



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ENGLISH LITERATURE: A ROYAL EXPERIENCE

A few years ago, I was asked to update two courses in the English departmental syllabi; in particular, to make sure that course objectives matched the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) expectations. This led me to rethink ways of incorporating THECB objectives into my classes.

Semester after semester, my English literature students had entered my classroom sheepishly, fearful of the subject matter and fully expecting to sleep their way through the semester. As a result, my objective became to introduce them to the fun and the relevance of British literature. Rather than finding a stifling classroom environment led by a stodgy instructor, they now find an informal environment guided by an enthusiastic instructor. As that instructor, I introduce the students to the links between modern and medieval works and pull students into the process.

One week a semester, I let students take over the class. Knowing that most of my students would be too intimidated to take the reins alone, I have them create small groups. This approach satisfies my personal goal of bringing more fun into the classroom and satisfies many, if not all, of the course objectives. Once I began utilizing this approach, I discovered a nice by-product: students develop a greater appreciation for my class preparation efforts. Best of all, once students master their nervousness, we have fun.

Group Assignments

Students need to be equipped with skills for lifelong learning. They need to know how to work with others, find enjoyment in the mundane, and discover relevance in the seemingly irrelevant. They must know how to present knowledge in an engaging, clear, and timely manner. Dividing and delegating responsibilities, based on interests and skills, help make the task manageable. After all, safety, comfort, and resourcefulness can be found in numbers.

Students choose their own groups. I guide the process to get everyone into a group and foster success, but the

groups function better when the students have a say in membership. Once the groups are formed, I present topic options. To ensure availability of materials and prevent repetition, I create enough topics for each group to have its own. In addition, separate topics, and thus separate presentations, reduce the comparison/contrast between groups. The students may be competitive, but they are not worried about following in someone else's footsteps.

I offer three or four ideas about approaches for research within each topic. Each group has the freedom to widen or narrow the scope. I encourage the groups to build onto and adapt my suggestions. Students need experience with applying critical and reflective thinking and articulating an informed personal reaction to various works. It is in this application process that the fun begins and students realize the mundane is not so mundane, after all.

There are a few unalterable requirements for students' projects. Each member of the group must be involved in the research, preparation, and oral presentation. Each presentation must include a PowerPoint and one other teaching method—music, performance, video, handout, discussion, etc. Some of the groups have so much fun with this assignment that I have been forced to place time limits on the presentations. I allow 20-30 minutes per group, including set-up.

I know that many students have participated in group projects with nonparticipating members. I promise to assign individual grades, not blanket grades. Each group member is required to submit a copy of his/her research materials, and the group submits a list of delegated and completed responsibilities. I am not a speech teacher and do not expect a polished performance. However, when I find genuine effort, my students find an enthusiastic, energetic, encouraging audience.

Royal Treatment

I always look forward to presentation days. My students amaze me with their creativity and resourcefulness. The class responds well to music, art, drama, and YouTube creations. Regardless of the



approach, students' diverse talents and interests always add a new twist to an old tale.

One group's presentation focused on Virginia Woolf and her implementation of "stream of consciousness." The students utilized her essay, "Mark on the Wall." In this piece, Woolf writes about an unidentified mark on her parlor wall. She is not inclined to get out of her chair to identify the spot; she prefers to let her thoughts wander and return to the mark from time to time. Eventually, we discover that the mark is actually a small snail. In the group presentation, on various PowerPoint slides, a snail would appear and disappear randomly. As the group shared its research, no mention was ever made of the phantom snail!

Another group chose to research Geoffrey Chaucer. Their research focused on the tales Chaucer utilized in writing *The Canterbury Tales*. The group presentation and PowerPoint were constructed carefully and solemnly. However, the presentation ended with a performance. One member of the group had written a song about why Chaucer should *not* be revered. The student played his guitar and sang the song as the closing for the presentation. His performance created a comical contrast to the seriousness of the rest of the project. I believe Chaucer would have been proud of the irreverence. Yesterday, I was thrilled to overhear an ex-student telling classmates about this song. She was regaling them with some of the words and with our class's reaction. The memory lives on.

A third group researched Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The presentation was straightforward, but students found a way to lighten the mood. They ordered cookies from a local bakery. The cookies were decorated with raised yellow crowns on white icing. As the students offered the pastries to the early-morning, breakfast-deprived class, they also distributed crowns. A local fast-food restaurant provided cardboard crowns which a group member covered with gold glitter. One crown was covered in foil and decorated with gold glitter. A golden "A" was placed on the front and presented to me. As good sports, we all wore our crowns and ate our cookies while the group presented its project. Needless to say, this group created a royal start to the day's presentations! It did not hurt that the chair of my division slipped in and took our picture and that we ended up on the college website. That picture now adorns my office door, as proof that literature classes are not always stuffy.

British literature can be fun. It can be inclusive and hands-on. Sometimes, it can offer the royal treatment!

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