



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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HOOK 'EM

How do you convey to your students how important the class, the course, and the subject really are? How do you instill in them the value of education? How do you get them to complete assignments at the most appropriate levels?

I am convinced, after 30 years of teaching at the post-secondary level, that most instructors *are* interested in having students learn, but may not know how to get students committed to doing all that is necessary to succeed. The following strategies have proven successful with my students and can be adapted to work with a variety of different students, groups, instruction, and subjects.

- **Act as though the class is important.** Convey enthusiasm. Relate the course matter to everyday life, right from the beginning. Make newspaper, magazine, and Internet articles, and even cartoons, available to your students; read some articles to them and post others on your website. Invite a graduate of your institution, who is employed in a field related to the interests represented in your class, to discuss his experiences with your class.

- **Identify with the field.** Distribute something clever and related to the subject matter that you have written. If you haven't written anything clever, think about doing it. Talk about some research that you've done, and then watch students pick up on the idea.

- **Lay out what students will be able to do with knowledge and skills from the course from the first day.** Use "fast facts"—e.g., "do you know...?"—to move the discussions along.

- **Make and use lesson plans.** Share them with students. Lesson plans with behavioral objectives help students assess their progress and help you stay on track.

- **Outline any lecture or presentation for students before you begin.** Explain how new information in the current lesson relates to previous lessons. Provide clues and cues to note-taking, organization, and integration. Use mnemonic devices where possible.

- **Humanize your subject.** Talk about people cur-

rently working in the field—not as dry textbook descriptions, but as real-live characters (and there are plenty of characters in every field.)

- **Act the part.** Some of us prefer maintaining a formal appearance, others less so. Ties, scarves, t-shirts, pins, tie tacks, and desk sets, among other accessories, can reflect and appeal to almost every field of endeavor. Wear or display objects of your interest. Students find it easier to relate to a subject when the instructor thinks it is important.

- **Have contests and quizzes.** Have students write Jeopardy questions, create word searches, and create crossword puzzles that can be used for reviews and quizzes.

- **Encourage co-ops, internships, volunteering.** Develop, nurture, encourage, and support student involvement in your field, whether it is their major subject or not. Valuable time is wasted and valuable knowledge lost when students cannot immediately relate and apply. Give appropriate credit and set an example.

- **Sponsor student clubs.** Be an advisor or, at least, get a club started. From Interior Design to Astronomy to Social Work, clubs afford benefits and connections that help open doors a little wider for all students.

- **Do it with them.** There are research topics in all fields that provide opportunities for the application of classroom instruction. Find one that the students and you can agree on—and do it!

- **Ask students what they want to learn.** It may sound like a radical idea, but it is possible to include the most important curriculum material in these discussion sessions. And, students will establish more ownership in their learning and care more about their work.

Jerry Clavner, Professor, Social Sciences

For further information, contact the author at Cuyahoga Community College, 700 Carnegie Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115. e-mail: Jerry.Clavner@tri-c.edu



TABOO® TO DICKINSON: A DESCRIPTIVE WRITING LESSON

Finding new ways to introduce the importance of richly detailed essay writing to my Freshman Composition students is an elusive task. One important objective of teaching descriptive writing is for the students to learn the “show, don’t tell” method of essay writing. In order to introduce the descriptive writing lesson to my Freshman Composition students, we play the interactive word game, Taboo®, and then we connect the activity of word identification to Emily Dickinson’s poem “It Sifts from Leaden Sieves.”

I wait to play Taboo® until the fourth week of class because the students are more comfortable interacting in groups at this stage of the semester. On this lesson day, I avoid referencing textbook notes, and instead I surprise the class with the bright red Taboo® box. First, I introduce the game’s objective as it relates to the writing lesson by clarifying how this activity will give them practice using descriptive language. Next, we discuss the game’s rules. The object of the game is for each team to score the most points by allowing each team to guess their player’s “taboo” word. In order to facilitate great use of descriptive language, the player cannot say any of the “taboo” words that would describe the main word easily. Restricting each player from associating words such as *cake* and *candles* with *birthday* forces each to identify creative ways in which to describe words. When one word is guessed, the player picks another card, and the team continues guessing words for one minute. It is amazing to witness the enthusiasm for language. Students come alive, they blurt out random adjectives and adverbs, they stutter when the answer is dancing on the tips of their tongues, and they sigh when the word is finally revealed.

This game, though exciting to play, serves multiple educational functions. It reiterates the usefulness of clear detail, and because charades are not allowed, students must play the game with their own words, which provides great practice for identifying descriptive language. Playing Taboo® demonstrates the importance of describing details by utilizing the five senses, as well as synonyms, adjectives, and adverbs. Through descriptive language, students learn how to eliminate assumptions from their language, which subsequently eliminates assumptions and inadvertent stereotyping in their essays. The game also gives students an opportunity to brainstorm potential topics because while playing the game, students hear random words that often trigger memories or ideas for future essays.

After playing Taboo®, I connect the lesson of using rich description to an Emily Dickinson poem that utilizes the same language technique. This lesson extension helps students see the larger picture of how descriptive language versus interpretive language makes reading an intriguing activity. Using the overhead projector, I show students a short Emily Dickinson poem, referenced as “It Sifts from Leaden Sieves.” The poem does not state the topic; it simply provides a rich description of snow. Without knowing the poem’s topic, students analyze the poem, discuss the content, and deduct a topic from the text. Following discussion, interactive group investigation, and further exploration and elimination, students ultimately connect the topic of snow to the poem. Students are no longer playing Taboo®; they are reading and investigating the poem in order to find the connection between playing a word game and analyzing poetry to understand better the significance of using descriptive language.

Each semester I look forward to introducing the descriptive language versus interpretive language lesson (this activity works best with smaller classes, approximately 20 students). I know that by combining Taboo® with Dickinson, I can create an environmental mix of excitement and intrigue. My students make great connections between the practicality of using rich detail in their spoken language to the practicality of incorporating descriptive language in their essays. From this teaching technique my students learn how to “show and not tell” while being exposed to teamwork and literary text.

Maria E. Christian, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee, 1801 East 4th Street, Okmulgee, OK 74447-3901.
e-mail: mariaec@osu-okmulgee.edu