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Teaching for Success

Empowering You to Inspire Your Students

Vol. 19 No. 1

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FINDING AN ANTIDOTE FOR THE COSMIC DREAD

Lynette G. Esposito
Adjunct Professor
Burlington County College, N.J.

Can you hear the groans that are almost audible on the first day of an English composition class? Could the outcries be from the widespread freshman malady, the cosmic dread of reading and analyzing literature?

Is There a Cure?

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DO I HAVE TO COME TO CLASS TO PASS?

Kay Roof-Steffen
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Eastern Iowa Community College District, Muscatine campus, Iowa

I imagine my surprise, during a recent articulation workshop, when I polled a class of high school seniors, all of whom were headed to college after graduation, when they asked me this question: "Do you actually

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What Master Teachers Do

The mediocre teacher tells.
The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates.
The great teacher inspires.
—William Arthur Ward

We choose to go the moon...and do the other things not because they are easy but because they are hard. Because the goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

—John F. Kennedy

(See page 6)

FOR THE LOVE OF TEACHING

Why teach for success? Because, I'm willing to bet that your life has been immeasurably enriched by the talented, success-oriented teachers you have encountered, and your students deserve that same level of excellence.

I created TFS because I believe the number of instructors who create memorable, life-enhancing, and meaningful learning experiences for their students can easily be multiplied exponentially with the right intellectual nourishment.

Adjunct or tenured professor, to me it makes no difference: When you are with your students, you have an unprecedented opportunity to represent education and your field of expertise in away that helps your students achieve more, retain more, and become more.

Teaching For Success is the only faculty resource that offers an organic mix of success, instructional, and learning principles that combine to make it a powerful, healthy, professional growth-stimulator for all faculty.



TFS Publisher,
Jack H. Shrawder

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE ANGORA WILDFIRE

Jack H. Shrawder
Publisher, *TFS*
South Lake Tahoe, California

June 24, 2007: Fire weather warnings were posted for the second day because the High Sierra air was hot and bone-dry; the tall Jeffrey pines bent noticeably under the relentless force of the gathering west winds.

And then a whiff of smoke—the smoldering remains of an illegal campfire, feeding on piles of dead limbs and bug-killed fallen and standing conifers—flashed to life.

Seven chaotic days later, those neglected embers reduced 3,000 acres of forest and 330 homes to ash. It was the perfect, long-feared Tahoe firestorm unleashed.

Feeling the heat, hearing the freight-train roar of the



photo by Sue Hartzell, "Tahoe Firefighter"

advancing flame front, and seeing spot fires ignite all around

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COSMIC DREAD

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Introducing creativity into the formal study of English composition expands students' perception and enhances their understanding and enjoyment of the subject.

English literature has specific rules for critiquing, analyzing, and discussing texts—a necessary focus of the field, but the more creative students may have difficulty producing the highly structured articles and essays traditionally required.

The Solution: Add Some Spice

Just like sparingly peppering a steak with a spice makes the taste more complex and inviting, a few creative teaching strategies can vastly enrich compositional learning.

For example, when studying fiction, discuss the form of a short story and examine common literary techniques for this genre.

Then, choose a story to analyze and add the ginger: offer your students a chance to

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Share Your Success Advice

Problem: Often students take a course only because it's required and often admit to not liking it in the least.

How do you compensate for this negative attitude?

Have your ideas published in an upcoming *TFS* issue; send them to: jack@teachingforsuccess.com.

ATTENDANCE

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have to go to classes in college when there's not a test?"

In fact, with the increase of online instruction, test-out capabilities, and other opportunities for "instant course completion," my colleagues and I are experiencing a rise in this attitude.

When we speak with employers, we emphasize attendance, just as they do. Some faculty members agree, such as one from Western Illinois University, who writes, "I have come to think of attendance in college classes as an obligation comparable to attendance on a job." (1)

At my college, we are directed not to base a portion of a course grade solely on attendance. Students often have legitimate reasons for being absent, and deans want to avoid deciding what is and is not a viable reason for not going to classes.

I, too, balk at being the excuse judge. Therefore, I have no policy for "this many excused or unexcused absences," because acting ability sometimes supersedes honesty or integrity.

There are many colleges that disagree with this, however. According to the Counseling Center at Villanova University, in an article entitled, "Adjusting

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WILD FIRE

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us, we evacuated with minutes to spare. My spouse Penny and I hurriedly packed our Explorer and left—not knowing what we might find when we returned....

Lessons Learned

Through this experience, I learned how everything can change in minutes: Treasured

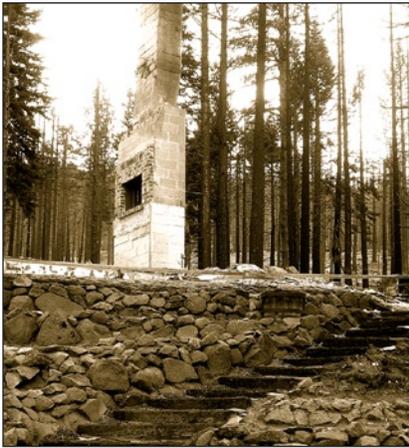


photo by Sue Hartzell, Her Tahoe home.

possessions can be melted, vaporized, and vast landscapes altered beyond recognition.

I learned that post-disaster cleanup entails cleaning up the physical debris, and cleaning out the mental wreckage of collapsed belief constructs, such as:

Our false sense of security (This could never happen here).

Our consumerist attachment to things of little ultimate value.

Our trust that those in charge of maintaining public lands know what they are doing.

A sense of guilt and “if only” thinking, characterized by feeling we should have done something to prevent this.

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COSMIC DREAD

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rewrite the ending of the story. This technique helps students understand and appreciate literature on a more complex, creative level.

Often students miss or do not appreciate literary subtleties and contextual implications, possibly because they live in an era replete with physical action as the main fare of their entertainment diet. Allowing them to rewrite the endings and impose their creative ideas introduces a more intimate understanding of how the author wrote his or her own ending. While reworking the story, students feel involved and enjoy exercising their creative energies.

Peer Review Benefits

When learners have an opportunity to read their endings out loud during class, they receive an excellent peer review. In addition, they have a chance to hear the many other scenarios that could serve as story endings.

Furthermore, when they rewrite endings, they become aware of how language changes from one era to another—how informal language has become today as compared to decades ago. Going further, ask your class to compare the tone, mood, and style of their writing to that of the author. This instructional accent can be very savory.

Although it’s too ambitious to assign students the project

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ATTENDANCE

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to College,” counselors advise incoming freshman: “Professors typically do not call if a class is missed, but will likely grade for attendance.” (2)

What’s the Answer?

There is not just one; course objectives are unique, so identifying your goals is your first step. Analyze each course in terms of the types of learning tasks involved and whether students will work in groups or individually.

A Film Class Example

My class “Survey of Film” is an example of this. Students are encouraged to attend discussions and are welcome to view films I have chosen in class. However, I often offer alternative choices of movies. Students are allowed to find them and watch them in more comfortable environments than I can offer in the classroom. Even so, the meat of their grades is based on their assignments as well as the final exam.

Putting a Fine Point on It

Do I grade on attendance in those classes where attendance is valuable, such as speech and Spanish classes? Well, yes and no—let’s say, “technically yes” and “actually no.” Technically, I follow our guidelines and do not grade on attendance, although I document it. I am required

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WILDFIRE

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Belief Is Everything

Finally, the Angora fire indelibly taught me that the adage “You believe what you see” can be turned on its head to say, “You see what you believe.”

I learned that the fire could destroy the present, but can’t destroy the future unless I allow it.

When we finally did return, there it was, intact—our home and Pentronics Publishing studio miraculously had escaped destruction.

Your Turn

So what do you believe about teaching and learning? What do you believe about your students? Because, knowingly or unknowingly, you will create the class you believe you can create.

If you doubt the power of belief to alter outcomes, rent the movie *Endurance*, the staggering-but-true story of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s disastrous expedition across Antarctica in 1914. It’s a stunning tale of how the single-minded belief and determination of one person saved an entire crew.

Belief and Teaching

What can be accomplished in teaching and learning? That depends on your: teaching goals, strength of desire to reach those goals, mindset flexibility, instructional skill, and beliefs. Belief drives success, and in the end, success is the only option.

COSMIC DREAD

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of writing a play, they certainly should be able to compose poetry. When choosing poetic projects, keep in mind that the assignment should be challenging.

The Sestina Challenge

One of the more difficult forms of poetry is the sestina. A sestina is challenging because it has a multitude of rules. When students are able to produce a reasonable sestina, they demonstrate that they can follow directions and adhere to rules while learning a poetic form.

Many students do not like English literature classes because of the abstract nature of figurative language. The solution? That’s right—more spice! Invite students to translate the original genre into contemporary language. To do so, they must learn to trust and sharpen their own

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A TFS GROWTH QUOTE...

“Before you become too entranced with gorgeous gadgets and mesmerizing video displays, let me remind you that information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, and wisdom is not foresight. Each grows out of the other, and we need them all.”
—Arthur C. Clarke

ATTENDANCE

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to document attendance for financial aid reasons; I also keep it for final grade corroboration, in case of rare grievances.

In my speech and Spanish classes, I award “class participation” points for activities completed in large or small groups. Sometimes those points can be made up, other times not.

For example, I show a video and ask students to answer some “guided viewing” questions, or to summarize the film based on whatever communication skill we happen to be covering.

I usually allow those absent to contact me within a week and complete the assignment in the library. I have learned to keep extra credit to a minimum, so no substantial assignment or exam points can be replaced by unrelated work.

Allow No Ambiguity

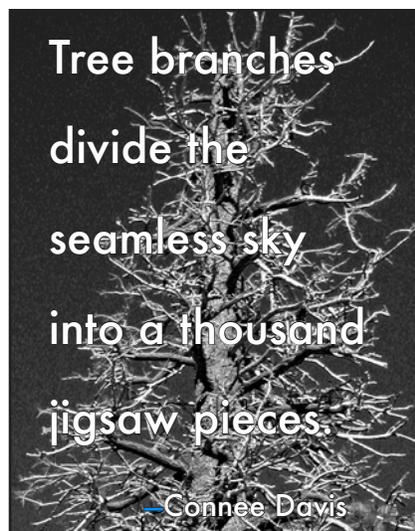
Is it time to strictly define “attendance” to your students? Should attendance mean adhering to specific rules, like, “Cell phones and pagers on mute or turned off,” or, “No food allowed in class that can be heard or smelled”? Or “Sleeping in class is forbidden.” Or “You are not contributing anything to class when you sleep, except callowness. Go home and sleep.”

Do you consider students who are not participating to be not in attendance? You must make these expectations clear.

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TEACHING FOR SUCCESS FITNESS CHECKLIST

- I ensure my students feel included, recognized, and appreciated, especially by name-face recognition.
- When testing or reviewing, I give my students a time to shine and demonstrate their mastery of special topics of particular interest and value.
- I frequently assess the effectiveness of my teaching.
- I occasionally ask a peer to observe my class and give me suggestions.
- I make a video or audio recording of myself in class at least once each term.
- I ask my students for a one-minute, anonymous written teacher assessment at least every two weeks.
- I begin class with a learning goal statement for that session.
- I use regular short quizzes to check how well students are learning.



COSMIC DREAD

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instinctive analysis of what the author is saying. It's an effective way to teach the multiple meanings of most literature.

When pieces are more than half a century old, the words and approaches used are sometimes lost on 21st-century students. When they employ contemporary language to explore universal themes, they often surprise themselves with how well they comprehend what they are reading.

Many other zesty ideas abound. Below are my top three internet idea resources:

- <http://teacher2b.com/>
- <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/>
- http://cle.usu.edu/CLE_IF_learning.html

TOP TEN IN-CLASS TIME WASTERS

1. Starting class late
2. Lack of daily class preparation
3. Holding a class with no learning goals
4. Handing out information sheets, homework papers and tests
6. Verbally recording attendance
7. Fixing computer projection systems
8. Allowing one student to dominate a discussion
9. Disinterested students annoying others
10. Boring lectures

ATTENDANCE

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Lateness

Finally, let students know when you count latecomers absent. In my "participation" classes, if we have begun an activity and students arrive in the middle of it, they receive no points for that activity.

Again, just make sure everyone is clear on your policy and expectations. If I have habitual latecomers, I show them the affect on their grades.

Two Fundamental Rules

It's vital to follow two simple rules when dealing with attendance:

First, understand your institution's policy, if there is one; if not, understand the attendance needs of your course.

Second, communicate your policy and expectations clearly so there can be no questions or unfair "exceptions" to the rule. College is preparation for professionals. If your definition of "professionalism" includes showing up, then you know your attendance policies are a vital part of teaching for success.

References:

- 1 www.wiu.edu/users/mfbhl/wiu/attendance.htm
- 2 www.villanova.edu/studentlife/counselingcenter/infosheets/psych_topics.htm?page=adjusting_college.htm

A GATE SECRET

Jack H. Shrawder, publisher, *TFS*

Has the creativity gate ever suddenly closed in your life? Well it did for me last year.

I literally had nothing left to say after eighteen years of writing and publishing *Teaching For Success*. As a result, *TFS* has not been published since April 2007, the end of Volume 18.

I thought the best way forward was to get out of education altogether and find another job and career. After all, isn't that what we are supposed to do in today's work world, have five or ten different careers as market tides sweep us from here to there?

In retrospect, it didn't add up. It's been the year of my discontent; things just didn't feel right; I felt very lost. Maybe you have been there too. It's not fun.

After a close call with a wildfire this summer (see "What I Learned from the Angora Wildfire," page 2), I was organizing my personal library when I came upon a book I had never read, *NLP: The New Technology of Achievement*. NLP stands for neuro-linguistic programming, and it's all about communication, development, and high achievement.

I read and reread the section "Finding Your Mission" several times, and finally, the outlines of a clear path emerged from the fog, revealing a gate leading out of the wasteland that had bogged me down for so long. I don't know what to call this new

space—perhaps mission control, but that sounds so Sixties. I've relearned the hard way that when you lose your handle on your mission, your life's purpose, the spice-in-life turns very bitter.

My most revered professor at the University of Illinois tried to teach me about the value living in sync with a long-term life purpose. But at age 24, I didn't really get it. At age 61, I get it.

How important are mission, purpose, and goals? I've never read a better passage on the importance of all three than John F. Kennedy's famous words: "We choose to go the moon... and do the other things not because they are easy but because they are hard. Because the goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills."

Let's look closely and carefully at his description: To be meaningful and satisfying, a mission or purpose must be worth doing, it must be hard, not easy, and it must serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.

What's your life mission? How does teaching fit into it?

I choose teaching improvement because education is central to personal development and career preparedness. In higher education those two merge into a single focus. For me it's a life's mission worth doing.

Specifically, "worth doing well," or excellence in higher education, means providing at least five things:

- good analytical and synergistic thinking skills;
- challenging learning experiences that build self-confidence and problem-solving abilities;
- research skills to facilitate the finding, appraising, and logging of new knowledge;
- strong communication skills;
- a well-stocked address book of contact information for peers, professors, and other experts.

In simplest terms, my editorial mission is to make sure every reader is delighted to have read each issue of *TFS*, and that *TFS* is instrumental in helping you to achieve your primary teaching mission.

If you don't have a primary teaching mission yet, consider this one: "I want each student to be delighted and pleased that they enrolled in my class."

If such a focus doesn't resonate with you, that's definitely OK. But right now, before you teach another class: Create, codify, and start living your own personal teaching mission. It can make all the difference.

Creating a personal, engaging, and challenging mission statement is the very first step toward teaching for success.

If you feel stuck in a creative wasteland yourself, a commitment to an energizing, important career purpose might open the energy gate for you as it has for me.

