

Teaching with Force: How to Engage Students in Their Own Learning
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Part I. Resourcing

What every student wants is to learn what is being taught without having to open “same old, same old, boring books!” as more than one of my students has shared with me. Modern technology offers today’s students’ chat rooms, information at their fingertips whenever they want it, and easy interconnection with their peers. These interconnections have been shown to be what makes people happy (PBS Wed. 10 pm). At a seminar presented by Stephen Krashen at the University of Arizona in 2009, he pointed out how studies have shown that contentment leads to more learning which is what we want our students to do, learn more than what they may be thinking they need to learn. He supports the use of a “naturalistic approach” to learning. His methodology worked with all of my students.

To compete against the wavelength driven technology, I improvised an immediate and common connection: everyday realia. The idea of using realia is based in the research done by educators Gloria Ladson-Billings and Gay Ivey. In the developmental writing courses I recently taught, I used the “textbook” as my comrade in arms to grab the students’ attention to their own particular writing weakness. For example, a few students in each class were particularly bad spellers. They were assigned to read the entire chapter on spelling and to do all of the exercises in that chapter. They chose to do the assignment as a group. More than a few students in each class were terrible about sentence punctuation, they were assigned to do the three chapters on punctuation in the textbook. They chose whether to work together or individually on those exercises. Otherwise, we occasionally used the textbook as a valuable resource for readily available examples, but we did not go through it chapter by chapter.

Their reading materials were comprised of the realia I gathered such as bookmarks from libraries, bookstores, and other sources. I also collected brochures of new books from local printing companies, banking services from banks, random menus from exotic and exorbitant restaurants, a student art poster announcing a student gallery event, and even unusual emails I received. At one point I pulled out a wide assortment of educational materials brochures from a recycling bin in the faculty resource office that I shared with no less than about 100 other adjuncts. The brochures were un-needed extras that comprised most of the majors at the junior college where I was teaching.

Part 2: Using the Resources

1. In the case of brochures

This literature represented the modern day to day life components of at least one if not all of my students. In the new press release brochures the students found books that sparked their interests. Each student received a brochure and was asked them to find at least one or two books that they *might* read. They could see that the books were to be released in 2010 so I was ahead of their insistence on “the new” and that was not lost on me. The book descriptions were brief. Of course, they had been written to grab the attention of readers. And the students,

slightly suspicious that I would have them read a book if they chose one, were cautious. I told them they did not have to read any of the books, but that they had to read the descriptions of the ones they had chosen as their favorite of the offerings. The brevity of the descriptions of the books made it easy for them to comply with the in class assignment.

After giving them a few minutes to review the brochure, I asked them to tell me the name of the title they had selected as their number one choice. Very few of the students had chosen the same book. I asked them to get out a piece of paper and I showed them the step by step components of an MLA citation so that they could write the MLA of the book they had chosen. They easily met the goal, which was how to write a citation, especially since all of the books in the brochure were to be printed in 2010 and they were all from the same city and publisher. We repeated the exercise with the second book title they had chosen with me walking them through the steps on the white board, once again. Then I asked the students to each put their last name next on the list of citations, with their last name first, followed by their first name and then a period. This really surprised them. They were more surprised when I asked them to add the title of the first book they thought they might write somewhere in the future and list the city and publishing company to match that of the first two they had already written down.

There were many smiles in that room as they wrote themselves down as authors of an imagined book. And that was the lesson that day. In our classroom we “imagined” as often as we learned. Their imagination drove their writing as much as my steering them toward writing that was significant to and for them. When it came time to write a paper with MLA format, I referred them to their portfolio page titled “3 MLA Citations” which proved a helpful and easy reference for them to use. I also showed them the Son of Citation Machine web site and OWL at Purdue site to broaden their resources.

2. Using the educational materials brochures

One of my concerns with the technology is that students are not learning to develop their own thoughts and ideas on paper. Text messaging is reducing language to odd combinations and abbreviations that may one day become common, but are not useful to higher order thinking and form needed in science and math. I thought of this exercise as another way for students to develop their voice on paper when I found out that of the 90 students in three classes only seven had ever been taught how to write a business letter.

As the students filed into class, I asked them to browse my spread of the various brochures and for them to take one that matched their major (e.g. a medical company one was suitable for students interested in nursing an arts supply catalog for an art student). The assignment was for them to “browse” their chosen brochure for an item that interested them that they thought their peers might also find interesting. In the case of the musicians in my class, they had chosen a brochure filled with videos and recordings and books that taught music.

It was interesting to watch the students’ interest grow as they opened the pandora’s boxes of useful and interesting items that were meaningful for them. There were audible gasps and “ahs” as they paged pleasurably through the brochures. Meanwhile, I wrote the name and mailing address of the administrator in charge of making purchases for the library at their college on the whiteboard.

My first goal was to teach them how to create their own letterhead by centering their name, address information and contact phone number and email on separate lines at the top of their papers. Then I had them put in the date next to the left margin under that and skip two lines to finally add the address I had put on the board.

Using the “old fashioned” methodology I had enjoyed as a student (because it meant I didn’t have to create the proper wording) I “dictated” a letter in which they were asking the library purchasing director to obtain the item they had selected from the brochure. The first item of interest to them was the reference line where I asked them to provide the title of whatever item they had picked from the brochure. Then they addressed the purchasing administrator with “Dear Mr. Rubens:” and began the first paragraph with “I am requesting that you purchase....” They included the title of the brochure, the item and page number, the cost, and the web site address for placing the ordering. There was a little dismay from some of the students because they wanted to know if he was “for real” which I assured them that he was, and next they needed to be reassured that this letter was not “really” going to be sent to Mr. Rubens, which I assured them it was not.

I asked the students to state one or two reasons why they thought students should have the item available to them at the library, giving them word patterns such as: “my medical students would gain useful information if they could access this video in our college library” and other similar phraseology. In giving them this information, I shared with them that that was part of the job of being a professor, having to select the best teaching and learning materials for the students for each class and for them to “enjoy” that they were under no pressure to ever have to “use these materials to teach,” we were only using them to experience what it was like to have to write one of these letters of requests that adults have to manage even in their private lives. An example I gave them was how in Westwood, California, the city is very efficient about maintaining a high standard of impeccability simply because the highly educated citizens do not hesitate to write letters to their city manager, visit him, email him, or call in their concerns. In this case, they, as my students, were learning to do the same.

The third and closing paragraph provided a “thank you for your time and attention” and they had to phrase how much the students would gain from the purchase. This was another part that I gave them word patterns for them to choose from, such as: “I am certain my students will greatly benefit from this valuable addition to our library.”

Then I had them choose one of four or five examples of closures (e.g., Yours Truly, etc.) and leave three blank lines for signing their name and print their name on the fourth line, giving themselves a degree title of M.A., Ph.D. M.F.A., M.D., etc. following their name depending on how high they wanted to pursue their education. As we did this, I explained to them the differences in the titles and how much education each took and how they would apply in the differences between fine arts degrees and doctorates. I let them choose what they were aspiring to become. Under that, I asked them to write the name of the department they were supposedly working in (e.g. Department of History for historians, etc.)

As a last task, I asked them to sign their name. This really got them stirred up. They said things under their breath to me such as: This better not get me into trouble, you better not be sending/showing this to anybody, etc. They were so uncertain about the outcome that I had their complete attention throughout the task.

When we were finished, they saw for themselves that they had composed an acceptable business letter. In their portfolios, they now had a personalized business letter they would never forget and could easily replicate. I could have ended class early by stopping there but then my thought went back to Westwood as a shining example of a well-educated population. So I had my students bring out another piece of paper and had them address it to the City Manager of their hometown city using the library purchase letter as a guide.

This time, their concern and their personal wording of problems in their community related to graffiti, crime, trash, noise pollution, street lighting repairs, potholes, playground equipment that needed replacement at their local park, etc. became the subject of the letter. They asked the City Manager to repair, fix, and/or pay attention to their own concerns in their neighborhoods. This letter made them laugh and talk and share about the troubles they had in their communities. The writing gave them a place to properly vent what they saw as problems in their neighborhoods. This time, however, I had them sign off as "City-Name Resident." They were very happy with their results and we were four minutes beyond class time, they were so engrossed in their writing.

I was asked by the students if they could mail these letters, whether mailing the letter would get them in trouble, if they could just say "a lot of problems" and I explained how the City Manager would not know who to delegate the task to if a broad term was used. They had to be specific and clear in order to get a response. About a third of the students did mail their letters. They felt good about their writing and could see that they had done something to contribute to their own neighborhoods that might bring results. They had gained useful knowledge.