

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 4 Fall 2007

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 4.1 In This Issue...

*Denise Stephenson and Dana Smith*

This issue of GIFTs brings a fresh set of teaching techniques that can be easily adapted. From new formats to exam follow-ups, this issue offers provocative ideas for thinking beyond current practice.

Changing the structures that students use to think and report findings can alter the learning environment, especially when it also refocuses audience. Blogs can keep students communicating in an on-line discussion forum, whether the class is on-site, hybrid or on-line. **Jim Sullivan** found that the built-in audience of classmates created better and better writing, even without the activity being graded. That's impressive! See his article, rich with examples.

Want a different kind of read? Here an interview format provides one for you which tells about a better kind of "read" **Steve Eso** experienced when he eliminated his tired, old research paper. He asked for even more research on multiple topics, but asked students to structure it as chapters in a book. With a bit of class time devoted to sharing their chapters in-process, his students accomplished the impossible—interesting, well-written papers that Steve enjoyed reading.

In this issue, you'll also find multiple techniques to retain students and simultaneously teach them how to be successful. **Bruce Hoskins** offers strategies for follow-up with students who do poorly on first exams. **Larry Burns** recommends students picture what they find most challenging in a course and then talk to faculty about how they can meet that challenge. **Paul Katson** points out the value to many students of getting realistic grade estimates throughout the

### 4.1 In This Issue...

*Denise Stephenson and Dana Smith*

### 4.2 Blogging: Finding and Keeping an Audience

*Jim Sullivan, English*

### 4.3 Research Papers that Excite: Keeping the Research, Changing the Structure, and Invoking Audience

*Steve Eso, Psychology and Denise Stephenson, Writing Center*

### 4.4 Retention = Attention + Prevention

*Bruce Hoskins, Sociology; Larry Burns, EOPS Counselor; Paul Katson, Automotive Technology; Jeff Keehn, English*

### 4.5 Using Hollywood Film Structure to Build Stories by Processing Content

*Kevin Wheeler, Film*

#### 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](mailto:dstephenson@miracosta.edu)



Teaching  
Academy

#### Editors

Dana Smith  
Denise Stephenson

#### Layout & Design

Brandi Blahnik



[www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter](http://www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter)

term. And **Jeff Keehn** provides an excellent “get acquainted” activity that he uses first day and beyond to connect students’ interests to course content.

There’s even a technique that builds on students’ attraction to film as a way of exploring content. By using a plot structure borrowed from Hollywood, **Kevin Wheeler** suggests students create a fictional story to reveal their understanding of academic concepts or course content. What if students’ stories had characters

experiencing the political unrest of Kent State days, or the riches and risks of the Gold Rush, or the serendipitous discovery of penicillin? Wouldn’t those be fun papers to read—and write?

The Teaching Academy and the Writing Center remain dedicated to nurturing and promoting effective pedagogy from within our own academic community. Take a minute to thank your colleagues for continuing to share their best practices. And consider submitting your own golden teaching nugget. 🍌

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 4 Fall 2007

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 4.2 Blogging: Finding and Keeping an Audience

*Jim Sullivan, Letters*

English teachers have long struggled to create “authentic” writing assignments that help students understand how to shape a piece of writing to address the interests and expectations of an audience. Even in classes emphasizing peer response activities and the writing process, the teacher’s role as grader looms large over any attempt to broaden the concept of audience in the college composition classroom.

Last year, I responded to this dilemma with a blogging project that I believe helped students appreciate the challenges and rewards of writing for a “real” audience. For a transfer level English class focused upon reading and writing about California, students contributed to a course blog entitled “All Things Californian.” In posts ranging from 150-300 words, the students chose any topic related to California that interested them: they could write about places, music, events, politics, health care, education, or anything connected to California. To help avoid

some of the vitriol of “real-life” blogging on the web, I asked students to connect their posts to the guiding question of our course: How do competing versions of the California dream shape our state’s culture and politics?

Over the course of a semester, students completed six to eight posts and twelve to sixteen short responses to the posts of their classmates. At first, students struggled most with finding topics and connecting them to our guiding question, but their concern quickly shifted to attracting the response comments of their classmates. Without any prompting from me, these student writers recognized that their classmates responded to the most engaging and well-written posts. And with that recognition came a sense that they really did have an audience other than their instructor. To

*This course blog offers student writers a new sense of and space for audience.*

further encourage this engagement with their web audience, I deferred any grading of blog posts or comments until the end of the semester when the students submitted a portfolio of what they considered their best posts and comments.

Although I did not grade the blog during the semester, the students received plenty of feedback. I made comments to them during conferences and on printed drafts of their posts, and the class spent peer response time every few weeks discussing each other's posts, nominating the best posts of the month, and sharing ideas for topics and writing techniques that would attract readers and responders. Students also frequently continued these discussions out of class: bemused writing center facilitators who led learning communities for students from my classes regularly complained to me that "all the students want to talk about is the blog." These enthusiastic in-class and out of class conversations generated significant improvements in the quality of posts to the blog. By the end of the course, student writers were contributing interesting, witty, and sometimes provocative posts.

As an instructor, I had to invest considerable energy in the blog project early in the course and keep a close eye on what appeared on the blog. Occasionally a student writer, imitating the more odious forms of blogging on the web, substituted name calling for respectful disagreement. In those rare cases (twice in a year's worth of student blogging), I had to remove comments or posts made to the site, but by the end of the semester, students had created their own community of writers on the web.

The blogging project is something new for most students—even those with plenty of web experience—and the expanded audience it generates can be intimidating. For this reason, I always gave students the option of a more traditional essay instead of the blog portfolio. But even the most anxious students soon found that they enjoyed blog authorship. Here is a comment

April 22, 2007

### Medical Marijuana



In 1970, the federal government passed the **Controlled Substances Act** which made the use of marijuana illegal for all purposes. This included the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes in any form. Despite the preexisting law, California passed **Proposition 215** in 1996, which allowed doctors to prescribe marijuana to ill patients. California directly defied the federal government and lawsuits began immediately. As of today, the federal government is standing firm on Controlled Substances Act of 1970.

Several other states have followed in California's footsteps and voted to allow medicinal use of marijuana. The federal government has made it clear that cultivators and distributors of marijuana for medical purposes are not immune from federal prosecution under the Controlled Substances Act. Even patients using marijuana vaporizers in their dying days are not protected by Proposition 215. As recently as March 2007, federal agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), **arrested three marijuana cultivators** in southern California.

California has the reputation for being a place to escape oppression. People move to California every day to escape persecution from their families, small towns, and religion. Men and women come seeking freedom to live as they see fit. It is no surprise that California was the first state to legalize medical marijuana. I believe Californians are shocked by the federal government's response. The struggle between California and the federal government resembles that of a child and a parent. The parent makes the rules and the child rebels, some of the siblings (other states) take the rebellious side and others are loyal the parent. The dream of having the freedom to choose in California is challenged by the boundaries set by the

*The beginning of a post on medicinal marijuana. Blog posts include links (orange text) to other web sites and resources.*

from a student who was initially so put off by the blogging assignment that she tried to enroll in another section of English 100 to avoid it:

As I sit here at the conclusion of the semester, I can honestly say, the blog was the most motivating and exciting part of the class. Throughout the semester, I would spend hours reading other posts and searching for topics to write about. Making comments was a learning experience because the other bloggers were students I saw in class; therefore, I had to be careful with the way I expressed my opinion regarding their post... Before the blog, I did not think I had opinions about very many topics. Through the blogging experience, I learned that I have strong opinions in a variety of areas and

with a little thought I can persuade others toward my side with my writing.

Negotiating her responses to the ideas of her classmates, avidly reading through their posts and comments, discovering that she could interest and persuade others—I do not have too many writing projects in my teacher’s bag of tricks that can help a student experience all of that.

If you would like to learn more about this assignment, visit “All Things Californian” at this web address: <<http://www.freetowrite.com/allthingscalifornian>>

For more about blogs and teaching (including portfolio instructions and two sample portfolios), explore this page: <<http://www.miracosta.edu/home/jimsullivan/blogs.htm>> 📖

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 4 Fall 2007

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 4.3 Research Papers that Excite: Keeping the Research, Changing the Structure, and Invoking Audience

*Steve Eso, Psychology and Denise Stephenson, Writing Center*

*The article was born conceptually when Denise bumped into Steve in the cafeteria during finals week. When asked what he'd been doing, he responded enthusiastically about the stack of papers he'd just finished reading. This is an anomalous response from a faculty member at any time, but during finals all the more so. Denise had to know more so she kept probing with questions, excited that Steve credited the Bean seminars she'd held the year before. Here you have a glimpse into the conversation that day. Imagine standing with us in the cafeteria:*

**Denise:** I have to know about this assignment, how is it different from what you've assigned in the past?

**Steve:** In a traditional research term paper for psychology, it is common to assign a single topic, such as cognitive dissonance. The benefit of this is that students learn lots of information about that topic, but of course the disadvantage is that they are limited to that topic. It occurred to me that if I broke the large paper into a series of smaller chapter papers, the students could cover more topics. Just as importantly, from one of your

seminars regarding audience and voice, I wanted students to be able to talk about the psychological material in a more comfortable voice.

**Denise:** How was voice important?

**Steve:** What I really wanted to do was allow students to find their own voices in talking about the material, but I didn't want to lose the sense of a college-educated level audience. I also wanted to get the students to better apply course concepts to their everyday lives, in the hope that by making the material more meaningful to them, it would stick better.

**Denise:** I think that using personal experiences contributed to a shift in voice as much as telling them to write for their peers. That makes a writer comfortable and confident.

**Steve:** I didn't necessarily want to make the assignment more comfortable; that wasn't my goal. But if it did that and yet achieved the learning objectives I had, all the better.

**Denise:** They had to write ten chapters. That seems like a lot. How did you make that achievable?

**Steve:** The format of each chapter was the same, and I provided them with that on the assignment sheet. Each chapter began with a brief description of an experience in everyday language. Then came a reframing of the situation, using psychological terminology and incorporating psychological research findings. Finally, the students were encouraged to conclude with a witty or pithy ending statement.

**Denise:** I can't get over your excitement. What were other benefits for you as a teacher?

**Steve:** There were many! I really enjoyed reading the papers!!!! Every one was unique, and they exhibited a kind of passion or driving force that really made me proud to see just how much

work the students put into them. In addition, the level of comprehension and application that the students showed was well beyond the responses I had gotten to previous assignments. Finally, it was fun to see students excited about writing their papers—throughout the entire semester. Students would bring completed chapters to class—not because I assigned due dates, but because they were excited about sharing their accomplishments.

**Denise:** Beyond enthusiasm, what other benefits were there for students?

**Steve:** The first big benefit has to be that they willingly subjected themselves to doing research on at least ten different topics, complete with reading and understanding multiple research articles in each area. It seems that by giving them a chance to write in their own voice to an audience that they could imagine, I inadvertently created a situation in which they became self-motivated (who woulda thunk!) to write a 20-page paper. Additionally, from the redundant format for each chapter, they gained a certain amount of meta-cognitive awareness and confidence as writer-researchers—the first couple of chapters were difficult for them, but after that, they started to think like psychologists, seeing psychology all around them.

**Denise:** A moment ago you mentioned students sharing these chapters in class. Can you talk about the ways they did that or the benefits they got from it?

**Steve:** This was actually a bit of a serendipitous result, in that I had allowed time in class for them to read, edit, and suggest changes to their peers' chapters (as suggested in one of your seminars). But what I found was that the students reinforced themselves and each other so much that as they finished a chapter, they brought it in to show off to their fellow students. This

began an interesting cycle of editing, discussing, and motivating as students, in their small workgroups, kept apprised of how each of their group members were doing.

**Denise:** In short, it created competition in the best sense of the word. This also created a genuine community of peers where students were writing for each other. This produces much better writing than when students write for authority figures, for faculty. It not only produces clearer prose, which are easier to write, but it's what we value. After all, we have students read peer-reviewed articles. If academics write for peers, why not students?

**Steve:** I'd like to say that I planned it all that way, but alas, it was gift from the great beyond.

*A few months later...*

**Denise:** Hey Steve, did any of your students who wrote the multi-chapter books last semester submit their work for the Behavioral Science Paper Symposium?

**Steve:** As I told you in fall, I was so impressed with the overall quality of the papers for this assignment across my entire class, that I invited all of them to submit their papers. In order to submit papers, students needed to meet with me to discuss the suggestions that I made and tend to any additional proofreading and editing tasks. Although I knew that not all students would be interested, I felt confident that virtually all of the papers were of sufficient quality to be entered. Ultimately, two students presented their papers at the symposium.

**Denise:** That's great. It's validating to have others share in your students' success. 🎁

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 4 Fall 2007

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 4.4 Retention = Attention + Prevention

*Compilation edited by Denise Stephenson*

*Members of the Retention Advisory Committee want to share ways of preventing students from falling into academic jeopardy by intervening early. While institutional ways of retaining students are important, members of RAC frequently use their own experience as touchstones: how do they connect with students, how do they help them learn to be academically savvy? Here we provide four strategies that MiraCosta faculty use to teach students about being academically successful.*

#### **Write and Release Strategy** *Bruce Hoskins, Psychology*

Every semester, without fail, I have between 8-10 students struggle with my first test in Introduction to Sociology (D or below) even though I give a study guide. Something I have done in my class because of this is to give an extra credit assignment that requires the students to: 1) report ALL of the correct answers to the test, 2) tell me three things that they could do differently next time to improve their grade, and 3) one thing that I could do to help them do better in the class.

Alternatively, I allow students to skip #2 and 3 if they prefer to tell me what happened to them. Having been a MiraCosta College student, I know that sometimes “stuff happens.” Of course it can be useful to figure out how to improve their own performance and what help instructors can provide, but sometimes it is necessary to give

students an opportunity to “vent,” to let me know that they are better than what their current grade suggests, and to allow them to own the experience and grow from it. They get a second chance to prove to themselves that they can do better.

#### **Taking a Picture**

*Larry Burns, EOPS Counselor*

I recommend the following challenge to students: In the class you are having difficulty with, go to that professor’s office hours and discuss your concerns about your level of confidence/success. I instruct the student to be very specific and tell the professor exactly what they observe or see that causes them the concern (as if they had taken a picture of it).

The purpose for this is:

- The student gets a chance to develop a relationship with the instructor that is more personal.
- The student is required to critically think about the challenge they are facing, and because of the way the challenge is framed (the picture again), they have to address the realities rather than feelings, beliefs, or misconceptions.
- The feedback that they get from the professor is in the form of problem-solving, decision-making or planning responses...then all the student needs to do is implement the resolution process.

At that point I review with them what action they are planning to take.

## Performance Checkpoints

### *Paul Katson, Automotive Technology*

A strategy I have used for some time to help students achieve success is to provide their grades 3 times per semester. The checkpoints are at the 5, 10 and 15 week marks. These are casual one-to-one meetings that take place during break, after class, or during office hours. Each meeting takes from one to five minutes. Areas of discussion include test scores, lab participation, attendance, and total points accumulated.

These discussions create a sense of course ownership for the student and the instructor.

It is not uncommon during the 5-week consultation for a student to say something like “I didn’t know I was doing that bad.” This situation is the most common for underachievers. I “walk” them through the syllabus and discuss the class expectations and my grading process. When students lack organizational skills, we address: being on time to class, note taking, and not being afraid to ask questions. From the student’s perspective, he or she will feel noticed and discover an instructor who cares and keeps track of their hard work. This is also a time where students have to “come clean” and are made aware that success is in their control. As a result, a mutual respect between teacher and student evolves. The payoff is that this helps the class as a whole operate smoothly with less interruptions. It also helps with retention. Some of my students realize what they can achieve with a little extra work and a plan which prevents them from withdrawing. Students who are doing well receive a deserved “pat on the back” for their achievements.

## Listening For Teachable Moments

### *Jeff Keehn, English*

I am a firm believer in the saying, “We never get a second chance to make a first impression.” And on the first day of class the impression I want

to make is that I am an instructor who respects and values student input and will do what I can to help students reach their goals. With that in mind, I start inviting student feedback day one with an ice-breaker activity I learned from Marty Spring at a flex workshop several years ago. I pass out an anonymous survey that simply asks students to fill in the blank:

- I like students to . . . .
- I don’t like students to . . . .
- I like instructors to . . . .
- I don’t like instructors to . . . .

As the survey sheets circulate around the room, students are free to say hi and work together while jotting down ideas about the ideal classroom environment. At some point during a lull in the conversation, I invite students to share what they wrote down so that I can alleviate their concerns and fears and validate their vision of the ideal learning environment.

As students are getting to know one another and filling in the survey, I post the prompt for another day-one activity—the self-introduction. This exercise not only provides me with a quick diagnostic writing sample from each student, it also provides me with background information for future interactions.

The prompt goes like this:

- 1) Please introduce yourself by name and/or nickname.
- 2) Please describe your goals in this class. (e.g., the skills you hope to develop, the grade you hope to earn, the number of hours you plan to spend on homework . . .)
- 3) What are your educational goals at MiraCosta College? (Are you working toward a degree or certificate? Do you plan to transfer? . . .)

- 4) Have you met with an academic counselor?
- 5) What are your career goals?
- 6) Have you met with a career counselor?
- 7) Please describe your favorite hobby.

You may be thinking—wow, that was random! Why is he asking the hobby question? It's not because I'm pushy or nosy. It's because I have learned that when students are not fully engaging the writing process, their interest can sometimes be sparked by creating an analogy between the rewriting process and an enjoyable activity that they have mastered. Throughout the semester, I hold individual conferences, and during those conferences teachable moments often spring from student responses to the hobby prompt. Speaking with an art student, I learned that the writing process is similar to the process

of sketching out figures in pencil before shading or before adding layers of color to a painting. A computer tech major explained that he finally got a handle on sentence variety when he began to see a correlation between syntax and computer programming protocol (whatever that means). And several musicians have given in to the tedious satisfaction of the revision process after recalling how they struggled to master a rhythm, hold a chord, or finger a scale. Over the years, the hobby prompt has sparked dozens of epiphanies that helped students to develop confidence and earn higher grades.

*Of course these are not the only ways of intervening with students to keep them connected to our classes and to their academic pursuits, but they are well-tested preventative strategies. What do you do? Perhaps you'd like to share that in a future GIFT article or with a RAC committee member. 🎁*

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 4 Fall 2007

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 4.5 Using Hollywood Film Structure to Build Stories by Processing Content

*Kevin Wheeler, Film*

I have students write stories relating academic ideas to their own lives. Putting concepts into stories can help students process material in a different way. They get to “explore and discover” instead of “support and defend.” Perhaps in your discipline, you’d like students to have a section of their research paper, clinical report, or expository essay that tells a story too. Using Hollywood film structure, I want to share an effective way to teach thorough storytelling.

Back in screenwriting school, we learned to tell a story by thinking of plot and emotion at the same time. A plot is a hero, a goal, and a barrier to a goal. Emotionally engaging stories emerge from relationships.

To create a story, we start with any notion, character, or event and begin constructing the whole narrative with seven story points and a million dollar question.

#### Seven Story Points

- 1) **Normal Life** (need): As the students begin, I ask them what they, or their protagonist, are afraid of. What’s the void, flaw, or missing knowledge in their lives?
- 2) **Inciting Incident** (happens to protagonist): Students should find an event that both creates a problem and keeps the protagonist in the story until she or he solves that problem. A class assignment, for example, could be an inciting incident.
- 3) **Plan/Goal/Difficult Choice** (propels hero to take action): Find a single, clear goal to solve the problem. Many great stories tie this goal in with a difficult choice/moral dilemma. No matter what the protagonist chooses, they sacrifice something else. His or her choice defines who they are.
- 4) **Twist** (hero realizes flaw): Near the middle, the plot spins in a new direction. This twist sizzles when the unexpected turn comes from a character we thought we knew, or when an outcome is different from what was expected. Other times, the twist is more existential; heroines and heroes have started to get what they want, but now they know what they need. They realize their flaw, but it might be too late...
- 5) **Low Point** (catastrophic setback): The protagonist has overcome tough obstacles. The hardships have left scars and caused change, but overall he or she is winning. Until now. Just when the protagonist has the end in sight and plans to ride off into the sunset, BAM! They lose, and they lose big. Ask students, “What is the most devastating loss you can give your hero?”
- 6) **Final Challenge** (hero must be agent of her/his own salvation): The big event, the most exciting part of the narrative can be a showdown with inner demons. How?

What was the one thing the protagonist was unwilling to do at the beginning of the story to get what she or he wanted? Force them to that choice now.

- 7) **Return To Normal Life** (now forever changed): If the story is a tragedy, let readers feel the hero earned something for his effort. Or, if the heroine faced her greatest fear and conquered it, that's good too.

**Million Dollar Question:** What is the emotional relationship between two characters that either needs to be repaired or established?

What lesson is learned? It is the connective tissue that keeps the story from being episodic.

When students follow these guidelines, they learn how to tell a story using plot and emotion. They also know something about how their creative endeavors will be assessed. In terms of form, do the stories contain each story point? In terms of content, how has the experience affected, or event changed, the protagonist through the course of the narrative?

The stories are a pleasure to read; I get to know my students better and gain a clear sense of how academic ideas are being applied. And I owe it all to Hollywood. 🎬