
FOREWORD

After spending the first five years of my career in an exciting, but laborious, low socio-economic school environment, I decided the time had come to pick up stakes and move on to the promised land of upper-middle-class America where the affluence dictated that special programs existed to meet each student's individual needs. Because of my experience with the reluctant learners of my previous school, I was excited to see what could be done to inspire them with some financial backing.

Much to my chagrin, at each of the first two schools where I interviewed, I was told that no special attention (beyond remedial reading classes) was provided for low-ability or reluctant learners because "they were better left in the back of the room where—it was hoped—they could learn from the bright students up front. They would never amount to much anyway, and so money was better spent on 'good kids who want to learn.'" My hopes were shattered. Did these "educators" really believe these low-ability students did not deserve equal attention? Are we an elitist society willing to forget nearly half the population?

In disbelief, I interviewed two more times at each school during the next few weeks. The message was the same. Ethically, I could not adapt to their philosophy. Several weeks later, I interviewed at Mission Viejo High in Southern California, where I soon found—despite programs which send nearly 50% of the students directly to four-year universities—the majority of the teachers had never lost sight of the needs of *every* student, regardless of the humbleness of some students' career goals or immediate aspirations.

However, I have never been able to blot those first interviews out of my memory. Consequently, along with many college-prep and honors courses, I have always taught at least one "workshop" or "remedial" class. The following fifty pages are a conglomeration of successful activities I have experienced with these students during an eighteen-year career. I can guarantee all fifty do work; each is a proven success.

During these eighteen years, I have learned a great deal about low-ability and reluctant learners—their habits and their needs. This foreword would not be complete without ten "truths" which I have formulated over the years and which I believe will assist any teacher who works with "workshop" level classes:

1. The attention span on mundane work like grammar exercises or vocabulary review is about 20 minutes. Any work, on one activity, beyond this point, is fruitless.
2. Workshop students need to be excited by an assignment immediately. The teacher's first example (poem, book, unit) needs to be excellent. These students cannot begin with negativity or hesitation.
3. Given the chance, they will rise to whatever expectations the teacher sets for them. Granted, class objectives cannot be nearly as demanding as in a college-prep class, but these students are capable of accomplishing much more than they think they are able to accomplish—if they are motivated.
4. It is a fallacy that workshop students cannot discipline themselves. Misbehavior most often results from boredom, which is common in these classes. Interesting activities will retain their interest, just as they do in a college-prep class.
5. An example, or step #1, is always necessary. Assignments will be accomplished with much greater success if these students are not left to formulate beginnings on their own.
6. When an error is made, the student should always have the opportunity to redeem himself during that same class period. The old adage for marriage about never sending your spouse to bed mad, definitely holds true here.
7. Positive reinforcement has been severely lacking in the education of most of these students. In particular, every writing assignment must be praised for something, if the student is expected to produce again.

8. Workshop students have many worthwhile opinions of the world around us. Discussions should not be feared; in fact, since these students are not grade conscious, their comments are often more honest and heart-felt than those in a college-prep class.
9. These students really enjoy cross-curriculum or inter-disciplinary assignments. Most of their education has been fragmented into blocks of time and questions at the end of chapters. They are surprised to discover that all knowledge is interrelated and, therefore, applicable to real life.
10. If students can label a teacher (Media King, Iambic Queen, Ditto Master, Dr. Date), this reflects that the teacher is, in fact, too much of that very thing. “Variety is the spice of life.”

If one is willing to accept most of these ten concepts, the *50 Ways* which are printed on the next pages could provide many creative, challenging, and stimulating lesson plans. Again, I can assure you that they all have worked for me. **READ THEM, TRY THEM—ENJOY THEM;** I promise the students will!

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- (A) Analysis
- (S) Synthesis
- (E) Evaluation
- (CW) Creative Writing
- (R) Review

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1. SOAP OPERA

Subject:

English

Objective:

Students will write creatively and work cooperatively by producing a class soap opera.

Thinking Skills:

creative writing

Time:

20 minutes per day, 4 to 6 days in class

Activity:

The soap opera is an excellent device for involving the entire class in a creative writing activity. The goal is for the class to write, edit, produce, and tape a 15- to 20-minute soap opera. (Any longer is too cumbersome, and continual involvement is too difficult.)

Step one is to generate a general idea for the story line. Students, having watched hours of soaps, will have no trouble coming up with the latest aspect of kinkiness. Now the plot must be divided into 4 acts with a beginning and ending point for each. The entire class should decide these separations in open discussion while the teacher performs two functions: censoring of student suggestions and recording on the board.

The class should now be divided into four writing groups. They have been given only the starting and ending points for their act and a list of characters. Attention should be paid that each character is capable of moving on to the next act if he is supposed to move on. In other words, a character cannot lose a leg or die in Act I unless the writers of Acts 3 and 4 are prepared for this. The group should be given a portion of at least 3 days to write their act, since most "brilliant" ideas come at home when a student is not in the company of others. In most cases, the complete dialogue and stage direction should be written; I have found it very dangerous to let the actors ad lib during filming.

When the basic script is completed, it should be read for the entire class. The writers must now make transitions between acts and scenes and the teacher may need to edit objectionable material. Hopefully, every student has had some part in the writing.

The second major phase, the filming, now begins. I believe this is not nearly as important as the creating and the writing and, therefore, the time and exactness required in putting the script together need not be maintained. This phase will be more fun than anything else. Actors should be chosen by the class, but students should be assured there will be plenty of jobs for everyone. Sound effects, props, and special-effects people should take up a good portion of the class. The teacher also needs to select a film crew. Again, the actual filming is not as important as the writing and, thus, should be done in no more than 3 days. The final product will probably rival the Emmy-Award-winning soaps from TV. It certainly cannot be any worse.

Extension:

2. Literary Soap Opera
3. Historical Soap Opera
4. Soap Opera
24. Ironic Reality

2. LITERARY SOAP OPERA

Subject:

English

Objective:

Working with a selected theme from an assigned core text, students will write creatively and work cooperatively in producing a relevant class soap opera.

Thinking Skills:

creative writing, synthesis

Time:

20 minutes per day, 4 to 6 days in class

Activity:

The literary soap opera is an attempt to trick students into doing something very serious when they think they are having fun. Generally, the same format is followed as with the creative soap opera; the difference lies in the subject matter. After reading and discussing a work of literature, students should decide on a central theme which they find most applicable to their lives. The significance of this theme to modern society is extremely important because it is this theme which the students will portray in their soap. (The teacher may find that a student might just learn more from the soap than he did from the original classic.)

The division of students, the writing, and filming should take place as described previously. However, the production should portray a much more serious conflict, and in many cases, take on a much more serious nature. The teacher should be careful not to allow students to fall into the trap of rewriting the same plot in a modern setting, although this will certainly work well with an unimaginative class.

As an example of this project, let us use Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The students may choose as a theme that "man will revert to his savage nature if taken out of formal society." The teacher should guide the students away from an island setting and a repetition of the key scenes like Roger killing Piggy with the boulder (although, again this would certainly work in a hometown setting if the class can't come up with anything more imaginative). Most often, the class will see some parallel to a situation with which they can identify. For example, the theme of *Lord of the Flies* might certainly take place at the local Easter week vacation spot. Modern film producers do this very thing. The makers of *Jaws* must certainly have read *An Enemy of the People*. (For that matter, after reading and discussing *An Enemy of the People*, why not create a soap about the director of Disneyland who discovers the park's main attraction is unsafe the night before the major money-making day. The possibilities are endless.)

Again, the major objective of the teacher is to allow the students to rediscover and portray a significant theme which they might otherwise gloss over because of the simple fact that they hate classics or that they hate reading. They may not identify with a bunch of boys in war paint on an island, but they could identify with a group of students, on vacation away from their parents, who think their freedom allows for the dismissal of all learned values. This project may not make a student suddenly love to read, but it will help him to learn a valuable lesson for which the teacher taught the book in the first place.

Extension:

4. Radio Broadcast
16. Dramatic Soliloquy

3. HISTORICAL SOAP OPERA

Subject:

Social Science

Objective:

Students will research and evaluate the events of an historical incident and creatively adapt it to soap opera form.

Thinking Skills:

creative writing, synthesis, evaluation

Time:

20 minutes, 3 to 4 days in class for preparation + presentation time

Activity:

For the teacher of social science, the Historical Soap Opera is an attempt at creative rewriting in answering “what might have been.” It allows students to acquire a flavor of the “times” and be involved in some research without the potential boredom of a straight lecture in the workshop classroom.

The characters can be real or imagined depending on the needs of the assignment. For example, if students were studying Columbus and his dealings with the queen, the true, historical characters would be most useful in a soap opera sketch on their relationship. Documented evidence from library research would be required. On the other hand, if students were studying the plight of the farmers while reading *Grapes of Wrath*, research would still be necessary, but factual characters would not.

This project may bring out a serious side of students never shown before. For example, I once had a small group of students portray Galileo and the guilt he felt for recanting before the inquisition. Until that time I had no idea these particular students could ever seriously express emotions.

I have also seen some wonderful “what if” portrayals. One small group, after researching the “concentration camps” for the Japanese in California during WWII, did a sketch on “what if” the Germans had won the war and we, as German citizens, now read only of the terrible atrocities which took place in the USA.

For this project, I would suggest altering the format described in the creative soap opera. These historical plays seem to work best with smaller groups—perhaps 5 students. Given a large enough general topic, each separate group can write their own 5- to 10-minute soap.

The key to the success of this project, and, in fact, the real educational value beyond the creativity required, is the *research* assigned by the teacher. The more authentic the portrayal of the times, the more the entire class will learn from viewing one another’s skits.

Extension:

- 4. Radio Broadcast
- 16. Dramatic Soliloquy
- 19. Time Period Letters
- 24. Ironic Reality