

Let's Make an 'Academic' Deal

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Late one evening as I was preparing for the following day's 8:00 A.M. composition class, an idea occurred to me. At the time my desk was cluttered with a Borzoi College Reader, McCrimmon's Writing With a Purpose, some other reference materials, my Ell0 syllabus, and more than sixty freshman research papers waiting to be graded. The syllabus kept reminding me that I planned to discuss parts of McCrimmon's chapter on persuasion and an essay in Borzoi called "The Dumb Class." That's the essay where author Herndon tells us that the real dummies in education are the faculty and administrators. To complicate matters, I was in the habit of bringing folders of newspaper articles to class so that students might see other perspectives on and stylistic approaches to the subjects we discussed in class. My folder on education bulged with an accumulation of articles such as Art Buchwald's "Tuition, Books, and Remedial Everything" and one by Richard Cohen entitled "What Good is Algebra When the Ceiling Leaks?" I could not bear to give them up--any of them. Clearly I was over-committed and under-rested, certainly not prepared to face my 8:00 A.M. composition class in the morning. Around 2:00 A.M. the idea first occurred to me and I promptly dismissed it several times as quickly as it recurred. Some ideas refuse rejection, however, particularly when no other remedies suggest themselves. And so it was with this one.

I suppose Section 37, Ell0: Critical Reading and Writing, might be described as a typical group of college freshmen. Among others were a Dale Carnegie practitioner, an anxious please-don't-call-on-me girl, a campus-wise sophomore interested in doing only what was required to get a "C" and the Prodigal Writer who happened to show up now and then to see if he could possibly pass the course. By the twelfth week of classes all of them, with the exception of the Prodigal Writer of course, had written themselves into home stretch, and they were tired of the usual analyses of essays, the usual fare from McCrimmon, the usual presentation from their instructor, and with sixty more research papers waiting, I was a little tired of the usual too.

So, when I came to class that morning, prepared to shift quickly into my usual plan A if plan B failed, I carefully arranged six or seven items on the desk in front of me, among them the newspaper folder, McCrimmon, Borzoi, a copy of Ben Franklin's advice on "How to Win an Argument," my worn copy of Teaching as a Subversive Activity, and a small stack of 8 1/2" x 4" blank slips of paper. Identifying both the familiar and the unfamiliar items in turn, I then looked at the class and admitted frankly that I could not possibly cover all the significant material in each. Nevertheless, in order to assist me in determining what would be most productive or worthwhile that day, several members of the class would be encouraged to choose an item for discussion or for writing as the case might be, and so on until time or the items ran out one hour and twenty minutes later. With no other explanation, I stepped away from the desk and said in my best Monty Hall imitation, "Let's make an academic deal." Immediately, the Dale Carnegie practitioner leaped to his feet begging to make the first deal, while others urged him to bargain for Borzoi or the newspaper folder, but not for McCrimmon.

or the small slips of paper because they might have to write something. And as the first deal of the newspaper articles gave way to one for "The Dumb Class," discussions of educational relevance, declining SAT scores, and grading realities in college served as forerunners for Herndon's persuasive criticism of dumb faculties and even dumber administrators. No one yawned that morning. No one sneaked looks at wrist watches. Furthermore, by the end of class the campus-wise sophomore and the please-don't-call-on-me girl had forgotten their usual silent early morning behaviors. And so it was that a very simple idea to relieve late semester usuality worked.

Afterwards, I thought about "academic dealing" and its effect on the classroom atmosphere for a long time. The familiar television game show framework, it seems, had given Section 37 and two others a new slant on class participation. They knew what to do. And, within a range of choices, dealing had allowed the students to decide what they were interested in pursuing. Much later on, however, it occurred to me that at least part of the day's success was due to the fact that it revealed something new about me that my students had never seen before, something which served temporarily to remove the academic trappings of desk, empty chairs, textbooks and syllabus which sometimes kept me safely cordoned off from them. And them from me.

It also occurred to me that freshmen see us mostly as dispensers of information on thesis statements, rhetorical strategies, research paper techniques and the like. They don't know that we ride Hondas, identify with Rocky, read Playboy, laugh at Steve Martin, play touch football, drink Miller's, eat Big Macs, turn on "Barney Miller," turn off "The Gong Show," relax with Billy Joel, cheer the Eagles, coddle an aging VW, worry about finances, argue with parents, write essays for approval, and rewrite them when our efforts fail. Freshmen do not always know how versatile, how interesting, how "normal" we are.

And while it probably isn't a very good idea to burden freshmen with the complete range of our normality so soon in their college careers, perhaps occasional departures from the usual, occasional experiments with "academic dealing" of one kind or another may be necessary, even desirable, to keep our students participating throughout the semester and to keep us from becoming permanently cordoned off behind the cluttered, lonely side of our desks.