

Title III Grant Proposal Outcomes: Fostering Collaborative Learning in ENGL-108, an Online Creative Writing Course

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Teaching online has been one of the biggest challenges of my teaching career. One of the most difficult endeavors is creating a sense of community and a collaborative environment online. The Title III Grant has allowed me to rethink my approach to online teaching and to try new strategies to increase participation and encourage student interaction.

My project was to revise my teaching of ENGL-108 in three ways: 1) rethink and revise the discussion board topics to encourage more discussion among the students; and 2) establish a system for students to offer each other feedback about their creative writing; and 3) develop a project that requires students to work collaboratively on a writing and/or research assignment. I will comment in depth on the first two revisions because they seemed to be the most successful. The project, which required students to work together to research a publication where they might submit their work, was difficult to execute and definitely needs some further tinkering.

The first thing I did to revise ENGL-108 was to rethink how I used the discussion boards. I noticed during Fall 2006 that students seemed particularly engaged during impromptu conversations about their lives, hobbies, favorite books, etc. They liked sharing photographs of themselves, their families, and their pets. However, when it came to academic discussions about the readings I had assigned or the concepts I was covering in my lecture, the conversation often fell flat. Most students simply didn't participate, or their participation was lackluster. I couldn't turn to the handy motivation tool of grades because many of the students were taking the course for personal enrichment and were not concerned about their grades. I needed instead to motivate them to want to participate. What could I do to create a forum that people wanted to go to, but where real learning was taking place?

I decided to build on a strategy I'd briefly tried during Fall 2006. For the first discussion board topic, I asked students to write a brief history of their lives, but to do it in third person (using "he" or "she" instead of "I"). I started the discussion by posting my own history, and I tried to model the sort of posting I wanted them to make: I tried to be very open, give specific details, and use humor. The posting started rolling in, and I was astonished. They were so vivid and entertaining, and the students were already employing creative writing skills. I responded to each posting, trying to point out the details that really stood out to me. I also opened up another thread for students to comment on the experience of writing in the third person. Many said that the third person allowed them to share details that they might have felt uncomfortable writing about using first person.

In this discussion board topic, I tried to use the students' desire to share information about themselves as an educational tool. They wanted to tell their stories, and the discussion board allowed them the freedom to do that. However, when they wrote in the third person, they essentially became a fictional character, and they could begin to see how point of view alters both the reader and writer's experience of a story. They could start to see how their own lives could be mined for stories, and how the real-life details of their experience could have a powerful effect on a reader.

Another strategy I used for the discussion boards was to require students to post a weekly writing exercise based on a prompt I had given them. I had done this in Fall 2006 with some success, but I wanted to increase interaction. I didn't just want the students merely to log on and post their writing without reading other students' writing, as I knew several students were doing. Thus, for one of the first weekly exercises, I asked students to post a short newspaper article (as a potential story idea) to the discussion boards. The articles that came in were hilarious. Here are some examples of the titles: "Severed Legs' Owner Identified," "Fake Firefighter Showed up at Disasters," "Alibi Service for Adulterers," and "'Kryptonite' Discovered in Mine." After the students had posted their articles, I asked them to write a 1-2 page story (fictionalized and embellished in any way) about the article of their choice. They posted these stories to the discussion boards for their fellow classmates to read. I was impressed not only by the stories themselves, but also by the responses that students made to each other's work. Because the students had selected the articles on their own, they were invested in seeing the end results. I think this increased discussion board participation and engagement measurably.

Building on that success, another week I asked students to eavesdrop on a conversation in a public place and transcribe that conversation. As an exercise in writing dialogue, they were asked to post both the literal transcription and their edited version. Students struggled with this exercise—some people said that all of the conversations they overheard were dull—but once the responses started coming in, it was fascinating to see how much tension (and humor) was present even in everyday conversation. I wanted them to see how dialogue could generate conflict and interest even when the characters were talking about something "dull," and how dialogue was a key way of conveying a character's personality. One student who was very frustrated with the exercise ended up writing a hilarious send-up of the whole assignment, mocking the bits of mundane conversation that she'd heard on BART. Her response provided an excellent learning opportunity to show the students how writers often used their frustration about writing as a source of energy and inspiration for writing.

To further encourage interaction, I asked students to use an excerpt of someone else's eavesdropped dialogue in their next story. This was an intriguing experiment because it pushed students out of their comfort zones and required them to use their imaginations to envision how an excerpt of dialogue might be part of a longer narrative.

Finally, I asked students to participate in a revision exercise that required them to exchange stories and provide feedback to each other using guidelines that I had established. I set the students up in pairs and asked them to do this exercise at their own pace. Based on reading their feedback, it was clear that the students were working collaboratively and helping each other. Hurray!

Despite these successes, there were difficulties. Retention rate for the course was low, about 50%. Some students were so frustrated by the challenges of logging on—technical problems with Ohlone Online Education made it impossible for students to log on during the first week—that they dropped out without even getting started. Two students told me they were dropping because the enrollment and log-on procedure was so ill-designed. Other students participated so rarely that I withdrew them before the drop deadline. One student that I'd had in a live class before told me that she was enjoying the assignments, but that she was

dropping because she realized she needed the face time of a live class in order to motivate her.

The reality is that online education isn't for everyone; it requires strong commitment and discipline. Online students typically have busy lives, which is why they turn to online learning in the first place, and oftentimes they don't seem able to dedicate the time necessary for succeeding in a college course.

On the plus side, though, many of my students said in a survey that they liked the feeling of an online community, and they liked being able to log on anytime and be part of that community. Some said that the anonymity of the online environment helped them be more comfortable sharing their writing. A majority said that they found the other students in class helpful and supportive. And perhaps most important, all but two students said that they would not have been able to have taken ENGL-108 had it not been offered online.

Teaching is a constant process of learning and revision, and I hope to continue this endeavor to improve my online teaching and to create a communal learning environment in ENGL-108.