Faculty Forum

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Let's Get Engaged

I have been teaching at WCU for nearly 30 years and this semester my students in English 101, First-Year Composition, and English 278, Intro to Film, are the best I have ever seen. However, at the start of the semester, my sophomores in English 204, The Literature of Culture, resembled a group of high school students.

As we sat around our classroom circle during the first three weeks of the course, many of these sophomores slumped in their chairs. Some even tried to sleep. Several displayed what I call the "thousand yard stare." It was very hard to draw them into conversation. My teaching style is to facilitate and encourage educational self-sufficiency—to teach effective reading, analysis, and writing. But as I tried to engage these students in August and early September, they were mostly silent and monosyllabic. One young man gestured openly in disgust over something I said. One young woman whined about demanding assignments. Generally, the written work of these students was pitifully brief, unimaginative, careless, and poorly-spelled. There were frequent "no-shows" with assignments, and the students were generally docile but uncooperative and completely disengaged. At one point I thought, "this is the worst class I have ever had at WCU."

In the first week of class, I stopped the young woman who was whining for the second straight day and said, "You're whining again, and I don't like whining." That same class period, I said out loud to the whole class, "I sense an enormous amount of hostility in this room and I'm not accustomed to it." I soon asked them to write two and three times a week on what they had read.

All summer I had been excited about this course because I had expected us to work as fellow explorers of unfamiliar, non-western literature. I had planned to use my more refined reading skills to help them understand the unfamiliar literature and then help them with their writing. But up to September 11, getting my sophomores to explore was like a trip to the dentist. The shift in the class's attitude clearly began on that unbelievable day. We were all in shock, of course, and I can't really remember what we talked about specifically, but we found a way to relate the prepared assignment to the day's events.

Then, with no syllabus to restrict us, we immediately shifted gears and our assignment on September 13 was to learn about Islamic literature. I would love to report that the positive effects were immediate, but the truth is the transformation was gradual. It took us, for example, three class periods to succeed at finding Islamic literature on the Internet, but we finally struck the mother lode—adolescent women defending their second-class citizenship and young men extolling the justice of Jihad. The day before fall break we had a debate in class on whether Christianity was superior to Islam or Islam equal to Christianity. It was the first day that I would have called truly lively. However, these students now seem to be understanding that they can respond to unfamiliar literary texts with genuine insight. They are beginning to translate that reading skill into more effective writing. They are now more "engaged." We are now no longer a high school class. We are now a legitimate college class.

Is this experience just an accident of group dynamics, or is there a problem on campus with students more and more resembling high school students? In December of last year, Millie and Malcolm Abel reported in the Faculty Forum ("Learning Communities: Are They Worth the Investment?) that Freshman Seminar courses at WCU were uncovering new discipline problems. A number of colleagues agreed in notes & quotes that "high school" behaviors and extremely poor preparation were becoming more common at WCU. This shift in student behavior and preparedness should not surprise us.

Our students come from a post-print culture. They generally do not read habitually and they have trouble reading when we force them to. It's no wonder that they are frequently not "engaged" in our reading and writing assignments. Our lives have been full of reading and abstract thinking. Their lives have been full of viewing and "interaction." We read books. They play video games. We give them books to wrestle with, but the books don't have rapidly changing images, energetic music, or automatically interactive elements. Was it any accident that my sophomore class began to change on September 11? No. Here was something they could be engaged in, something they could "interact" with. Slowly, but surely, these students became more interested in their reading because it seemed more "real." As they read about Islamic literature, they remembered the replays of the twin towers collapsing, and they knew a band called Anthrax.

What can we learn from this? First, it doesn't take an international disaster to create engagement in the classroom, but we must always think about making bridges in our courses from their world to ours. We must plan engaging assignments, even making assignments more media-oriented and more like "real-world" tasks. We can take the time to help students learn how to read, how to "assimilate" written texts and make them their own. For example, I find that many students posture when they write or respond to their reading, thinking that they must sound "academic." We can invite students to simply personalize their reading and writing, connecting whatever they study to what they already know and feel deeply about. I recently discovered a fine book called Teaching College Freshmen (1991), which is in our Faculty Center Library and which was featured on last month's "Quotes" page. The authors cite a study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress [reporting] "that high school seniors actually spend less time reading books than fourth-graders do." The authors conclude that "simply telling students to read an assignment does not provide the inducement many freshmen require to become active readers."

Faculty also need to talk to one another--in hallways, offices, and in forums like this--about our problem classes. We need to share the strategies that work or fail. We need to be unashamed of temporary failure and we must not whine. We need to actually visit one another's problem classes to lend each other emotional support. In the Faculty Center Open Classroom Program, for example, we visit to learn how other classes work. If we don't share our problems and our solutions, we are likely to work in silence and frustration, quietly assuming that the problem is insoluble.

I believe that we can succeed with this new generation of college students. Let's enjoy this new challenge together, stop complaining and blaming, and discover new ways to make learning happen even in the most difficult of circumstances. Let's get engaged.

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The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.