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COMMENTARY

The Role of Instructional Technology

Douglass Gray

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Editor: How did you become interested in the use of high technology in classroom teaching?

Doug: I came into the technology assistance environment through my support of library technology. As Chesapeake College began to use more technology in the classroom—the traditional library support for instruction merged nicely with the support for technology.

Editor: What is the proper function of technology in helping to deliver course instruction? What are the kinds of technology and the modes of delivery?

Doug: Instructional technology is available to solve instructional problems and to enrich the instructional process. Ultimately, it should blend into the instructional process as a natural tool. It should not be intrusive or a demonstration of the instructor's knowledge of the newest gadget. One must select the appropriate technology for each particular learning experience. When we use technology to deliver instruction through some form of extended learning, the impact of the technology tools must be ameliorated to the fullest extent possible. Whether one is participating in interactive videoconferencing or a completely asynchronous instructional activity delivered via WebCT or Blackboard, some aspects of the content delivery, such as the immediate personal contact and the immediacy



cy of interaction that are present in the face-to-face classroom, may not be available, but there are always compensating positive factors. It is the function of the instructional designers and technology support personnel to maximize the positive impact of technology and to minimize the negative impact. For example, an instructor of stress management at our college found that asynchronous instruction allowed the students to share more openly about very personal subjects. From the first week in the course, students were exchanging insights and personal experience on issues such as drug abuse and family problems. The relative anonymity of the online environment made the students feel more comfortable. The negative impact of a cold technical environment was overcome by the design techniques used in the course as well as the positive factor of anonymous responses to create a very successful learning experience for the students.

Editor: How would you address the concern that because learning takes place between the teacher, as mentor and guide, and the student, as one eager to learn, instructional technology can distract from learning?

Doug: Learning comes from interaction between student and instructor, between student and student, and between student and content. The instructional designer's job is to help instructors to increase those interactivities.

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The Role of Instructional Technology

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Anyone who has taught in an auditorium setting knows that the greatest distance learning difficulty is bridging the gap between the instructor in front and the student sitting in the back row, his baseball cap on backwards, and his feet up on the seat in front of him. Designing instruction that is engaging and involves the students with the mental interactions necessary for learning requires that we use all available teaching tools in order to reach both the eager student and the less eager student in the back row. Well-designed technology-enhanced instruction is effective, efficient, and elegant. It does not detract but rather enriches the instructional experience.

Editor: How would you address the concern that instructional technology adds more to the cost of higher education than it provides in benefits?

Doug: The money spent on instructional technology is a tiny portion of the annual budget of higher education institutions. Depending on what aspect of the instructional technology budget you are talking about, it is sometimes the case that instructional technology saves money and in some cases it is the least expensive way to deliver instruction; finally, it provides educational choice to students.

Saves Money—Our institution pays about \$10,000 a year for a course management system. The course management system (CMS) allows classes to run without bricks and mortar classrooms. Instead of building new classrooms, we can expand the number of classes delivered over the CMS. That saves money.

Reduces Expenses—For a college that serves a wide geographic area, distance learning reaches students who would be unable to attend the college. To provide services in the student's home area would be even more expensive than supporting distance learning (DL) services.

Provides Choice—Students have the choice

of what schools to attend that best meet their educational needs. Higher education no longer holds a geographic monopoly that will force students to take the courses from the school without question. If a student cannot get his educational opportunities from your school in the format and in the delivery mode that he most wishes, he will go elsewhere. The future of higher education will be based on providing high quality instruction at reasonable prices: anytime, anyplace, and any pace.

Editor: How would you respond to the comment that the use of this technology as a mode of educational delivery is a fad that will go the way of other discarded forms of distance learning?

Doug: Trends show distance learning increasing. In the last year as many as 90% of community colleges provided some form of technology-mediated distance learning, and there are very few DL programs that are decreasing in size. Most are increasing both in content and in enrollment. What I see ending is a distinction between distance learning and the traditional classroom. We already see a great increase in the number of hybrid classes (classes that meet face-to-face part of the time and asynchronously the rest of the time) and technology-enhanced classes (those classes that maintain a regular face-to-face schedule but enrich the experience through additional communications, such as webboards, blogs, and online chats). In the future there will only be "classes." Some of these will meet face-to-face all the time, some will only meet online, and some will use a mix of face-to-face and online. Instructors will need to be comfortable in many environments as needed to provide a quality educational experience to their students. Actually, I guess that this means that one could argue that it is the traditional classroom that is disappearing.

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The Role of Instructional Technology

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Editor: How can technology help in teaching and learning in a variety of modes of instructional settings?

Doug: The most important thing that we do in education is to train our students to think. Thinking does not naturally grow out of the traditional classroom environment; it grows from the methods by which we instruct our students. Bad instruction yields poorly educated students in whatever the instructional setting. The least important part of education is the memorization of facts. The minimum that technology can do is to eliminate a vast amount of memorization.

Editor: What arguments would you use to persuade professors who are suspicious of technology or reluctant to use it to employ instructional technology in the their classrooms?

Doug: I never argue with professors. I prefer to find out what problems or issues an instructor has in the classroom. We are in the problem-solving business. We design the best instructional solution for every problem and use all of the tools available to us. Technology provides some of the tools in the toolbox but not all of them.

Editor: What are some ethical issues that have sprung up with the use and popularity of instructional technology?

Doug: There is no greater difficulty for the information age than the ongoing struggle to define the equitable compensation for intellectual property. How do we make these resources readily accessible at the same time that we appropriately compensate the creator of the property? How do we figure fair use for the educational community? Another issue in the educational world is academic dishonesty. Cheating is easy in the electronic world and our teaching strategies need to change to make it more

difficult. Anti-plagiarism resources such as turnitin.com are only one measure. We need to design instruction in such a way that we can create cheat proof assessment. The first time that I taught a computer class, I thought that it would be difficult to get students to admit that they had pirated software. In actuality, it was difficult to get them to admit that it was wrong. Comparing it to stealing from a store, I asked the class members if they would walk into a store and stick items under their shirts and steal them. They replied, "If we could get away with it." Most downloaders do not see anything wrong with stealing or cheating on their classes.

Editor: What kinds of instructional technology will be available in five to ten years?

Doug: Remember where we were ten years ago? Most people still didn't know what the Internet was. See how far we have come. I would do workshops claiming that people would be attending class over the Internet, that they would be buying merchandise, that they would see the Internet as a form of recreation. None of that existed ten years ago, but those predictions were fulfilled in five years. Instructional technology is still in its infancy. We will see tremendous change over the next five years. Among the technologies that will come to maturity are intelligent agents and more powerful searching; mass digitization of books, video, and other resources; voice recognition; convergence of voice and data; convergence of cell phones, computers, and PDAs; ubiquitous wireless connectivity; bandwidth that can truly handle video to the desktop; virtual reality and other simulation technologies. Most of these will begin to affect the educational environment in as little as three years.

Engaging Students Through Presentations, Peer Critiques, and Technology

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Introduction

Many professors in most disciplines assign individual and/or group presentations in their courses. Often, the focus is placed on the presenter(s). The non-presenting students are assumed to be the audience. In some students' minds that may be a day to skip class, a day to work on other assignments or readings, or even a day to physically be attentive to the presenter while they accomplish other tasks in their mind. Thus, a "speech day" is just that for a presenter, but a "speech daze" for the non-presenters. As professors of theory and skills-based courses, we are often confronted with the task of engaging the non-presenters, which is how students not presenting often see themselves. Therefore, we frequently have found ourselves in a position of teaching students how to play the role of audience.

What we have learned in studying and teaching communication is that all

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Engaging Students

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presentations are a form of public speaking. Typically when we prepared students for presentations we provided public speaking advice that Detz (1998) states “typically falls into two categories:

(1) the content category, or (2) the delivery category” (p. 34) in terms of the presenter. However, we have found that the ultimate speaking advice for all students—presenters and non-presenters—falls in the category of listening. By assigning all students a listening responsibility during individual and/or group presentations, we have helped promote active learning.

Early in our careers as communication instructors, we began exploring various ways to involve all of our students in practicing communication skills in classes that centered on delivering speech presentations. The act of writing, organizing, and delivering an effective speech was central to our course objectives. Because public speaking is one of the most valuable skills college students can gain to enhance their career opportunities, executing multiple speeches has been an integral goal to the successful development of our courses. Thus, the students enrolled in our classes delivered between four and five speeches a semester. This issue led us to frequently ponder the question: How do we engage students in class on the many days they are not speaking?

Answering this question led us to develop speech days that were filled with student engagement and opportunities for all students to hone their communicative abilities especially in the area of listening, which is by far the most dominant communication activity that people engage in daily. Regardless of the type of speech our students were delivering, we planned presentation days with a list

of listening roles that students would play during each class session. In order to develop the lifelong learning skill of listening, students alternated between three categories: (a) presentations, (b) peer critiques, and (c) technology.

Presentations: The Role of Listening from the Audience Perspective

Students assigned to give presentations, whether individually or as a group, concentrate on content and delivery. The goal, as Marton (2000) states, “is to design a winning presentation, which is constructed by thinking about the presentation from the audience’s perspective” (p. 5). Student presenters spend time listening to their audience by completing an audience analysis, constructing a speech and its delivery, and by considering what they have learned from other people’s presentations who presented in front of the same audience. They are taught to keep in mind that “everything must be run through the filter, expectations, needs, and bias of the audience” (Marton, 2000, p. 5).

Once the speech is designed and delivery is practiced, students arrive to the classroom ready to talk to their listeners. First, they place their name on the board in a slot that denotes the number of students speaking during that particular class session. Second, when it is their turn to speak, they execute what they have determined to be the appropriate oral, visual, and nonverbal communication that reaches all listeners. Third, when they are not speaking, they record similarities and differences that presenters had about the audience’s perspective.

Peer Critiques:

The Role of Listening as the Audience

In order to examine the impact of the presenters’ listening process, a group of students are required to critique presenters of the day. Specifically, this group

listens for “the purpose of making reasoned judgments about presenters and the credibility of their messages” (Brydon & Scott, 2003, p. 86). We emphasize to the students that they are not effective critical listeners unless they actively participate in the presentation.

Peer-critique students begin by focusing on their presentational styles based on the nonverbal feedback they provide to the presenter(s). Before a presenter begins, the non-presenters are reminded of the importance of their presentational styles and professionalism as they participate in the speech presentation of their colleagues. We typically remind audience members that they need to sit up straight, make eye contact with the presenter, provide positive nonverbal feedback, and take notes during the presentation to demonstrate and enact professionalism and respect for the presenter.

During the presentation, peer-critique students complete a pre-designed critique form organized to help them determine presenters’ strengths and weaknesses as well as provide critique consistency in areas of communication competencies. Critique consistency is important to grading based on Patri’s (2002) study that found that “when assessment criteria are firmly set, peer-feedback enables students to judge the performance of their peers in a manner comparable to those of the teachers” (p. 109). In presentational speaking, “feedback or criticism is a method used by teachers to inform students that aspects of their performance need to be altered or maintained” (Book & Simons, 1980, p. 135). Therefore, peer-feedback focuses on strengths (what should be maintained) and weaknesses (what should be altered).

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Engaging Students

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At the end of each presentation, peer-critique students give a brief verbal assessment of the presenters' abilities. The presenters also have an opportunity to give feedback on how audience members related to them during their presentation. Thus, a dialogue is created on assumed audience perspectives and actual audience perceptions based on content and delivery. Presenters and non-presenters are videotaped throughout the presentation.

Technology: The Role of Listening for Audience Engagement

The final group of students videotapes (a) the presenters' presentations, (b) the audience members during the presentations, and (c) the feedback dialogue between the two. This procedure allows the audience-centered process of public speaking to be captured and the demands of effective listening skills to be highlighted.

Because effective listening skills are influenced by presentation environment management, technology students on a speech day also perform the following: (a) prepare the spatial arrangement of our classroom at the beginning and end of class; (b) provide presenters' with set-up assistance; (c) collect presenters' professional materials including full-sentence outlines and handouts; and (d) time speeches and provide each presenter with the appropriate time cues. Technology students also are concerned with eliminating obstacles in the presentation environment, such as a loud air-conditioner blower or a misplaced overhead projector, and assisting presenters with successful use of visuals. In short, they spend time listening to visual elements of the presentation—dress, gestures, visual aids, and environment. They

provide awareness of how audience frames of reference were successfully employed.

Conclusion

We have found that by organizing speech days into the three categories of presentations, peer critiques, and technology, all students are engaged in all of our class presentation days. Students have the opportunity to engage in presentations by listening from the audience's perspective. By placing equal emphasis on presenters and non-presenters, we created a presentation environment that fosters interpersonal engagement. Students have responded positively to this format because they realize how much they are valued on presentation days. At the same time, instructors have responded positively because more students actively listen to the presentations and have much to contribute during the discussion sessions. The roles we all play in our classroom community are integral to the success of presentation assignments.

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Using “Investment Writing” to Enhance Student Involvement in Learning

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Objective

Student writing has long been a tool for evaluating learning and content mastery, but writing is also potentially useful for promoting students' learning involvement apart from evaluation. Structured “investment writing” is one fruitful means for engaging students with course material long before the first paper or exam is due. Investment writing “encourages students to invest themselves in the study at hand” (Thomas, 1995, p. 15). Patricia Lambert Stock, who developed the concept, advocates connecting scholarly theories to students' situated personal experiences (Stock, 1995) as well as deliberately treating oral and written communication “as seamless uses of language and . . . treat[ing] language as the fabric from which communities and their constitutive meanings and values are fashioned” (Stock & Robinson, 1989, p. 311). Investment writing centers on the communication process rather than its product, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. It builds from experience to listening to speaking to reading to writing to refinement (Stock & Wixson, 1983). Structured use of this model on the first class day simultaneously

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Using “Investment Writing”

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I am unwilling functionally either to waste this first week of class or to risk dampening students’ enthusiasm with extensive lecturing.

engages students in an on-point theoretical conversation at a more advanced level than otherwise would be possible and relates that conversation to their individual experiences.

I use investment writing on the first day of a 25-person undergraduate/graduate bridge course entitled, “Communication and Social Order.” The course objectives are to understand and explain how communication relates to actual experiences of social order and to demonstrate familiarity with a range of communication choices for effectively maintaining or challenging social orders. The class meets once a week for approximately three hours. I am unwilling functionally either to waste this first week of class or to risk dampening students’ enthusiasm with extensive lecturing. This investment writing exercise engages students by 1) making course content relevant to their personal experiences; 2) briefly introducing a range of theories on central course concepts in a non-threatening, de-mystifying way; 3) helping students find voices, grounded in experience, with which to compare and respond to those theories; and 4) fostering collaborative learning.

Procedure

This exercise involves mini-lectures, brief in-class readings, and group discussion as well as writing. I first introduce some basic concepts (e.g., controversy, rhetoric, social order, hierarchy, epideic-

tic) and establish the course’s general approach. Next, each student jots down five to seven possible ideas that fit the category introduced (e.g., social controversies). Volunteers give examples from their lists, and we brainstorm additional possibilities without judging them. I record all ideas on an overhead. When we have a substantial list, I review the items, asking how many students had similar items on their original lists. In the process, we are able to identify some items on which there is broad consensus as fitting the category. Using this list, the class begins to distill what aspects might separate examples that many students see as clearly illustrating the basic concept category from those that are less consensual.

With this background, students can begin to connect these course concepts to their personal experiences. I next ask students to write a paragraph describing their most memorable experience with or impression of communication in some social controversy. It is crucial to give illustrations of appropriate experiences (e.g., an actual case of a former student who was mistaken for a client as she passed by an abortion clinic and was confronted by demonstrators), specify the level of detail desired, and set any limits or priorities for students’ writing. For instance, my students are asked to give a personal example, but one that is not too personal to share comfortably with all classmates. Given the course content, they also are encouraged to focus their paragraphs on the communication dimensions of the incident and the details that make it memorable.

This individual writing serves as the basis for small groups to practice identifying common concepts/principles—in this case, what aspects make communication in social controversies salient. Students randomly assemble in groups



of four, usually by each student drawing a playing card from a partial deck (e.g., all 7s are a group, 6s another); this process improves the chances that students will interact with strangers who may have quite different experiences to share. Before the small groups work, I model the process of abstracting more generalizable characteristics using the “appropriate” illustrations presented before the students wrote. In groups, students then read their paragraphs aloud to each other. After all members share, the groups try to propose and articulate some characteristics or general principles that seem to make communication in social controversies significant or memorable. They also indicate any differences that seem important, yet are inexplicable or uncommon. A designated presenter in each group (e.g., the person holding the “diamond” card) records ideas on a blank transparency. When the class reconvenes, each presenter explains his or her group’s transparency. After every small group presents, the whole class analyzes commonalities that might represent the more salient qualities of controversy communication, based on our collected experiences. This discussion not only shows the relevance of the course to students’ lives but also underscores that the students have some experiential basis from which to engage and evaluate course theories.

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Using “Investment Writing”

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Finally, this reflection on our experiences moves us to consider featured academic theories of communication and social order. Small group presentations serve as a springboard for a whole class discussion of what questions and issues a satisfactory theory of communication that promotes or contests a social order must address. Once we formulate possible theoretical puzzles reflected in our collected experiences, the small groups reconvene. Everyone is given a set of very brief—no more than a few paragraphs each—primary texts from a range of relevant scholarly theories on the course’s central ideas. The short readings, drawn in this case from Aristotle, Kenneth Burke, Lewis Coser, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, and Murray Edelman, are printed one to a page and only on the left half of each page. Each page’s right half is blank for notes with one or two directive questions regarding the reading posed at the top of this right column. Examples include the following:

- What is the role of communication in social order?
- What is the nature of social order?
- What is the relationship among social order, hierarchy, and communication?
- What is the relationship of conflict to the maintenance and change of social order?
- What is the relationship of communication to consensus and conflict?
- What is epideictic rhetoric’s relationship to social order?

Each small group summarizes one reading’s answers to the prompt questions and records them on a transparency identical to the printed page. Each group also attempts to relate that reading’s position to the issues raised by our

In an appropriate class situation, a well-planned investment writing exercise is a rewarding and exciting introduction to a semester’s work for both students and teacher.

experiences and evaluate its explanatory potential. When the class reconvenes, a member who has not yet presented reports each group’s findings (e.g., if “diamonds” presented the first time, “clubs” may present next.). As a class, we debrief. Having a consensually tested set of illustrations and a grasp of these experiences’ shared contours increases students’ confidence to question, critique, compare, and actively engage these academic theories rather than submitting to their authority, as they might have done were this material introduced in lecture form. Finally, I use another mini-lecture to link their ideas, concerns, and the theoretical readings to the course’s ultimate objectives and organizational plan.

Conclusion

Investment writing is an innovative teaching strategy that I count as a success. It can engage students immediately in an unfamiliar and complex subject, demonstrate that subject’s relevance to their lives, and inspire confidence in their capability—based on experiences whose relevance and representativeness first are tested in small and large group discussions—to respond critically to academic theories designed to account for such communication. The technique certainly inspires more advanced thinking and sustained, spirited discussion than otherwise would be possible on the first day of class. Investment writing does, how-

ever, demand a significant amount of class time and careful instructor preparation in terms of phrasing conceptual questions, avoiding readings that depend on prior mastery of a specialized vocabulary, selecting readings that are heuristic yet short, and formulating clear procedural directions that move the process logically forward. In an appropriate class situation, a well-planned investment writing exercise is a rewarding and exciting introduction to a semester’s work for both students and teacher.

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Literary Character Musical Chairs

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Objective

One of the basic principles of Reader's Theatre in classroom exercises is to dramatize literature and provide a visual/oral stimulus for students unaccustomed to using imagination to appreciate literary works. Reader's Theatre principles also enhance critical study of language, and promote reading, writing, an listening skills in classroom settings.

Classroom Warm-Up

Begin the exercise working with ensemble groups of four students in a series of relaxing physical and vocal warm-ups. Students bend from the waist, touch their toes, and slowly relax the arms in front of the feet. Slowly, students swing both the head and arms in a pendulum-like motion—like a limp noodle in a pot of boiling water. The swinging motion continues until students collapse in a soggy heap in the middle of the classroom space. In the second part of the exercise, students lie flat on their back and slightly elevate the knees, keeping the feet flat on the floor. The pelvis should be tilted toward the knees, and the arms relaxed at the side and flat on the floor. Students inhale deeply for a count of twenty-five, and then slowly exhale for a count of twenty-five.

When completely relaxed, students purr like a playful kitten and sustain the sound produced for a count of twenty-five. Keeping the pelvis tilted toward the knees, students continue to inhale deeply

and exhale slowly for a count of twenty-five as they growl like a dog; hum like a song bird; snort like a horse; buzz like a bee; whimper like an infant; hiss like a snake; and hoot like an owl.

Classroom Approach

Briefly review the role that vocal variables like pitch, rate, inflection, and volume play in the vocal interpretation of a literary character. Present students with a short poem, excerpt of prose, or dramatic monologue suitable for a two-minute classroom performance. Assign each student a different vocal term and remind them to use only the assigned term to vocally distinguish the literary character. Students read the short poem, excerpt of prose, or dramatic monologue aloud several times so the classroom listeners may evaluate each vocal term and make suggestions for additional clarity or distinctness.

Place three chairs in a circle and play recorded music as the four students circle the space voicing the excerpt and the assigned vocal variable term. Stop the music abruptly as students scramble for one of the three seats. Students who secure seats now assume the vocal term of the student performer who was left out, and the excerpt is read aloud again for classroom evaluation of the added vocal term. The exercise continues until only one student remains to voice all four of the assigned vocal terms in an interpretation of the literary character.

Conclusion

One of the primary principles of Reader's Theatre techniques used in classroom instructional strategies is to encourage students to visualize and vocalize the actions and thoughts of literary characters. When voicing the subtle nuances of meaning suggested in a literary text, students begin to cultivate an appreciation and an understanding of literary

character, attitude, or mood. This theatrical approach to classroom interpretation of text relies on the viewpoint that to "hear" a character's thoughts is as relevant to literary interpretation as to "read" or to "write" about a character's thoughts.

There are a number of creative classroom extensions to this exercise. Future assignments may contain descriptive character actions that students may express in spontaneous body movement, or include small group performances that cultivate a vocal vocabulary of subtle tones and shades of meaning producing crisp sounds in oral reports or speaking assignments. Repetition of the exercise should lessen the initial tendency of students to tense-up in classroom presentations and also promote more active engagement when reading aloud to others.

Examples of literature useful for small group vocal exploration might include excerpts from T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," and Homer's "The Shield of Achilles." Students have also responded well to longer dramatic narrative excerpts from Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Antoine de Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince*, Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

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The Article Rewrite Assignment

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One particular assignment that I have given for over 30 years has had a particularly strong effect on the popularity of my courses and teaching in general. This assignment, which has been required in every one of my advanced “Persuasion” courses (every term since 1973), is called simply the “Article Rewrite Assignment.”

It stems from the most provocative and reprinted article I have written in my career, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” (Vatz, 1973), published in the preeminent journal in rhetorical theory, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. The article was the antithesis of an earlier article in the same journal called “The Rhetorical Situation” (Bitzer, 1968).

My article argues, contrary to the philosophy articulated in “The Rhetorical Situation,” that rhetoric creates, rather than reflects, reality through a struggle for salience and meaning, roughly equivalent to today’s concepts of establishing an agenda and infusing a spin.

For just one illustration: according to the perspective argued in the “The Rhetorical Situation,” the rhetoric surrounding the war in Iraq was the result of specifiable and real components of that war; the components inescapably engendered the rhetoric. By the perspective argued in the “Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” however, the rhetoric surrounding the war was a result of decisions

If the assignment can be summed up in two words, the words would be “persuasive reinterpretation.”

by major players to make salient certain points and infuse them with the desired meaning. In the “Myth” the rhetors have responsibility for what they make salient and the meaning infused in the saliency. Thus, the relevance and significance of not finding weapons of mass destruction was rhetorically manufactured for different audiences.

The assignment requires students to choose an opinionated article in the popular press and *reverse* the essence of its position. While I maintain that this reversal could be applied to articles on the news pages, I direct the students to articles or reviews of books, movies, CDs and plays in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post (Style Page)*, and *The New York Times*, as well as other newspapers and magazines. I also recommend that the students consider restaurant and dance reviews, for these also may recommend themselves superbly for this assignment.

If the assignment can be summed up in two words, the words would be “persuasive reinterpretation.” The somewhat complicated rules of the assignment are as follows:

The student may not change facts (or the plot, if it is a movie or play review) of the article. If there is subjectivity, it may be reversed. Thus, in reversing a negative movie review of Dustin Hoffman’s acting, the student may not claim that Dustin Hoffman is tall, but *may* say that “even Mr. Hoffman’s acting in *Ishtar* showed under-appreciated aspects of brilliance.” If a negative original says,

“The singer’s range no longer could hit the high notes,” the writer may not say, “His range was equal to his range 20 years ago,” but he or she *may* say, “The beauty of his sounds more than compensated for any small loss of range he experienced over the years.” In reversing a positive dance review, “fast dancing” may be portrayed as “frenetic,” but not “slow.” The reversals must follow the original practically line by line with reversals occurring in sequence.

The changes must have a material point to them: if a book review starts out by saying that the reviewer woke up on a sunny morning, the student may not say that the brightness of the day made it difficult to drive. But if the review is positive, the writer may say, in reversing the piece, that the “sunniness of the day was in stark contrast to the interview which followed.”

Changes must be plausible, reasonable, and *substantial*; no credit is given to the adding of the word *not* to make an affirmative sentence negative. Students may add pictures from other sources and/or reverse the captions on pictures in the original.

The reversing of the original must be consistent; if a negative original concedes a positive point, in the reversal the point must be made *more* positive. Thus, if the original says, “Despite their short-sightedness, the Republicans have managed to win most of the presidential elections since 1968,” the student may write that “due to their understanding of the electorate, the Republicans have won all but one of the presidential elections since 1968 in which the Democratic nominee has been a liberal.”

Quotations may be eliminated or truncated, and one or two may be substituted, but in no case may the intended

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The Article Rewrite Assignment

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meaning be subverted or the words changed. Thus, if an original positive review of *Spiderman II* quotes movie reviewer Roger Ebert as saying, “Tobey McGuire is a uniquely capable actor, but is at times in over his head,” the student may not write that Ebert says that McGuire “lacks capability.” He may say that Ebert sees McGuire as “in over his head. The following are some excellent examples of recent note by students in a Spring, 2004 section of “Persuasion”:

Original (Large, 2004)

Going to XS is, well, fun.

. . .The breakfast food is kind of ordinary (which may be just what you want in breakfast food). For instance, the omelet—overcooked—comes with white-bread toast, little cubes of fried potatoes and a small cup of cut-up fruit. No surprises there. But the coffee is good and strong, and you’d never guess the maple chicken sausage patties aren’t pork.

The sushi, however, is anything but ordinary. There’s none of the minimalist Japanese thing going on. A maki roll like *Chorishi’s Fire* is an extravagant creation decorated with orchids and feathery sprays of celery leaves. The crispy bits of shrimp tempura folded in with avocado and tuna offer up a startling interplay of textures and flavors, none of them pedestrian. Not to mention the drizzle of spicy pink sauce trailing over the rice. . . .

Student Rewrite

by Elizabeth Broccolino:

Going to XS is, well, depressing

. . .The breakfast food is the same as what you could make in your own home, sans the tacky atmosphere. The omelet—overcooked, no less—comes with such Denny-esque sides as bread, cubes of

potatoes and a cup of fruit. Suddenly, the restaurant’s banality rears its ugly head. But luckily the coffee is so heavily dosed with caffeine that you’ll be too jittery to notice that the sausage patties aren’t even real pork. And then there’s the sushi. Destroying the tradition of the Japanese delicacy, American gluttony takes over. A maki roll, inexplicably named “*Chiroshi’s Fire*,” is a tawdry contrivance of sushi, haphazardly topped with flowers and leaves of celery, hiding the disappointment of the sushi itself. The crisp—no, the teeth-shattering—little crumbs of shrimp tempura mixed with avocado and tuna horrify the palette with their obvious incompatibility. They cannot even leave the rice alone, squirting a sort of Pepto-Bismol colored sauce over it.

Original (Denby, 2002)

Calculating Rhythm

. . .There’s a lot of pent-up anger about the way the health-care system works, and “*John Q.*” plugs into that anger like a drill working the Alaskan subsoil. The movie appears to be turning into a hit, and the consequences could be interesting. Right-wing populist movies—usually in the form of vigilante fantasies, like “*Collateral Damage*”—open every year, but a left-wing populist movie has become a rarity. There was “*Erin Brockovich*,” but that movie was an attack on a single corporation. This one is an attack on the entire H.M.O.—insurance-company complex, which, the movie suggests, screws the ethnic working poor. The movie quivers with righteous tears.

Student Rewrite

by Jennifer Hykes

Fascinating Rhythm

. . .There’s a lot of pent-up anger about the way the health-care system works and “*John Q.*” gives voice to that anger like Ella Fitzgerald does to the blues. The movie is quickly turning into a big

I truly love this assignment, and so apparently do my students. . . . It has been celebrated—and not just by me—for over 30 years now.

hit, and justly so. Right-wing populist movies—usually in the form of vigilante—every year, but a left-wing populist movie has become a rare gem. There was “*Erin Brockovich*,” but that film started small; the heroine took on a single corporation. “*John Q.*” takes on the entire H.M.O.—insurance-company complex, which, the film suggests, often stomps on the ethnic working class. The film quakes with heartfelt indignation.

I truly love this assignment, and so apparently do my students—at least those do who get passing grades on it. It has been celebrated—and not just by me—for over 30 years now.

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Instant Discussions: High Level, Student Constructed and Concept Driven

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Involving students in their learning is important, and discussion can be involving. When students engage each other, trying out ideas and working together to answer significant questions, they experience the benefits of a community of learners. However, sometimes we find ourselves attempting to involve students in classroom discussions with little success. One reason for the lack of dynamic response may be that the questions are not well-connected to student interests or thinking. The questions are not theirs. Another reason may be that the questions asked are at too low a cognitive level to generate much student effort.

For example, here is a question asked in a college classroom recently: “Do any of you know the formula for chi square?” The question was asked as the first statement of what had been billed as a “lecture” on statistics used in social science. No one attempted to answer the question and the instructor proceeded to do so herself. Even though the question was a well-intentioned effort to involve the students, it *lacked context or connection* to anything beyond itself. Students who knew the answer had no reason to pursue it; students who didn’t know the answer realized they merely had to wait for the answer to be dispensed. If we listen closely to ourselves, it turns out that we ask numerous questions like this one which lay rather inert at the lowest

level of any taxonomy of thinking.

On the other hand, a question offered may be so abstract or vague that the promise of what follows is unappealing to students. Here’s an example: “So, what did you think of the reading?” What follows is often a meandering chat resulting from the boldest students taking the Rorschach-like question and infusing it with whatever meaning they can. Other students are left to try to leap onto the now moving discussion bus or wait for the next possible opportunity to become involved which seems to arrive randomly. The problem nagging this sort of question is the same as the one above; namely, it simply points to the reading and provides nothing to provoke systematic thinking.

When experience is too predictable, it is not provocative. When we see things that are too perfectly symmetrical, they offer nothing new to attend to and are unengaging. On the other hand, complete randomness bores us, too. Few of us turn on the Windows Media Player visualizations *and actually watch them* when we listen to music on our computers because the designs are random and boring. The perceptual and intellectual problem with total regularity or randomness is that neither offers anything to think about. What is interesting is “news of difference” (Bateson 72). The basic logical principle in operation is *comparison*. Drawing from C. S. Pierce’s concept of “abduction” (Buchler, ed. 150–56), Gergory Bateson makes clear the need of human beings for “binocular vision” (73). Two eyes, he argues, provide double descriptions of a perceptual field wherein each description has similarities and differences which necessitate analysis, synthesis, and reconciliation. Comparison and contrast provide resolution in perception. The same goes for thinking; comparison and contrast of even linguistic or mathematical abstractions respond to what Bateson calls the “method of double or multiple comparison” (92). Compari-

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history, philosophy, agronomy,
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son invites discovery of similarity, difference and the creative moves of reconciliation which further invite explanation of insights. Students do not naturally know how to query content expertly. As we are inducted into a discipline, we become aware of patterns of knowledge and the gaps in that knowledge. For our students, the content of their courses often looks much the same—concepts are concepts, theories are theories, problems are problems. At the university level, most of our thinking is about linguistic or mathematical abstractions in the form of concepts and related theory. No matter the discipline—history, philosophy, agronomy, zoology—what we think about is *relationship* of concepts, theory, and practice. It is among those relationships that significant research questions are generated, and it is this fertile ground that begs to be tilled in our classes.

Figure 1, drawn from Communication Studies, provides an example of the intellectual impact of questioning relationships. One comparison is between theoretical approaches to instructional communication—American and European. Comparison of the approaches immediately generates higher order questions (analysis and synthesis) from the stereoscopic vision of instructional communication theory set before the students. There is something to think about. Adding another comparison between theory and praxis invites further questioning and thinking to make

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Instant Discussions

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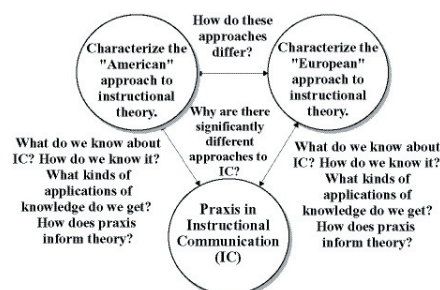


Figure 1

sense of the relationships posed by the model. Notice how a natural movement from lower level questions to higher order questions emerges from this new relational problem: “What do we know about [European] IC?” starts at the knowledge/comprehension level of Bloom’s taxonomy. “How does praxis inform theory?” requires synthetic answers.

Initiating a discussion by presenting something like Figure 1 to students is an effective way to begin. However, I argue this approach is even more beneficial when students generate the discussion questions.

Creating and Using “Instant Discussions”

First, the stimulus for the discussion is constructed from critical or significant concepts from the knowledge base relevant to the area of study. Initially you will need to choose those concepts, but as students become more intellectually mature, they can do so as well.

The simplest configuration is modeled in Figure 2 below. Once the concepts are isolated, the students’ first task is to generate questions regarding the relationship between them. The only “require-



Figure 2

ment” for the exercise is that we provide at least two related concepts for students to consider. A set of three concepts, as in Figure 3, substantially develops the possibilities for interesting questions.

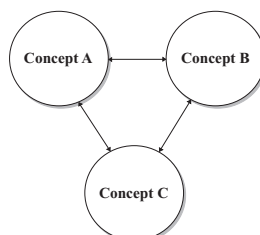


Figure 3

Figure 3 adds a degree of complexity that provokes more questions, especially if “C” is at a different logical level or is of a different conceptual category. (In Figure 1, praxis is related to theory, but describes a different logical category.) Once the concepts are presented, the students’ task is questioning those relationships. At first, you may need to model the process and assist the students in creating some questions. In fact, with most classes I find my first use of this approach inevitably requires that I assist the students in creating questions and assist them in selecting those that are provocative. (They often try to ask questions like those I introduced at the beginning of the essay because such questions are the sort they encounter most frequently.)

Figure 4 presents a model wherein all three points of the triangle are different but related. In each example, the complexity of the stimulus increases and the potential for increasingly substantial discussions generally increases. The difference between Figure 1 and Figure 4 is in the fact that in Figure 1 the work of comparing American and European theory stays much at the level of sorting. The problem of finding relationships between the logically different concepts of “interactivity,” “outcomes,” and “knowledge” in Figure 4 requires com-

What questions do each of the links suggest?

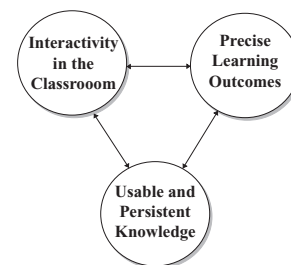


Figure 4

(This assumes, for example, that the students have some common understanding of these terms from prior reading, experience, or lecture.)

prehension, analysis, and synthesis to create the questions in the first place.

This approach to generating high level, student-constructed, concept-driven discussions is very flexible. I recommend it as a means for preparing discussion in any particular class session, but it can be done *during* a class session, hence “instant discussions.” For example, during a lecture in which you have presented at least two significant new concepts, you can simply turn to the board, construct a model like that in Figure 2 and check understanding by asking the students to pose questions they have about the relationship between the concepts. The questions in and of themselves may be sufficient for involving students in processing the lecture material. You may select the most significant questions (or ask the students to select) and use the model as a map for the discussion.

As I noted at the outset, students experience community when they do important work together. An effect of such work is that students who learn to ask significant questions and then pose answers to them move toward intellectual autonomy. They are freed from having to wait for someone else to set

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Instant Discussions

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their learning agenda; they are no longer just drones whose work it is to answer questions for others who already have an answer in mind. Students learn strategies for moving outside of their own assumptions and predispositions to see more clearly the issues they are wrestling with as scholars. Teaching students ways of asking significant questions will help them engage course material and lead to more substantive papers, projects and presentations.

Just as you and I learned to be independent scholars, yet deeply related to our disciplinary community, our students can achieve similar states if we show them how. "Instant discussions" is one of many possible tools to achieve those ends.

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Meet the Authors



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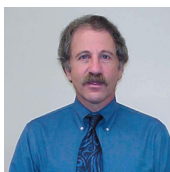
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