

A Collection of gifts



Issue 5 Fall 2008

Great Ideas For Teaching

5.1 Transitions

Denise Stephenson and Dana Smith

It was a foggy summer near the Oceanside coast. If you read the latest issue of Tidepools you'll find I have a long relationship with fog, so it wasn't my favorite summer ever. But that meant that coming back to work was an easier transition and more of a joy. Looking forward to teaching my first class at MiraCosta is no small part of that excitement. And so I return, we return, to the classroom.

If you'd like students to read more closely or prepare more before class, plan to use **Arlie Zolynas'** GIFT. She explains a technique she uses to ensure that students read for her classes. She details how she tweaks the types of reading responses in varied courses in order to find out who is struggling, to advance classroom discussions, and to create small group activities.

You'll want this next GIFT for day one. **Julie Haugsness-White** offers a way for students to learn each others names quickly, building community. For a small investment of time, there are huge payoffs.

But perhaps the most timely piece, as we struggle to come to terms with student learning outcomes, is the GIFT offered by **Louisa Moon**. She explains how she uses a pre- and post-semester activity which asks students to put learning outcomes into their own language and then to report on how well they accomplished their goals.

Making concepts accessible to students is a frequent classroom challenge. Putting concepts into student-accessible language, or perhaps student metaphors is the focus of **Jeanine Donley's** GIFT. She explains how she helps students recognize the scientific process in every

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Submissions

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

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



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www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter

day activities and current events. You don't have to be a scientist to appreciate this teaching technique.

Now a few words about the transitions here at A Collection of GIFTs. We've done away with submission deadlines, and will now adopt the following policy: we will produce hard-copy versions of the Collection during flex weeks and have rolling publications on-line. So stay tuned to your email for notices of new GIFTs arriving as the year progresses.

And with that, let me extend an invitation: Observe your own teaching this semester. When you leave the room energized, when students' hands are energetically thrusting into the air, when you grade an assignment and are excited by the knowledge demonstrated, reflect on what you contributed to make those moments happen. If there's an identifiable activity or technique that works for you, please write it up and share it with your MiraCosta faculty colleagues to be published in A Collection of GIFTs.

-- Denise Stephenson

Where one leaves off...

While Denise's early summer days on the Oceanside Strand were foggy, my late July days at Buccaneer Beach were full of sunshine. Yet when we compared the content of our respective summers, we both had stories that mirrored similar themes. And isn't that the beauty of collaboration? Where one leaves off, the other picks up in complementary fashion, arriving at a richer resolution and deeper understanding.

Of course, this is the gift we give each other frequently as MiraCosta faculty. Collaboration is at the core of many of our best teaching practices as well as our institutional decision making. In that spirit, it is my wish to announce my departure as co-editor of this publication, and to urge another to take my place. I have considered this role a great privilege and delight. Seeking authors, collecting articles, and comparing editorial notes to produce a collection of valuable pedagogical strategies is like being admitted to the editing room, screening party, *and* the premiere. If such an invitation list appeals to you, please contact Denise with your best intentions and my best wishes.

-- Dana Smith ☺

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5.2 Using Reading Responses

Arlie Zolynas, Letters

Though I had reservations that Reading Responses (RR) would be perceived as high schoolish or busy work, nevertheless some five years ago I began to include graded RR's as part of all my classes. My initial objective, quite frankly, was to make students accountable for the reading in the class and to minimize my own frustration at the lack of their preparedness, which made class participation in activities and discussions all but impossible. To these ends, I added to my syllabus one or two questions based on a close reading of a text, worth five or ten points (depending on the explanation needed), the answers to be more factual or informational than interpretive. As I began to work with RR's, I realized I could also ask for personal responses (relating some aspect of the content to real life), annotations, summaries, grids, or outlines; RR's could be used as more than carrots for students or stress relievers for me.

I noticed an improvement in student preparedness almost immediately. Since most students brought their RR's to class, I began to use them as the foundation for learning through group activities. Members share or compare RR's, and depending on the questions, groups may report or put information on the board. For example, in a literature class, I might ask students in an RR to list three traits for each character in a story. In class, I'll assign one character to a group. Members share, compare, and discuss the traits, and then report to the class to facilitate discussion. In a writing class, I might ask students

to type out a sketch outline of an essay or to type out two examples of support for the topic sentence in a particular paragraph. On the day the RR is due, I might add a few additional questions on the board for discussion, choose one group to report, and then move on to other aspects of the essay.

I also use the RR's to facilitate whole-class discussions. The answers become the examples or evidence in understanding a concept or larger issue. For example, in a humanities class, an RR question about the difference in meaning of "stewardesses" and "cabin crew" in an article about the airline industry can be used as a way into a discussion of sexism. Or in a writing class analyzing an ad, students can apply the answer to an RR question on an article detailing advertising appeals to an ad we're talking about in class.

While students are engaged in groups or partners are briefly discussing answers, I have time to walk around the class to grade the RR's. Besides completing the grading in class, I can also immediately tell if students are puzzled or confused about a reading and address the problem right then. I also encourage students to keep their RR's because they can be used in later assignments as substantial support as the students synthesize information among the many readings.

Reading Responses continue to be an integral part of all my classes. Yes, the above-mentioned activities could all be handled without using them, but, for me, these RR's help center all of us for the day. In addition, since I put all the questions in my syllabi (with cumulative points worth one third the grade in a non-compositional class and one essay in a composition class), I'm forced (in a good way) to consider what I'd like my students to "get" throughout the semester in detail. Students can become better readers with questions that help them focus, better writers

as they practice explaining things, and better students as they come to class prepared. Having students arrive with the basics, I can use our class time more productively by actually applying the

information and deepening larger discussions. And no student has ever complained about the work! 🎁

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5.3 Putting Names to Faces: The Photo Roster

Julie Haugsness-White, Biological Sciences

When I was in college, we called it the “Gribley.” It was a photo roster of all students attending my college, organized by year class. As a student, it was invaluable. It made the difference between a blind date and a hot date! At the time, I had no clue that instructors desired it for their own instructional purposes.

Each semester brings somewhere between sixty and one-hundred sixty new students into each of our classrooms. It is clear that establishing a personal relationship with each student promotes a comfortable learning environment. To that end, I have special first day activities to break the ice, promote collaboration, and even to uncover interesting tidbits about each of my student’s lives outside of the classroom.

So far so good, until I have to attach names to individual faces. Here’s where it all breaks down for me. As a visual learner, I need to see the face while I rehearse the name, grade the homework or exam, and/or write the letter of recommendation. And I need to reinforce my name recognition with practice between class sessions.

My breakthrough strategy came from a colleague at San Diego City College, Dr. Michael J. LeBoffe, in the form of a photographic roster. He’s been using them for years. Here’s the drill.

During my first class session, I have students print their name in large letters on cardstock. Then they line up for a quick mug shot taken with a digital camera by Chris Harrell (our tech-savvy instructional assistant). I should note that students are not always keen to have their picture taken on the spur of the moment. Chris and I keep it light-hearted and I promise to share my photo roster with them when it’s finished. Shooting the photos is about a ten-minute task, after which the name cards are folded and become classroom placards until my photo rosters are finished.

The more time-consuming task involves massaging the digital photos into correctly-sized, .jpg images and lining these images up alphabetically (we use Photoshop) until there are sixteen photos per page. The finished photo rosters can then be printed in living color or low-tech black-and-white and also mounted onto the course website for students to reference.

My initial reason for making photo rosters was to speed up the process of learning students’ names. In the last two years however, I have also come to rely on them as a memory prompt when former students request letters of recommendation, sometimes years after taking my class. This semester is the first time I’ve thought to post them on the course website for student access. Whether they use them to form study groups, or to forge new friendships, the photo roster helps build community. I for one will continue to create photo rosters for my classes, until the day that MiraCosta creates its own version of the aforementioned “Gribley” using the photos routinely taken for student I.D. cards. 📷



Student’s companion dog who attended anatomy class, though not Julie’s.

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5.4 The Self-Initiated Objectives Assignments

Louisa Moon, Social Sciences

Each semester in my Introduction to Philosophy class, I have my students complete two assignments on “self-initiated objectives.” This idea was adapted from an article I read in the American Philosophical Association’s Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy. It consists of an introductory assignment in which students tell me what their own objectives in taking the course are, and a concluding assignment in which students recount their initial self-initiated objectives and

report their progress on achieving them.

Students are more likely to be successful in a class if they can articulate reasons why they want to be in the class that go beyond the extrinsic motivation of obtaining credit towards a degree in the far-distant future. The first assignment aims at getting students to focus on my objectives for them (those I had when designing the course) and to consider what their objectives in taking the course are, not the extrinsic motivation of getting a grade or G.E. credit, but the intrinsic motivations that drove them to choose this particular course out of all of the humanities G.E. options available to them—their self-initiated learning objectives.

Included here is a copy of the first assignment, which I make due prior to first census, so students know before fully committing to the class what

Philisophy 101 - Knowledge and Reality*

Course Objectives:

I cannot tell you what goals you have for this course, nor can I make you achieve those goals. Below are some suggested goals I had in mind for students when designing this course.

Suggested Objectives	Self-Initiated Objectives
1. Read and understand a variety of approaches & answers to important philosophical questions.	
2. Employ the techniques of philosophy in your own thinking and writing.	
3. Reconstruct and analyze philosophical arguments.	
4. Improve your critical and creative thinking skills.	

By 10:00 pm on 1/30, send me the objectives you created for the right side of this table. These are the skills and knowledge you hope to gain from taking this course. The only answers that are not acceptable would be a grade, or GE/transfer credit. For many of you, the grade or GE credit may well have been the initial motivation for taking the course, but here we are looking for your learning objectives.

Choose your objectives thoughtfully, as at the end of the course (by 10:00 pm on 5/22) you will write an objectives final essay about the extent to which you have achieved these objectives, and what you did to make that happen.

When the end of the course comes, you can click on “view” to retrieve your objectives and write your paper. There will be another assignment posted here to tell you how to write the paper.

* Whether on-site or on-line, students are provided room to write their own objectives in the table shown.

they hope to get out of the experience in terms of abilities and knowledge.

A few sample student-initiated objectives:

- “I want to learn to NOT agree with someone just because I want to avoid a debate (or argument). I hate arguing, and feel this will be a good place to talk back and forth about a subject(s) and get positive and negative feedback, but without an argument.”
- “Learn to analyze this type of critical thinking so as to make my debates with my wife more interesting and have a possibility of keeping up with her.”
- “My objective for this class is to improve my philosophical (and other) arguments. Sometimes my discussions or arguments end in bad blood and all that has been gained is lost in emotion. I would like to learn a better way to debate very tough questions about life.”
- “I believe that one of the main objectives that I hope to achieve in this class is to learn the ability of how to use philosophy as an ‘agent of change.’ I am a pretty open minded person, so when I read that ‘agent of change can help us traverse socially determined boundaries that encircle us’ I was ‘caught,’ as Hallman would state in his introduction to philosophy.”

I respond to each student’s objectives with some general comments that apply to almost all sets of objectives, and some that are specific to the individual student. This lets the student know I’m seeing them as individuals, and the assignment does help me to see their individuality from early on in the semester. They aren’t generic students for whom a generic set of my objectives defines them, but a group of individual learners, each with his or her own set of learning objectives. I end by

reminding them to keep these objectives in mind throughout the semester.

When we hit particularly dense material that challenges students, or when students have radical disagreements with one another and have trouble interacting or lack understanding of the perspective of the other, I sometimes remind them of how many of them took this class with the express purpose of learning to be more open-minded, to critically examine their own viewpoints, to come to understand new ways of apprehending the world.

At the end of the class, after the final and all other work has been completed, I have the students write a one- to two-page paper on the extent to which they achieved their self-initiated objectives, and what they did to make it happen. I am always impressed, and frequently moved, by their “Objectives Final Essays.”

A couple of excerpts from the essay in past courses:

- “Gain problem-solving experience in one of the main areas of philosophy. The one part of the class that really made me develop and use my problem solving skills was trying to understand and distinguish between the philosophers’ different ideas about knowledge. For example, the relation of logical truths, relations of ideas and tautologies was clear to me, but the idea of knowledge through induction or “matters of fact” was difficult to comprehend. I believe that I gained a great deal of problem solving experience by reading and rereading Hume, Descartes and Ayer and comparing and contrasting their theories.”
- “My third goal of the course was to traverse my own socially determined boundaries. I think I accomplished this goal, particularly when it comes to my beliefs and why I hold them. As I have

mentioned many times, I am Catholic and the Catholic faith tries to control what people believe about the world and reality using what Dewey would call the Method of Authority. During this course, I really started questioning the Church and became aware of their authoritative methodology. So often, society, groups and institutions make people feel that they 'ought' to believe something or act in some way. These things are social boundaries and now that I can question what I 'ought' to believe, I know that I can go beyond what society wants me to believe, feel, or the way they want me to act. Philosophy opened my eyes to my beliefs and made me question why I hold them, thus traversing socially determined boundaries."

- "Objective two was a pipe dream. I will never keep up with my wife. I tend to think too concretely and these abstract concepts are not easily applied by me. However, I did gain knowledge, which helps me have more to bring to our discussions. In particular, the feminist writings by Frye gave me much more information with which to enter into discourse with her. It gave me a new way to look at things and made me think deeply about societal constraints that I had not realized were operating."
- "My goal was to seek general improvement in myself by increasing my knowledge and reviving my passion for learning. I think that being able to question more about beliefs that I held and why I held them, which learning about philosophy made me do, helped me to improve myself and get to know myself better. I also think reading classics

like Plato, Socrates, Locke, Hume, and Descartes revived my passion for learning and got me critically thinking again. Prior to this class, I felt like I was in a bit of an academic slump. I was 'over' school and tired of learning. Philosophy, though, is so applicable to real life, and provoked so many thoughts in me, that my passion for learning was revived. My passion for questioning and wondering was also revived, and I think that is an important aspect of learning."

- "What does it mean to live an authentic or meaningful life? Well, if this class could have answered this question, I would be able to write a book and we would be on Oprah! Although I do not believe I am able to answer this question, even with all the knowledge I have gained from this class, I definitely have the tools to ask the right questions. I have been thinking about why I have made certain choices, how people perceive me, how my perceptions of people impact my behavior and if the 'baggage' from my childhood and adolescence is still impacting my behavior today. I think that to live a meaningful life is not necessarily being able to say you did this or that but that you thought about your past actions and experiences and use this thinking to be a better person in the future."

The essay helps them see how they are ultimately responsible for their own learning, and only they can truly assess how successfully they have taken on that responsibility. These are the tools they need for lifelong learning, and I'm always excited to see them recount how they have learned to wield those tools skillfully. 🎁

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5.5 Incorporating the Scientific Method into Everyday Life

Jeanine Donley, Biological Sciences

The goal of the exercise is to communicate a sense of relevance of science (or biology) to our everyday lives. In doing so, I hope to encourage my students to think about how science affects them on a daily basis and in the process develop a deeper appreciation for the subject matter.

One analogy I commonly use to introduce the scientific method is the decision-making one goes through in the morning prior to stepping into the shower. I walk my students through a scenario which presents the key steps in the method.

Scenario: You turn the shower on in the morning and ask yourself a **Question**. “Is it warm enough to step in and be comfortable?” (And yes...the answer is subjective...but it’s just an analogy.) Then a person makes one or more **Observations**, such as steam billowing from the shower which leads to developing a reasonable guess or **Hypothesis** which addresses the question. In this example the steam hypothetically means the shower is warm enough which one tests using an **Experiment**—perhaps a hand is placed in the water to determine the approximate

temperature. The **Results** of the experiment determine the course of action. If the water is warm, a conclusion is made which supports the hypothesis...and it’s shower time.

This is a crude example but I think it gets the point across that the scientific method is simply a logical series of steps designed to ask and then objectively answer a question. In class, we conjecture about the observation not yielding a correct hypothesis (the steam was from water too hot to shower in) which would lead a bather to experiment by changing a setting before adequate results are reached.

Following this simple analogy, I introduce the method using a more sophisticated example, such as the science behind the development of drugs or antibiotics...or other mainstream issues that may be of interest to the students. The overall goal in mind here is to encourage students to understand and think critically about how science is done, how decisions and discoveries are made, and to be able to employ the method to formulate their own hypotheses in their journey through my class.

In performing this exercise I have found that students become more interested and engaged in the subject matter. They seem to find it easier to learn the material when concepts are presented in the context of their own lives and mainstream ideas they hear in the media. 📺