

## **June, 1993 - Eileen P. Flynn, Theology**

During the summer of 1991 I had the privilege of attending two programs at the College which were designed to improve teaching and learning. Two years later, as I respond to a request to describe some of the ways these programs have impacted on me and my students, I find myself once again aware of the value of examining teaching-learning techniques with an eye to improving both.

As a participant in the Institute for the Advancement of Urban Education directed by David Surrey, I designed a program which was meant to address classroom problems. I identified two specific problems: frequent absenteeism and students coming to class without having read (or even skimmed) the assigned material.

In order to lessen or prevent absenteeism I asked students to call in with their reason if they had to miss a class. If they did not phone, I would send a postcard reminding them of the policy. For absences in excess of two (in a class which met twice a week), I would subtract five points from the final grade for each absence.

In order to encourage/require students to complete reading assignments before coming to class I distributed questionnaires to accompany each assignment. These questionnaires were designed to check comprehension and mastery of factual data.

The implementation of these strategies met with mixed results. As a consequence of a student complaint, I had to scrap my attendance policy. (I was informed that a teacher cannot establish a stricter policy than the one in the Bulletin without prior authorization from the Dean.) Being unaware of this regulation, I did not obtain authorization and so had to revoke my policy in midsemester. Students who were so inclined went on to avail themselves of all the cuts to which they considered themselves entitled.

As far as the questionnaires were concerned, I found that approximately one-third of the students either copied answers or turned them in late, thus undermining the purpose for which they were intended. For students who were helped by added structure and reinforcement (again, approximately one-third of the class), the questionnaires provided a valuable learning tool. For the final third, very able students who are accustomed to doing their homework, the questionnaires added little.

The advantage of hindsight has led me to the conclusion that a teacher cannot compel her students to learn. She can place a book in a student's hands, but she cannot make the student read.

As a result of these experiences I realize that my ability to effect theological literacy in my students is actually quite limited. Listening to stories told by my

peers has convinced me that many colleagues face problems similar to mine. Lots of students come to class late, overcut, are unprepared and cheat, and notwithstanding, think that since they paid tuition they are entitled to credit for the course and a decent grade for the transcript, their passport to success. It seems to me that there is a critical and immediate need to examine the assumptions of Saint Peter's students as well as the laid back culture of the College to determine whether or not I am presenting an accurate account. If so, no time should be wasted in seeking to reverse the situation. If not, the institution of programs to treat delusional faculty might be in order.

Fortunately, a strategy which I developed as a result of the Writing to Learn workshop which I took with Marge Collier allows me to conclude this piece by sharing a positive experience.

As part of the Theology 120 courses which I am presently teaching, and which are not designed specifically as Writing to Learn, I require students to present an oral report on a moral issue and prepare a reflection paper on the same subject. Before my W to L experience, oral presentations by my students varied from gibberish to eloquence. I wanted, as far as possible, to eliminate gibberish and mediocrity so that reports would represent a meaningful experience for reporters and listeners alike. To this end I decided to require that each student prepare an outline, review it with me, and revise it as needed. The outline requirement forced students really to pull things together in their own minds, to think things through so that they made sense. In the course of putting the outline together, playing with sequence, challenging the coherence of each section as well as the whole and having an explicit road map at hand, students have grown in their abilities to focus and address moral issues. Several also consider their outline a crutch which will assist them as they try to get over the stage fright they associate with giving a presentation. (From my perspective an additional advantage inherent in the outline-oral presentation-written assignment sequence is that it makes much more unlikely the possibility of students presenting me with store-bought term papers at the end of the semester and the headaches attendant on dealing with such demoralizing scenarios.)

In conclusion, I want to thank you, administrators and colleagues at Saint Peter's for all you do in support of me and of each other, and to call on you to face up to the classroom issues which need to be addressed so that teachers can feel that they are getting the job done and students can understand that college is about personal transformation through honest learning.