



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## THINGS I WISH I HAD LEARNED THE FIRST YEAR

### **This Will Not Be Your Last Syllabus.**

I must admit that the first time I wrote a syllabus, it did not occur to me that I would be creating hundreds more, similar and different, as well as thousands of other documents. You might not believe how many files on my computer hard drive have some version of the name "Biology Research Project" (Fall, Winter, Summer, Spring; Regular, Honors, Interdisciplinary, Hybrid; 1996, 7, 8, 9; *ad nauseum*), or how many times I have made one small change to an assignment, only to scour 20 other documents that might have the same reference. (On the other hand, you might well believe me!) Well, call me slow, but only after 15 years has it occurred to me to set up a template, for all my course documents, based on one criterion: How can I alter this document in the future with the smallest possible domino effect? (I am still working on this one. Pointers welcome.)

### **Hunting for a Missing Folder Right Before Class Is the Real "Naked Teacher" Nightmare.**

Perhaps there is a career in which more paper comes across one's desk than in teaching, but I do not know about it—textbooks; CD's; years of grades; Powerpoints, other people's Powerpoints; all those articles that I use in class; and worst of all, all those articles that I might use someday but have not yet. What is more boring than a filing system? I have wasted so much time scrambling to find those very important, yet missing, papers! A system should include hanging files and manila envelopes, labels, and, most important of all, a rationale—not obvious in the piles that I move from one surface to another so that a student can sit down. This goal is still a work-in-progress as well. Right now I have two bookcases, roughly sorted by course and relevance; eight unmarked file drawers which I intend to identify as Administrative, Classroom, Reference, or Archives; and, since I teach health and human sexuality, various portable bins of contraceptive methods, food labels, etc. (Have any other ideas?)

### **You May Not Be Able to Form Successful Student Presentation Groups, but Your Students Can.**

Before I even attempted student groups, I talked with other instructors. It was off-putting. Their complaints ranged from students' not being able to make their groups' meeting times, to being unprepared, reading notes in a boring manner, and not showing up on the day their presentations were due! So I decided that the groups needed to be formed on the basis of shared availability, I needed to coach the groups in creativity and contingency planning, and students needed to receive points for their contributions inside and outside of class. Since implementing these strategies, I have utilized groups effectively and entertainingly for a variety of assignments in all my classes. Students particularly enjoy the chance to be creative with filmed skits, original songs and poetry, and brochure designs. (Luckily, it did not take me 15 years to learn this one! I wrote about it in "Creating Student Presentation Groups that Work," *Innovation Abstracts*, Vol. XXV, No. 6.)

### **To Know the Late Pass Is to Love the Late Pass.**

I learned about the Late Pass only a few years ago at a California Great Teachers Conference for distance learning. With it, each student receives the opportunity to turn in one assignment late—no questions asked, no points lost. Had I known about the pass in my first year of teaching, I would have avoided that depressing day after a student asked to turn in something late because her father had just passed away. When I needed to call her about something else, the person who answered the phone said, "She's not here, but this is her father." How many times have I set a standard and sworn I would stick to it, only to be swayed by a student's particularly poignant set of circumstances or felt guilty because I was not swayed by another student whose story was not as compelling? The Late Pass, I am happy to say, has removed all such angst from my teaching life. (Many thanks to whomever for the suggestion.)



## Write Pedagogically Sound Objective Test Questions!

I lucked into this one at an in-service seminar I was required to attend that first year. Most of my peers were good-naturedly griping about having to go, so who knew that a jewel was awaiting, nestled in the concurrent sessions? The esteemed instructor used Bloom's Taxonomy to illustrate how true/false, multiple-choice, and matching items could be constructed to assess a variety of levels of learning, potentially doing away with the dreaded essay question—not that I do not need to include writing assignments for my students (a mandate) and not that I do not want to read about what they have learned. On the contrary, I look forward to reading students' individualized self-assessments, as opposed to the same canned paragraphs again...and again...and again.

## Afraid of It? OK! So Try It Anyway.

Sometimes I wonder if I might be the only technophobe teaching an online class. Surely other online instructors do not experience sheer terror when a program does not open, a student emails that s/he cannot get into the online test, or—worst of all—an ERROR MESSAGE pops up on the screen. It took me eight years to prepare to teach an online class, and I was not sure it would ever happen. But now it is one of the most rewarding classes I teach. Sure, students giggle, during our few mandatory meetings, if the monitor freezes or I cannot even turn it on, as they can practically count the seconds till my “fight or flight” autonomic nervous system response kicks in. But we get through it. I can always ask students for help, call IT, or even resort to “old school”—blackboard and transparencies! Some other frightening experiences include conducting workshops for my colleagues, presenting at conferences, and attempting new activities with students that I am not sure are going to work properly. I am a shy person, not a natural entertainer. But all turned out to be wonderful learning experiences! And I am quite a bit less shy.

## Keep It Real.

That might sound like a corny platitude, but the Baby Boomer generation was right about some things. Why do we have labs if not to give students hands-on experience? Well, my courses in health and human sexuality do not have labs (just try to imagine a lab in human sexuality). But I began searching early on for ways to let my students view and manipulate real items. It is typical for students to handle contraceptive methods and read labels on food packages. But they also get to see my own infertility treatment needle collection, a friend's pregnancy ultrasound photos, another friend's open-

heart surgery photos, and a Down Syndrome karyotype supplied by my doctor. When we study historical events, there is the Song of Solomon from the Bible; original pioneering documents from Kinsey, Masters, and Johnson; the U.S. government Healthy People 2000 project; and even my own previous incarnation in an army jacket and peace-sign headband. Students appreciate getting a glimpse into our lives. Their favorite part of my online health course is called “Lynda's testimonials,” which describes life experiences I have had that illustrate our subjects—a bad car accident, my mother's suicide, a thieving caregiver. Perhaps the most powerful: In a filmed interview, my father-in-law, who was dying of emphysema, continued to smoke while on oxygen. Every semester, some students quit smoking after seeing that one.

## None of Us Wants to Bore Our Students or Ourselves!

Maybe it was the prospect of someday earning tenure, but something made me realize that giving the same lecture year in and year out would wear thin. Sure, enhancing the students' experiences creates interest for me, too. But sometimes I need “big kid” opportunities.

I have been fortunate that Mt. San Antonio College is very generous with instructors when funding permits. I have been able to train in the Langford method of teaching and assessment; participate in two California Great Teachers Conferences (one for distance learning); attend seminars in health and human sexuality; write small grants for various student projects; develop the online course; study student motivation; develop an interdisciplinary course with an anthropologist; become certified to teach distance learning; develop an Honors course; develop assignments for Teacher Preparation students; use our Wildlife Sanctuary; have a free personal trainer at our Exercise Science and Wellness Center; and, the *piece de resistance*, take a one-year sabbatical to study plants as medicine and the natural history of coyotes in California habitats.

I am so grateful for those opportunities. They have made me a better teacher and a better person.

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