

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 12 Fall 2012

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 12.1 In This Issue...

#### *Denise Stephenson*

My sabbatical provided the pinnacle opportunity of my career to date, and that's saying a great deal considering I came to MiraCosta to create a Writing Center from scratch eight years ago. At the time, I thought it couldn't get any better.

But having half a year to focus on a single writing project was invigorating, challenging, and ultimately exceedingly productive. I started with a 100-page assignment and ended with a 450-page novel. I came away with much more than the physical product; I came away having experienced deeply what it means to write beyond what we see ourselves as capable of—an experience many of our students have with every assignment we give them. The metacognitive learning that took place will provide riches for faculty I work with, for the Writing Center, and ultimately for students at MiraCosta. I'm excited to start sharing.

Two of the GIFTs in this issue focus on students assessing their own learning, though one is intended for frequent feedback and one for end of semester. Librarian **Steven Deineh** provides a quick classroom assessment technique that he uses throughout the semester to encourage students to contribute, and to ensure that they understand the material covered before he moves on. **Eric Carstensen** explains how he uses an end-of-semester qualitative assessment to reshape his courses between semesters, as well as prepare new students for what they are about to encounter.

The word "create" makes many people nervous. They believe they aren't creative, as if it's an innate gift. **Tony Burman** points out that while "create" is the highest order of thinking on Bloom's taxonomy, it can provide an opportunity to demonstrate learning by taking course content into uncharted territory that individual students

### 12.1 In This Issue... *Denise Stephenson*

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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](mailto:dstephenson@miracosta.edu)



Teaching  
Academy

#### Editors

Denise Stephenson

Layout & Design  
Brandi Blahnik



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

are more familiar with. His GIFT describes an assignment that embeds creativity in an end-of-semester activity that challenges while it rewards. Tony mentions he has used this assignment earlier in a semester as a homework assignment as well.

Sabbaticals are rare and wonderful gifts which provide focused time to go beyond our routine. GIFTs provided by faculty in this publication

are shared with a generosity not to be ignored. It's difficult to find the time to write up our best practices to share with colleagues. Thanks to Steven, Eric and Tony. In the coming weeks, when you celebrate a class activity or assignment that hits the mark, take a few moments to capture it in writing, so that you can continue the generosity. 🎁

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### 12.2 Daily Check-In

*Steven Deineh, Librarian*

This mini assessment tool (using generic, off-brand sticky notes) is brief and anonymous. My objective is to regularly get feedback from every single student!

My classroom is set up so that groups of 3-5 students sit around computer stations. Each day before class, I take a stack of sticky notes and leave them at each table.

Throughout the class period, students are expected to take a sticky note and leave me feedback in one of the following areas:

- a concept that was confusing
- a concept that they really understood
- something that worked well for them
- something that did not work well for them
- any question/comment/concern they have

At the end of lecture, if they have not come up with something to write on their sticky note, I give them a couple minutes before class ends to reflect on the day's lecture or activities, and to allow them to come up with something.

As they leave, the students post the anonymous sticky notes on the window beside the door. I then collect the notes, read them individually, and respond to them (in general) in a post-lecture email or during the next class period (if they require more in-depth discussion).

This gives every student a chance to voice any concerns they might have had in a safe and anonymous way. This format is especially good for shy students. By emailing the students a weekly wrap-up, I reinforce what we discussed in class each week and also have an opportunity to respond to individuals' concerns. This is also helpful for students who may have had similar questions or confusion, but did not post them! 📧

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### 12.3 End-of-Semester Qualitative Assessment

*Eric Carstensen, Business*

On standard student surveys, most students complete the scalar/numerical part, and don't provide much feedback. Therefore, the objective for this particular evaluation sheet is to receive qualitative feedback exclusively. I also find that as a result of handing this out during the final week of class, I get more comprehensive feedback (as opposed to a feedback from a student who has only been in the class for 6 or 8 weeks). A secondary objective is that we usually only have two classes surveyed per semester, and none during summer session—this allows me to get feedback from all sections, each term.

Dana Smith told me that asking students to provide a “piece of advice” leads students to provide honest tips for future classmates to follow. (And, just between you and me, the number one piece of advice is to read—imagine that!) I post an evaluation sheet for each class on BlackBoard each semester for new students to preview. This will be coupled with my own “Suggestions for Studying Accounting” document that I post alongside the syllabus.

I hand this out on the last or second-to-last

day of class, in a rather unannounced fashion. I provide about 10-12 minutes of class time for students to respond. I used to let them take these home, but only about 10% were returned; therefore, this method provides for greater representation. I have everyone turn them in at the same time, so I can't see who's written what. I tell the students that I use these every single term, and provide at least one example of where I implemented student suggestions in class (i.e., going to weekly quizzes as opposed to every-other-week).

These evaluations have yielded many insights for me. On one hand, it reinforces those things that I am doing well, and on the other, students tell me honestly what could make the class better. In addition to the quiz example, one semester students wanted more time with stocks and bonds next term, so I adjusted how I covered that the next semester. In that instance, I stressed concepts more than the pure record keeping aspect which I thought would respond to their request.

As for the students, I think it is a good moment of reflection for them. Quite often, they will indicate that the class is tough, and the workload brutal at times, but, they can't imagine how we could get through the text any other way. That's pretty huge, to me. 🙏

*See reverse for sample assignment.*

Course \_\_\_\_\_ Section # \_\_\_\_\_ Semester \_\_\_\_\_

**1. Please give a piece of advice to students that will be taking this course next semester.**

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**2. What did you like best about this course?**

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**3. What did you like the least about this course?**

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**4. Are there any topics you think should be emphasized in greater detail?**

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**5. Are there any topics you think could be avoided in favor of others?**

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**6. Please list any other comments on the back of this document and/or continue any of the above. I sincerely appreciate your feedback – it helps me to make a better learning experience for all students in the future.**

*Sample End-of-Semester Qualitative Assessment*

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### 12.4 The Assignment That Never Was: A Student-Created Assignment

*Tony Burman, Transfer Letters*

For the final project in my ENGL 201 course I invite the students to present on an idea, skill, or concept that we've addressed during the course. My guidelines are intentionally general: the students must **choose** a concept, skill, or idea from the course, **outline** an argument which examines or uses that concept, skill, or idea in a new or interesting way, and **present** that argument to the class in a new or interesting way.

Last semester, a finance major in my English class chose to perform a close textual analysis, a skill we worked on throughout the semester whether with short stories, novels, or poetry. He then outlined an argument: "the skill of close textual analysis is a skill that has far broader applications than just better understanding fiction and poetry. This skill can actually help you improve your financial literacy and can ultimately help you 'critically engage' with any sort of written materials." Finally, he presented in a very unique way: he handed out tons of financial mailers college students might receive—everything from credit card applications to loan offers; he then gave a lesson. He closely analyzed the mail, pointing out everything from the specific language choices loan companies use to entice customers, to how credit card come-ons obfuscate how interest rates work and instead highlight the concepts of "free" money and immediate gratification.

Other students have created radically different projects: a student took classmates through an analysis of a beer commercial using a variety of literary lenses (a feminist analysis of the commercial, a Marxist analysis of the commercial, a cultural analysis of the commercial); two students partnered up and presented a skit—and metacommentary—arguing we cannot escape the use of metaphors in communicating; a veteran took a theme from Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" and applied it to his own experiences; one student drew fascinating parallels between how we examine argument in English and how he had examined it in philosophy; recently, a student presented on the rhetoric of identity and our Facebook pages.

The author of a recent New York Times article framed it quite well: "teachers [are] really caught between these very prescriptive curriculums and their desire to give kids opportunities to explore." I think we can reconcile these two by asking students to take course content and use it or apply it in unique ways.

To do this, develop a purposely open prompt that **invites students to do something new and interesting** with the material they have worked with during the semester. Provide an example "creative project" and assist students in generating a list of potential creative projects. Students then create an assignment and complete it. The instructor facilitates, but doesn't lead. What students learn in class is premised on a direction they help create, not one created in advance by the instructor without input from students. (Note: 'Create' is currently the highest order of thinking within the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy of learning. The Create category emphasizes creating new meaning and structure and includes specific cognitive skills like designing, organizing, composing, generating, compiling,

and explaining.)

This assignment should complement course objectives and outcomes, not negate them. For example, in compiling a sample project list on the board, the instructor can add language from the course objectives or Student Learning Outcomes. For example, a student suggestion “What if I looked at a commercial using some of those different lenses we discussed earlier in the semester?” becomes “Analyze cultural text from a variety of critical perspectives.” In other words, the instructor’s job is to connect students’ new, different, and interesting ideas to the course

objectives and outcomes while leaving the actual direction of the project as open as possible.

Here I have highlighted the final project version of this assignment, though I have used this concept less formally as well. For example, I have also used the idea as a simple homework assignment. I ask students to take the information we’ve covered on a particular day and to apply it in a new or interesting way. The creative homework responses then become the review part of the next class. Try it. Let your students explore and learn! 🎁