

A Collection of gifts



Issue 3 Spring 2007

Great Ideas For Teaching

3.1 In This Issue...

Denise Stephenson and Dana Smith

Once again, the challenge of asking faculty to add one more activity to their already full teaching lives has been met. A Collection of GIFTs continues to provide a forum for you to share your best pedagogical practices with colleagues.

In this issue, **Lisa Lane** presents the virtues of setting up course websites outside of the delivery systems of Blackboard and Etudes. If you teach on-line or use electronic media for your classes, the suggestions in this article are for you.

Working in teams and building community in classes are themes in many articles. **Rita Soza** offers a technique which uses challenging reading material as a central focus for team work. It develops reading, analysis, and oral presentation skills besides promoting students' confidence. **Christina Hata** focuses on boardroom behaviors which can be fostered in the classroom. The centrality of content isn't questioned, but how that content is incorporated by students is front and center.

Dana Smith provides a one-to-one communication strategy that can be used in many settings and with many course contents to help students develop comfort with each other, and to get people talking. Speed dating isn't just for fun; it builds instant community. And finally, **Sarina Molina** tells about using multiple modes of delivery to create community by working with classmates in creating class presentations. In her case, by thinking beyond the usual essay format, ESL students get the opportunity to share information about their home countries and cultures, via projects with purposes they can grasp quickly. In the process, they also learn how to use new technologies.

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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



Teaching
Academy

Editors

Dana Smith
Denise Stephenson

Layout & Design
Brandi Pisen



www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter

We offer these GIFTs to you in the spirit of enriching the learning and teaching environments we so diligently create and fiercely protect. When you walk out of class with a smile on your face,

thinking “Wow, that went well,” consider writing up your delight and success to become a GIFT for your colleagues. 🎁

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3.2 An Alternative Way of Constructing a Class Website

Lisa Lane, History

One of the most frequent uses of a class website is to post the syllabus and assignments. Some instructors add links to interesting sites or MiraCosta service pages. Those who want something more turn to the college's supported Learning Management Systems (Blackboard and Etudes) to get features like gradebooks and discussion boards.

Let's say I'm teaching a 3-hour class at San Elijo, and I want students to do web-based homework assignments, read my weekly lecture outlines, and use a discussion board between classes. I also want their grades posted so they can access them. And I want the website itself to be easy to create and flexible.

At MiraCosta, I could create such a website inside either Etudes (easier to use) or Blackboard (more features). Most instructors use these systems for constructing their site, simply typing material into the various fields provided by either system.

But I construct my actual web pages OUTSIDE of these systems, in plain HTML. Why? Because neither Blackboard or Etudes will export any files to be used elsewhere. What if I want to switch? What if some day the college no longer supports one of these systems? I don't like re-doing work!

For my lecture outlines, the simplest way to make pages is to use my browser's Composer feature (Mozilla's is the best). Or I can use Word,

and save the files as HTML, though the code isn't as good. Dreamweaver is the Cadillac of web page creation programs. I can make my pages using nice templates and style sheets. I can upload directly to my home folder from within the program.

For homework assignments, I create more HTML pages. Etudes and Blackboard want me to create my assignments inside them, where they cannot be retrieved later. But both will let me link out to an assignment written on a web page. I can read student-completed assignments online, and put the grades in the gradebook area. Similarly, for the Discussion Board, I just write my topics in a text file, and copy-and-paste them into the discussion area.

Whichever program I use to create the pages, I can put any of my HTML files in my home folder and point to this file with a URL inside Blackboard or Etudes. I can change the files anytime on my desktop, and upload again. I always have a copy that can go into any system or be separate from any system.

Blackboard's menu can even be changed to accommodate such an approach. Each link or button can be changed to say whatever I want ("Homework Mania") and link externally to a page in my home folder. The page appears inside Blackboard, so no one knows the difference. But the difference is flexibility, which is important to me in a world where technology changes so quickly. ☺

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3.3 A Team Approach to Analysis of Difficult Material

Rita Soza, Business

Simply

One of my best teaching practices is to create a sense of community and achievement in the classroom through teamwork assignments which delve into sophisticated and complex content, relating course concepts to real world situations. If dissected and distributed properly, the individual student load can be quite manageable and rewarding. These assignments also serve to demonstrate my high expectations of the students, and in turn they learn the value of teamwork. The outcome is usually a very high level of discussion and often exceeds my expectations.

In more detail

One such lesson plan that has been very successful at engaging students and achieving some pretty great outcomes involves dividing up a difficult case study into digestible portions—for my course, it has been the *Harvard Business Journal* case study on the Hubble Telescope, “Hubble error: Time, money and millionths of an inch.” This case study is frequently used at the graduate (MBA) level. By presenting this assignment to my students I make a significant statement about what I think they are capable of tackling, even in our introductory course work. At the same time, by limiting their focus to a specific objective I can ensure they will not be overwhelmed.

In addition to providing experience in the synergistic benefits of teamwork on such a tough assignment, I had several other objectives for the students:

- 1) To describe the management styles of specific individuals in the case
- 2) To describe cultural differences inherent in different organizational structures
- 3) To analyze how ethical choices impacted the project
- 4) To discuss the economic, political and cultural issues that influence the behavior of organizations

Students chose what team they wanted to be on: Economic Background, Financial, Organizational Behavior, Management Structure, Ethics, Technical, People/Personalities. Teams met in class, after school, at home, in the library and consulted by telephone and email. Each team member received the same grade on the assignment so they were all depending on each other, not just to show up but to contribute in a meaningful way to the discussion. Content was dispersed throughout the article so students had to search through the entire article to ascertain elements that applied to their team. Most read the entire article but really focused on the content they needed to teach their fellow students in the class discussion.

The teams had one month to prepare. On the appointed day, I moved the desks into one large circle. Teammates sat together. I moderated/guided the discussion, but essentially the students

taught each other the entire case. By dividing up the reading, no single student had to take on too much, and each contributor to the discussion was able to dig pretty deep. As a result, the entire 16 page technical case was thoroughly covered.

During the Fall '06 semester the assignment was particularly successful. In both sections of Introduction to Business, the teams dealing with the financial issues taught themselves how to calculate the value in today's dollars of the waste

and errors identified in the building of the Hubble telescope. That extra effort far exceeded what I imagined the students could produce, and I might add, exceeded the analysis conducted in my recent MBA course.

From my own personal experience, the instructors, managers and mentors who presented me with the most challenging assignments were responsible for me making giant leaps in my career. 🎁

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3.4 Classroom to Boardroom Teaching Skills Students Need for Career Success

Christina Hata, Business

One of the biggest challenges we all face as teachers is preparing our students for the working world. Regardless of whether they plan to major in biology or business, most students will eventually spend the majority of their careers working in corporate America.

My approach to teaching business courses incorporates my belief that in addition to the knowledge acquired from learning the course subject matter, students need to develop skills that will enable them to become successful business people. For me, this means that I must not only teach what to do, but I must also teach students how to be. In a 1990 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, management professor Henry Mintzberg described “important managerial skills—developing peer relationships, carrying out negotiations, motivating subordinates, resolving conflicts, establishing information networks and subsequently disseminating information, making decisions in conditions of extreme ambiguity, and allocating resources. Above all, the manager needs to be introspective in order to continue to learn the job.”

Mintzberg’s concern was that institutions were failing to teach students the behavioral skills

that would enable them to become successful leaders and managers. These skills include the ability to get along with people, speak to a group, write clearly and concisely, work as a productive team member, be organized, get deliverables out on time, be accurate, see the big picture, communicate clearly, and have fun. To communicate to students that I am developing behavioral skills in addition to technical aptitudes, I have created a handout that I distribute on the first day of each semester. Each day, planned classroom activities address at least three of the skills listed in the handout, reinforcing to students the rationale for why the class is conducted in such a manner.

When I present this handout, student response varies from complete acceptance, to skepticism, to nervousness. At least one student pulls me aside at the beginning of the semester to share their trepidation about working in groups or speaking in front of the class. I usually respond by telling them that although I understand their hesitation, in the corporate world they will likely be put into teams or put “on the spot” at some point, and their ability to respond to either situation will help or hinder their upward mobility. After the first week students see how the classroom to boardroom skills enhance their learning environment, and they respond positively when we debrief each activity and how they will use that skill in the working world. 🎁

See reverse for handout.

Classroom to Boardroom: Skills Individuals Need for Career Success

- 1) Get along with people
 - a. Small group activities
- 2) Ability to speak to a group
 - a. Presentation of homework problems
 - b. Small group activities
- 3) Write clearly and concisely
 - a. Periodic writing exercises
- 4) Work as a productive team member
 - a. Small group activities
 - b. Homework review
- 5) Ability to organize oneself
 - a. Organization of homework, notes, and classwork
- 6) Get deliverables in/out on time
 - a. Timeliness of assignment submission
- 7) Be accurate
 - a. Accuracy of assignment submissions
- 8) See the big picture
 - a. Experiential activities including case analysis and simulations
 - b. Ability to relate learnings to personal life
- 9) Communicate clearly
 - a. Small group activities
 - b. Homework solution presentations
- 10) Have fun

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3.5 Speed Dating for Fun, Instruction, and Community

Dana Smith, Communications

I'm always searching for new and innovative ways to establish a sense of community in my classroom. I've heard many students lament that they "don't get to meet anybody" in their classes; too often they see only the backs of their classmates' heads. Class discussions often reveal particular students' opinions, but don't always engender numerous personal connections. For me, the handful of enduring personal relationships I most treasure began in college.

Further, one of MiraCosta College's key selling points is our small class size, which offers a prime opportunity to create community. We know from Ken Bain's research on the best college teachers that one element of a "natural critical learning environment" is a challenging yet supportive environment where students "receive emotional support as they try, fail, and receive feedback." Establishing direct contact among peers is one of the first steps in creating that environment. So I've conceived of this exercise that lets students meet each other -- and respond to each other -- one-to-one.

Objective

Provide a lighthearted and engaging way for your students to get to know each other at the beginning of the semester

Time Needed

2 (or 3) minutes per pairing (30 people = 15 pairs @ 2 minutes per "date" = 30 minutes; 20 people = 10 pairs @ 3 minutes per "date" = 30 minutes); the instructor should decide what works best for the class time allotted.

Process

- 1) Have students divide into pairs.
(Unfortunately this exercise does not work with odd numbers, unless you choose to participate as well.) Students should move their chairs so they form two large circles in the room—an inside circle, and an outside circle. The pair is facing each other, so essentially the outside circle is facing the center of the room, and the inside circle has their backs to the center of the room.
- 2) Announce title and purpose of the exercise.
- 3) Explain the procedure: Each pair will enjoy a two- (or three-) minute "date" getting to know one another, and this date will be structured by participants exchanging answers to specific questions. The "inside circle" will remain seated throughout the exercise; the "outside circle" will move to the next seat in the outside circle to meet another classmate. Rounds of "dating" will continue until students return to their original seats.
- 4) Introduce the questions (see below). These questions are entirely up to the instructor,

and can be tailored to suit the audience or address specific content. Students can choose to exchange answers to all six questions, or just one or two, depending upon where their conversations take them.

- 5) Begin the first round of dating; time it (two or three minutes), and sound a buzzer to signal the outside circle to move to the next seat. Students will catch on very quickly.
- 6) The exercise is over when the outside circle is back in their original seats.

Sample Questions

- What do you collect?
- What is your secret talent?
- Who were you in a past life?
- Who is your role model?
- What do you have a passion for?
- What have you changed in the last year?

Option

The questions could stay the same for the entire exercise, or a new question could be introduced every two or three rounds of dating. There could be several rounds of dating with one set of questions, and then a second set of questions could be announced halfway through.

Instructor's Role

Stand in the center of the room so you can gauge the level of engagement and monitor the time and questions to keep the conversations moving; or participate yourself, if you have an odd number of students. I've done both. As an observer/timer, the energy and decibel level amazed and pleased me. As a participant, doing

double duty as a timer, I occasionally lost track of time and some rounds went slightly longer than planned. I found both roles equally enjoyable.

How well does it work? So far, very well! I asked students for feedback after I tried this exercise the first time, and consistently heard positive comments. Even if students found their own answers a little repetitive, they thoroughly enjoyed hearing different interpretations of the questions and varied responses from their classmates. They moved to new seats quickly and easily, so the exercise didn't prove logistically cumbersome. When I participated myself, I got a thin slice of each student separately, so the first impression I had of my class was not as an aggregate, but as individuals. I conducted this exercise during the second class meeting, and was able to gather more data on my students than I usually have at that point in the semester, which I could draw on for future class discussions.

The only downside I can detect so far is that students within each circle don't get to "date" each other. Everybody isn't meeting everybody, but each circle is meeting half the class.

The fun part is coming up with the questions. Those I have offered here are intended to provoke interesting and thoughtful conversations on a more immediate level. But I can envision questions that deal specifically with course content. This exercise could occur mid-semester and become "Speed Dating for Opinions and Reflection" with students exchanging their ideas more so than their personal information.

I am convinced that the class students find enjoyable and meaningful in a personal way is the class in which they will persist. If they persist, chances are they will succeed. And if they succeed, we can celebrate. ❄️

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3.6 Creating Classroom Community Activities for a Computer Lab

Sarina Molina, ESL

Our ESL 802 writing course is divided into two 2.5-hour segments. One session is spent in the classroom and the other is spent in the computer lab. The classroom is very conducive to whole group and small group work when we tackle the writing process as it is a more traditional venue for teaching. However, the use of lab time in Letters courses is a more ambiguous area and differs significantly in its use from instructor to instructor.

Most of my students in the past were utilizing lab time to conduct research related to a writing prompt assigned in class. During this time, I would conference with students individually to go over their drafts and provide feedback. However, I felt that a few selected lab-related projects could offer more opportunities for students to learn and connect with one another. I was looking for innovative ways in which to utilize the lab for my writing classes so students could learn to express themselves in writing as well as learn about other students in the class.

As a result, I developed three lab projects where students learned to utilize the PowerPoint program to share their personal autobiographies, create travel brochures for a country represented by a student in our class, and write a cultural showcase research paper on a cultural icon they

then shared and/or demonstrated for the class.

The lab time provided an environment to engage in this type of learning. Aside from mastering our five paragraph academic essays, which we focus on within our classroom, I utilized the lab time to experiment with other modes of writing.

Autobiography

In this project, students were required to share the story of their lives. They were to choose four areas of their life: friends, family, school, church, work, etc. They presented their autobiographies to the class in PowerPoint format. At the end of the semester, a compilation of their autobiographies was presented to the students in the form of a class memory book.

Travel Brochure

For this project, we listed all the countries represented in our class and, in teams, students were to select a country and research it. They were to select five questions to research in areas such as demographics, religions practiced, tourist spots, accommodations, celebrations, etc. They researched questions by interviewing classmates, as well as utilizing the library and online sites. They also learned to create a brochure utilizing a Word template. They printed these brochures for the class and delivered presentations on the country that they researched. The students were allowed to use PowerPoint to project images of their selected locations to add to their verbal presentation of their countries. We voted which countries we would like to visit based on the presentations. Students learned to paraphrase, summarize, and creatively present the information as they created their travel brochures. All the

students went home with the brochures that the other students created.

Cultural Showcase

Our final showcase project had students delve into their own cultures and select something that they wanted to share with their classmates. In this project, each student was to select an item, celebration, custom, etc. from their native countries. They also handed in research papers. For their presentations, they were asked to demonstrate this cultural icon—food, toy, custom, or practice—for the class. Many students learned things about a common cultural food,

item, or custom that they did not know before. All the students enjoyed the presentations and demonstrations of these projects and learned wonderful presentation skills, this time without the use of PowerPoint or handouts.

The projects were directed in terms of the framework provided, but students got to choose their areas of interest when researching their topics. As a result of these projects, students said that they gained a new understanding of themselves, their cultures, and those of their classmates, not to mention the acquisition of new presentation and writing skills. 🎁