand it? I have found that using Reading Responses as an assignment is an effective way to encourage students to complete their reading assignments and help them to understand what they read. In an earlier GIFT (5.2), my Letters colleague Arlie Zolynas described how to use reading responses effectively in the classroom. Inspired by her example and by John Kirwan's use of reading responses for his literature classes, I developed a reading response sheet that has been a versatile and effective tool for instruction. In this GIFT, I'll share a few tips for constructing and using reading responses.

My reading response sheet is a blank "form" for students to fill out with information from an assigned reading, due on the day that the reading will be discussed in class. Depending on the course, the sections in the reading response sheet can vary, but the common element is that students must read actively and write down ideas or information from the reading before coming to class.

I have found that having students complete reading response sheets consistently throughout the semester significantly improved their engagement with and understanding of the readings. Students became more self-directed in answering their own questions (for instance, looking up vocabulary words on their own, since there was a section on the sheet for vocabulary)

and appeared to have a greater investment in the topic before coming to class.

Reading responses are versatile and can be used as:

- discussion starters for small-group or whole-class discussion
- diagnostics for comprehension of the reading
- study guides for exams or quizzes
- a means of instructor-student dialogue about the reading (especially if there is a section on the sheet for "questions for the instructor" or "unanswered questions")
- a vocabulary building activity

An important element in my use of the reading response sheets is a quick turn-around in grading, so that students get their responses back in time to use them as study guides or idea-generation sheets for an assignment. To facilitate quick grading, I use a simple check/check-minus system: full completion of the sheet earned full credit, while an incomplete or sketchily completed sheet earned half credit, as did late responses. (Since part of the objective of the reading response was to prepare students for in-class discussion, I felt that it was pedagogically appropriate to reduce the grade on a late response sheet.) In the future, I plan to experiment with a slightly fuller rubric for grading, but even this very simple approach worked fine. To keep the students' workload balanced, I eliminated a journal assignment from previous semesters, and gave the reading responses a substantial weighting in their overall grade.

Practical tips:

- Using a consistent form throughout the semester is easier for the instructor (you

do not need to tailor each sheet for the particular reading) and provides a sense of consistency for the students.

- Having a section focused on gathering information from the reading (content-based) encourages students to read carefully and take the assignment seriously.
- Students can practice critical thinking in reading responses in a variety of ways, which you can delineate in the reading response sheet, such as drawing conclusions from the reading, identifying key ideas and evaluating their relative importance, or coming up with questions for discussion. I observed far better results in terms of critical thinking from the reading responses than from open-ended/ response-oriented journal assignments for the same material.
- If you use Blackboard, you can make a PDF or Word document version of the response sheet for students to download and print on their own.
- I strongly encourage requiring students to hand-write their responses. Writing a definition

or quote by hand ensures that the student has actually read and processed the words that he or she is writing; if the response sheet is done on the computer, it is possible to copy and paste a definition from Dictionary.com or the like without actually reading it or thinking about it. Writing by hand also adds a kinesthetic-learning dimension to the activity. 📖

Name: _____	
READING RESPONSE SHEET	
Title: _____ Author: _____ Act/Chapt. _____	
Vocabulary:	
Interesting Images or Lines:	
Themes or Important Ideas:	
Questions:	

A sample reading response sheet for English.

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8.4 Learning Vocabulary by Creating a Children's Dictionary

Jamie Clopton, Behavioral Sciences

For years, students would ask me “what should I study for the test?” but when I told them “everything,” they weren’t too happy with me. Then I told them to focus on the key terms, but I found they weren’t really learning the key terms. They were passively reading the glossary definitions from the text. They needed to become more active in their study. However, when I told them to “rewrite the terms” they wound up copying the glossary. I realized they needed a better way to actively learn the terms, so I came up with this assignment in which they create a children’s dictionary of key terms from two early chapters of our text.

My philosophy is that if you know the key vocabulary you’ll have a much easier time understanding the concepts in the course. So, my idea was to have them re-define the key terms into simpler definitions, words that a child could understand. I encouraged the students to think about what the words meant by making personal connections, giving examples, drawing pictures, and simplifying the language. Here’s the basic assignment:

Purpose: To demonstrate a working knowledge of the key terms.

Assignment: Create a Children’s Dictionary of the key terms in Chapter 3 and 4.

- Make sure your definitions and explanations are at a child’s level of comprehension. (Do not just copy the definitions from the book!)
- Include a picture or diagram for each term.
- Give a real-life example of each term.
- Alphabetize all of the terms combined.
- Put it together in a “little book” with a cover page, too.
- Put your name on the cover since you are the author of the dictionary.

Example: STRESS - anything or any situation that makes you feel like you have to take actions or do something extra in order to get through it but you may not know what to do. It can be scary or really exciting; it’s all how you look at it. Like, when you have 3 tests on the same day and no time to study!



After giving the instructions and encouragement, I just turned them loose. I must admit that I was quite a cheerleader for this project, and I think that my enthusiasm and excitement helped. I was able to get their dictionaries displayed at the MiraCosta library at San Elijo, which was “the icing on the cake” for these students.

Focusing on vocabulary in this active way increased their engagement; the results were amazing. Plus, their scores on the chapter tests were significantly higher. 🎁

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8.5 Spice Up Your Class with a Touch of Realia and a Dash of Culture

David Detwiler, International Languages

One way to help make lecture and discussion material relevant and interesting for students is to use *realia* (real-life objects). Using props in the classroom and bringing in real-life examples and illustrations can make otherwise abstract material be relevant, personalized and real. Let me show you what I mean.

I have found props to be very useful in language instruction. For example, in one of my Spanish 102 classes, we were discussing the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle. When I began to brainstorm about ways I could make the vocabulary words from the book come to life, it dawned on me that the answer was in the trunk of my car. My gym bag became the springboard for a conversation about living a healthy lifestyle. We talked about the importance of exercise, going to the gym, and eating a balanced diet, as well as ways to reduce stress. On a different day I brought my overnight bag to class to review reflexive verbs. A toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, soap, and shampoo, provided a great review of verbs and vocabulary, but also a great segue into related

topics, like how often you brush your teeth, where you buy your toothpaste, and so on. It also gave us the chance to discuss differences and similarities among Hispanic cultures.

Culture is an integral part of any foreign language classroom, and now, thanks to the World Wide Web it is easier than ever to bring authentic culture into the hands of our students. It is very easy to convert a traditional PowerPoint presentation into a culturally enriched lesson. Rather than simply presenting a slide of an ordinary house, I present Frida Kahlo's house or perhaps La Casa Rosada (the Argentine version of the White House). My students no longer see a generic overhead of the family, instead they meet the Spanish Royal family. And instead of simply learning about the geography and history of Colombia, they are asked to describe their favorite painting by Fernando Botero, mention some of the works by Gabriel García Márquez, and write a playlist of music for a Colombian Independence Day celebration.

Students not only relate better to real-life examples than to generic examples, they also appreciate the variety. It is not always possible to use props in every lesson, but I believe that we can make our subject matter come to life by bringing real world samples into the classroom. So next time you are thinking about how to spice up your lesson, consider bringing something with you and make your class come alive. 🎁

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8.6 Group Work: Simple Tips for Success

Dara Perales, Letters

Our community college students sometimes have a hard time building community on campus. As we all know, most students work fulltime, drive to campus just for their classes, and leave immediately after. Of course that's not the case for everyone, but many of our students miss out on the community they might build at a four-year school. In-class group work is an effective, pedagogically sound tool, and group activities definitely help foster relationships among our students. Some instructors are reluctant to employ group work in their classrooms. My training included a strong collaborative bias, and I have always found meaningful, productive group work to be a necessary component of every one of my classes. If instructors purposefully utilize group activity, they will find their students building stronger relationships in and then out of the classroom, and they will find collaborative learning a valuable use of class time.

A brief message about concerns: Yes we have disabled students in our classrooms. I have used every one of these methods in classrooms with wheelchair-bound students, and I have never had to say, "Hey. If you're in so-and-so's group, make sure you go to him because he's in a wheelchair and cannot move about easily." Students are generally very cognizant of their fellow classmates, and they naturally move to where they need to, to accommodate one another.

Another important thing to consider: Groups

of three or four students are optimal. Any larger, and things tend to get unruly, and you'll inevitably lose some involvement with quieter students. See #3 below for help with that concern.

Ten helpful tips for successful group work.

- 1) **Purposeful activity:** Students know time wasters when they see them. And busy work is just insulting. If you plan a meaningful activity with clear objectives and a well-contextualized lesson, group work is usually effective. As with any classroom technique, if you throw together a group activity, it will go down in flames, and your students will let you know. Make sure your groups participate in meaningful dialog and interaction.
- 2) **Product:** There should always be a meaningful, pedagogically grounded product as a result of group activities. Whether students create something drawn, some sort of solution to a problem, a piece of collaborative writing, or anything presented to the class, a product keeps students more on track and responsible for their work.
- 3) **Choose a group sheriff:** When there are unusually quiet students in a class, choose those students to be the sheriff of their groups. Each sheriff's job is to ensure every group member speaks and that the group stays on task. Giving the quiet students this job allows them to hold themselves accountable to participate in the group while maintaining order in the group.
- 4) **Randomize group membership:** Oftentimes, instructors have students fill out index cards

with names, email addresses, etc. on them. Sometimes you need certain students to be separated from other certain students. If you run into that circumstance, yet still want to maintain an air of indiscriminate grouping, simply stack your deck of index cards into the groups you want. Then “randomly” choose the cards in order of your deck and place the students into groups. You might think this wouldn’t work well, and maybe it’s only really effective one time per semester, but it does work...save it for a group work emergency!

- 5) **Comfort groups for difficult or more personal products:** When students need to complete a task that’s more serious or one which could lead to more personal responses, it’s sometimes a good idea to let the students group themselves into comfort groups (people with whom they’re used to working). When something artistic is necessary, I use comfort groups because students usually build trust with these group mates, and many are not comfortable with art. Being in groups with people they trust allows them to be a bit more uninhibited.
- 6) **Fun ways to put students into groups:** In the spirit of full disclosure, I learned many of these strategies in Mary Gross’ “Names, Games, and Groupings” Flex workshop a couple of years ago. Of course, an instructor can put her/his own spin on these to fit any class/activity/desired outcome.

a. *Puzzle piece groups:* Print out photos related to your class activity. If you want six groups, print out six different photos. For instance, when I teach “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin, I print out photos of jazz greats: Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Bix Beiderbecke, Chet Baker, Billie Holiday, etc. I then write

either directions or discussion questions on the back of the photo. I cut the photo into as many pieces as there will be group members in each group. Then each student takes a piece out of an envelope. The students must then find their “puzzle buddies,” sit in a group, and follow the instructions on the back of their puzzle. I’ve done this with every class at every level, and the students really appreciate the perceived effort that goes into making these groups happen. Even if you don’t print instructions on the backs, you can still use this method simply to group students as well.

b. *Candy:* I pre-sort candy so that I have several pieces of several flavors. Each student blindly chooses a piece, and finds their group mates by finding the other students with the same color/flavor candy. This one works well once a semester, as with many of these strategies, because students find ways to stack the groups once they know the strategy.

c. *Playing cards:* Works just like the candy grouping. Isolate as many cards as you would need for student groups, fan them out and let students “pick a card.” I always tell them not to worry; we’re not gambling. Once students pick a card, they find their group mates by completing a three-of-a-kind, four-of-a-kind, straight... whatever I’m in the mood for.

d. *PowerPoint teams:* When I want to pre-ordain the groups, I’ll sometimes create a PowerPoint slide with the groups already mapped out. I usually asterisk a student as the group sheriff, and I name the groups something fun/clever. If you prefer to avoid fun/clever, number the groups and

it works out just as well. As mentioned above, students seem to recognize the fact I took time to build the slide and make the groups, so they take the group work a bit more seriously.

- 7) **Interaction with groups:** It would be awfully strange if students worked on an activity while the instructor sat at a table/desk ignoring their efforts. Group work is sometimes extremely tiring on an instructor. To be an effective facilitator, move about to each group to answer questions, guide conversation if necessary, and to show students you're just as invested in the outcome of this work as they are...or should be. Sometimes you'll have to give students hints to assist them, and that's great. It's as if you're playing on their team, and they appreciate the guidance.
- 8) **Coming together at the end:** Once the group work portion of an activity is accomplished, reconvene as a whole class to either have certain groups present their products, or have a whole class discussion where representative
- 9) **Classroom assessments:** Any time you want a gauge of how your group activity worked, run a short classroom assessment at the end of the lesson. You can have a quick write and share, or you can have students anonymously address a question and turn it in. CATs (Classroom Assessment Techniques) are extremely valuable, yet we sometimes attempt to cram so much into our classes we might skip this important element of instruction.
- 10) **Have some fun, dangit!:** Students need to know academia isn't all about stress, pain, and worry. Show them being smart is fun and cool. Some group activities can produce laughs while producing strong critical thinking skills. If you like to have fun, incorporate some of that into your activities. The students will respond! 🎉