

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ A Pedagogy Care Package

Every teacher needs a little help now and then. But not everyone knows where to find it. Where can you turn when you need a boost in the classroom?

**BY DIANA FUSS AND
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Have you ever looked at your syllabus for the next day and thought, *I have no idea what to do in class tomorrow*? Have you experienced the thrill of designing an ambitious new course followed by the despair of actually pulling it off? Have you added a new text or topic to a successful class but found yourself at a loss for how best to approach it? Have you reviewed that course you've taught for years—the one that feels a little too familiar—and wondered if there might be ways to freshen it up?

We've certainly felt all these things. With more than fifty years of university teaching between us, we have run the gamut from newbies with no teaching experience to veterans looking for new ideas.

There are few places we would rather be than in the classroom. The classroom is our intellectual home. And yet we still have much to learn about how best to spend our time there as we seek to engage, energize, and enlighten students who may not always share our excitement. Let us tell you how we discovered what other teachers are doing—and how you can benefit from their advice.



Meet Diana Fuss and William Gleason



Diana Fuss and **William A. Gleason** (who prefers Bill) are colleagues in the Department of English at Princeton University, where they teach courses on literature, film, and pedagogy. Separately, they have authored or edited eleven books on a wide range of subjects, from poetic elegy and identification to architecture and environmental studies. Together, they are the co-editors of *The Pocket Instructor: Literature*, the first comprehensive collection of hands-on, active learning exercises for the college literature classroom. Both Diana and Bill are past winners of Princeton's President's Award for Distinguished Teaching. Diana can be reached at dfuss@princeton.edu, and Bill at bgleason@princeton.edu.

Finding Recipes for Success

We know what teaching tricks and learning activities we've tried in our own classrooms, but how do other people help their students learn? How do they organize their classroom time? What kinds of approaches and activities are working for them? And how do we find out?

Like us you may have reached out to a friend, colleague, or mentor and asked for advice. Or you may have turned to a reputable educational periodical, like this one, for the latest suggestions on how to help stu-

dents learn. You may also have consulted a useful teaching guide, perhaps Wilbert McKeachie's *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* (14th edition) or Anne Curzan and Lisa Damour's *First Day to Final Grade: A Graduate Student's Guide to Teaching* (3rd edition). Thankfully for all of us, there are many superb teaching handbooks available with general advice, from tips for leading discussion to ideas for building lesson plans.

Largely missing from these teaching aids however is what college teachers often need most: a comprehensive set of disci-

pline and field specific exercises to use in the classroom. The absence of such a resource has become painfully apparent to us in our own discipline of literary studies. As teachers we have long experimented

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > INSPIRING MODELS

The idea for *The Pocket Instructor* took shape over several years.

We had each spent time leading pedagogy seminars, guiding new teaching assistants and covering the “essentials”—what to do on the first day, how to lead a productive

discussion, how to give feedback on student work, and so on. There is a wealth of published material on these critical teaching skills.

But when we invited colleagues to share specific classroom *strategies*—their “go-to” activities—we realized how useful a

collection of such exercises would be. What if we could bottle up all these fantastic teaching techniques?

Since assembling *The Pocket Instructor* we've found not only our own teaching reinvigorated but also our work as trainers of graduate assistants. This past

spring, Diana was the first to teach our pedagogy seminar with *The Pocket Instructor*, and it worked as hoped.

New instructors combed the volume for activities to match their particular needs, adapting them as necessary. Three instructors even ended up as assistants

in Bill's large lecture course, where they introduced their own favorite exercises to the rest of the teaching staff.

It's the kind of teaching we love best—not hard and fast rules but creative and crafty inspiration, ripe for sharing.

with workable solutions for teaching widely across periods, genres, and national literatures. And as leaders of our English department's pedagogy seminar, we have worked even harder to answer the hundreds of questions posed by our graduate students trying to do the same under even greater amounts of pressure.

In these lean days of shrinking Humanities departments, dwindling tenure-track jobs, and increasing numbers of adjuncts, literature instructors find themselves asked to teach everything from Medieval poems to graphic novels, often in the same semester. Teaching outside one's comfort zone is no longer rare. It's expected. Little wonder that we all need a little help acclimating to a changed teaching landscape where there often seem to be more questions than answers.

A Pocket Full of Questions

So what are the questions that preoccupy literature teachers?

Some are general: Is there a way to combat my students' fear of poetry? How can I encourage my students to talk about more than plot or character? How can I encourage them to talk more to each other? For that matter, how can I be sure they are actually learning what I am trying to teach them?

Others are quite specific: How can I possibly help students decipher Geoffrey Chaucer's language in *The Miller's Tale*, or the imagery in one of Shakespeare's sonnets? What is the best way to approach the question of race in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? What interpretive keys might help students unlock the experimental styles of Junot Díaz, Lydia Davis, or Zadie Smith?

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Sharing our own limited experiences, year after year, hardly seemed sufficient to answer these tangible questions. In fact we found ourselves ever more curious about what other college teachers were doing in their literature classrooms. How were they tackling the new challenges of teaching across an entire discipline? What particular exercises did they find most memorable? Had they discovered unique ways to teach literature as literature? It was clearly time to find out.

Calling in the Troops

With the help of Princeton University Press we put out an open call to college literature instructors inviting them to share a favorite teaching exercise. We hoped to solicit classroom practices that teachers found especially successful and their students particularly rewarding. We welcomed classroom activities based on any philosophy or method, and that could work at any institution. Our interest was in practical exercises that actually work.

When we looked over the manuscript that resulted—*The Pocket Instructor: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*—we immediately realized that nearly every contributor's favorite classroom exercise had one crucial element in common: a strong active learning component.

We should not have been surprised. After hundreds of studies, conducted over several decades, the message is clear. In active learning classrooms—those classrooms that rely less on lectures and more on interactive or collaborative work—students both learn more and retain what they learn longer. All students profit from learning by doing. And the students who benefit most are from groups previously left out in the

■ BEST PRACTICES > A SAMPLE MENU

We've divided *The Pocket Instructor* into eleven sections—*Discussions, Essentials, Stories, Poems, Plays, Genres, Canons, Words, Styles, Pictures, and Objects*—but you can also choose across the volume to whip up your own lesson plan. Here is a sample exercise, in capsule form, suitable for an introductory survey course on fiction. (Exercises are also adaptable for courses in adjacent disciplines that focus on texts.)

"THE SIX-WORD STORY," BY JACQUELYN ARDAM (UCLA)

A collaborative exercise that explores narrative condensation.

Genre: *fiction, especially short stories*

Course Level: *introductory*

Student Difficulty: *easy*

Teacher Preparation: *low*

Class Size: *small to medium*

Semester Time: *any*

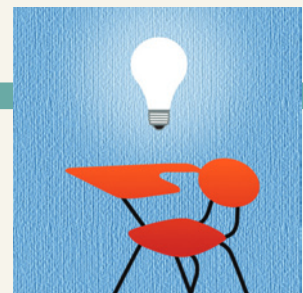
Writing Component: *in class*

Close Reading: *high*

Estimated Time: *45 to 50 minutes*

Exercise: Legend has it that Hemingway's favorite piece of his own writing was a six-word short story that he wrote to win a bet: For sale: baby shoes, never worn. Write Hemingway's six-word story on the board and ask the students for their thoughts on it. After this discussion, divide your students into pairs and ask each pair to transform that day's reading assignment into a six-word story.

Reflections: When you put students in an active authorial position, they are able to think about style from a completely different perspective and see a text's diction, syntax, and punctuation as deliberate.



cold: women, minorities, and shy or alienated students.

We dubbed our volume “the pocket instructor” because it highlights what is unique about the collection: a practical set of exercises that teachers can pull out of their back pockets whenever needed. One of the early users of *The Pocket Instructor*, Scott Herring at Indiana University, later came up with an even better phrase to capture the spirit and purpose of the volume. He describes it as “a pedagogical care package for days when you’re ‘off,’ or students are tired, or the ice needs to be broken again, or you just want to shake things up.”

For the exhausted among us, having 101 diverse teaching exercises, pitched straight to the many fields within the discipline, can be a lifesaver. With heavy

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teaching, service, and advising loads, none of us have the strength or endurance of superheroes. But we remain nonetheless deeply invested in the success of our courses and our students.

Don’t we all deserve a pedagogy care package?

A Recipe Book

Our care package comes in the form of a recipe book. For each exercise we offer navigation keys so users can estimate how much preparation might be involved, how long things might take, or how easy or difficult it might be for students to do. Making the most of our cookbook metaphor, we also offer cross-indexes to highlight exercises that are ideal for specific occasions, like the first or last day of class.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

CHALLENGES EVEN SEASONED TEACHERS FACE

What if my students won’t talk? Lighten the mood with a classic discussion starter like “The Sixty Second Game” or “Fish-bowl.” These are guaranteed to turn even the quietest students into lively, engaged participants.

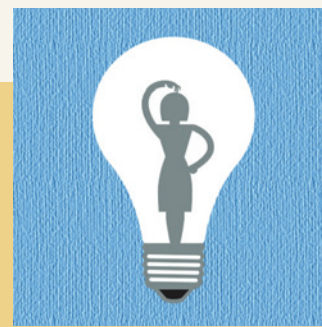
What if my classroom has bolted-down desks? Active learning exercises are almost always more effective in classrooms with flexible seating. If the chairs can’t move, the students may have to!

How do I know my students will take these activities seriously?

Without guidance and supervision some students may feel they have license to let others do the work or to goof off. So it’s important to strike a balance between too much freedom and too much regimentation. Your aim should be to promote intellectually adventurous critical thinking guided from the start by a clearly stated learning goal.

What should I be doing while my students are engaged in group work?

Depending on the exercise, you might consider joining in, either by adding your-



self to an existing group or by doing the work in parallel on your own. Or you might simply move quietly from group to group, checking in on their progress and offering encouragement and suggestions. Keep an eye on what’s happening (and on the clock!), but try not to become overbearing. The students need to learn to work together to reap the full benefits of active learning.

We had a wonderful time testing many of our featured exercises to see what other concoctions might be possible. The best teaching recipes, we quickly discovered, are flexible and adaptable. Basic steps, and even ingredients, can be changed. Teachers can choose to closely follow directions or to creatively improvise, tailoring each learning activity to their students.

Of course, not every idea may be appealing to you. Only you know your students. In our own forays into our pedagogy cookbook we have been delighted by how many new ideas we have found there. And gratified by how well some classic exercises still hold up.

There are activities that deploy tried-and-true close reading aids (circle, underline, annotate, imitate) and exercises that invite creative visualization (write, draw, map, design). You’ll even find exercises that get students on their feet (debate, declaim, stage, perform), a process that truly brings out the “active” in active learning.

In the works is a companion volume, on Writing, edited by our colleagues Amanda Irwin Wilkins and Keith Shaw in the Princeton Writing Program. As the profession

re-dedicates itself to the fundamentals of good teaching, now seems to be the ideal time for all of us to share our very best classroom exercises.

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