

October, 2000 - Jon Boshart, FineArts

Evoking interest and even, perhaps, excitement in the classroom is advantageous to the learning environment. In the classes which I teach I like to incite a little of what I like to call "drama." This can be accomplished in several different modes.

After introducing a subject area and thereby providing students with the necessary facts and/or "tools" I present students with a situation unfamiliar to them. The students are expected to puzzle-out possible interpretations and/or explanations. Since I am teaching art history, this unfamiliar situation is usually a slide of an artwork not previously discussed.

At times I open the puzzle to a verbal discussion. However, this often results in the non-involvement of many of the students. Therefore I prefer to have them all express their opinions, ideas, or even lack of ideas, in writing. Giving the students ten minutes to jot down their thoughts, I emphasize that I will not grade their submissions but that I will give them a positive check on my grade sheet for their written efforts whether right or wrong. After collecting the papers I refuse to discuss the puzzle and proceed on to another topic.

I then return the papers with comments the next class, mentioning to the class some of the various ideas gathered from them but without indicating the contributors' names. It is then that a general discussion often erupts spontaneously.

What does such an exercise accomplish?

1. It involves all the students in a scholarly mini-experience.
2. It requires all of them to consider seriously an aspect of the subject.
3. It elicits use of their introductory knowledge.
4. It encourages creative, puzzle-solving involvement.
5. It gives the professor insight into the level at which various students are conceptualizing.
6. It often provides fresh perspectives and ideas which the professor had not realized.
7. It creates anticipation of the next class and the "solving" of the puzzle.
8. It encourages students to express their ideas even when they cannot be sure the ideas are correct.
9. It provides an opportunity to write within the course subject and then bounce ideas off those of others in the next class.

Other modes of creating the classroom "drama" could include the following. Present a situation without the needed introductory information. Then ask the students to decide what they would need to know in order to figure out the

answer. In this way students concretely experience the need for resource information.

Or, present situations where recent interpretations/discoveries have proven an earlier "solution" to have been incorrect. Have the students decide where the previous "solution" went wrong. This might motivate students to be more critical in their reading and thinking.

Yet again, present material on which there is a wide divergence of scholarly opinions. Let the students decide which of the opinions appear most correct to them. This will underline the organic quality of our respective subjects: they have not all been definitively decided. Debate, controversy, contrary ideas and unanswerable questions should be not only tolerated but rather encouraged.

Hopefully, these few ideas may help to make our classes more exciting for our students and ourselves.