

February, 1992- Thomas Donnelly, Sociology

Did you ever tire of lecturing on the same topic semester after semester, year after year? Did you even sense boredom on the face of your students? Did you ever try to begin a discussion and get silence in return?

What finally got to me and made me change my teaching style after many years was seeing students in my introductory sociology course not taking notes -why? - they had the lecture word for word from students who took the course the previous semester.

So I signed up for Marge Collier's Writing to Learn Workshop and found out that she also had been looking for some innovative method to breath new life into her teaching. She discovered writing to learn, and now she is so enthusiastic about how the method works that she teaches a workshop on it, heads up the program at Saint Peter's College and delights in measuring the success of her own classes and the classes of those in the program.

Writing to Learn simply works. It has worked for me and for others, and it can work for you. It is a teaching technique, but the focus is not on teaching -it is on learning. It is a way of activating and engaging the student in his or her own learning. It is not just one method or approach. Writing to Learn incorporates many different techniques within a general philosophy that writing helps learning. And don't be misled: Writing to Learn is not learning to write. Nor is it just writing intensive. It is writing in order to learn. Intrigued? Contact Marge Collier about this summer's workshop, and find out for yourself.

I used to think that if I put on a better performance, I could make the students sit up and take notice and maybe learn better. My emphasis was always on me and not on the students or on what they were learning. The longer I teach the more I realize that teaching is not so much about the performance of the teacher but rather about the learning of the students. Writing to Learn places the emphasis on the latter rather than on the former.

And lo and behold, my student evaluations went up considerably. Writing to Learn was not the only technique I used. I also employed cooperative learning methods which I picked up during the CIIP (College Instruction Improvement Program) workshop last summer conducted by the Institute for the Advancement of Higher Education, under the direction of Dr. David Surrey. Blending the two techniques -Writing to Learn and Cooperative Learning -really worked for me. Different techniques work differently for different teachers and different subjects. But there are writing to learn techniques for practically every subject. Just ask Marge Collier.