



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range * (434) 982-2815 * trc-uva@virginia.edu * <http://trc.virginia.edu>

Fall 2004

Personalizing the Engagement

Marva A. Barnett, TRC Director and Department of French

In adapting Theodore Panitz's idea of "writing a letter to your students prior to the semester" for my recent 300-level French course (enrollment of 20), I had several purposes:

- To help students realize what they already know and how that prior knowledge can help them learn new material
- To provoke each student to consider what s/he hoped to learn in the course
- To make clear that the course would best succeed as a team effort
- To encourage serious students and discourage those looking for an easy course
- To level the playing field among students whom I knew from previous courses and those new to me

The letter filled my objectives well. Students offered a wide variety of goals and confirmed my suspicion that they brought diverse background knowledge and skills. Moreover, since they e-mailed me their letters before the course began, during the first class I was able to alleviate many anxieties they had voiced (for example, no knowledge of Hugo's work, perceived low-level French ability, fear of speaking in class).

On the last day of the course, I returned students' letters and asked them to spend five minutes writing individually about these topics:

- How their goals had changed, if at all

- To what extent they felt they had met their goals
- What future course improvements they would suggest for students with goals similar to theirs

The ensuing discussion was very productive. More importantly, students had a chance to reflect on what they had learned; they finished the course conscious that they had accomplished much – if not all – of what they had proposed for themselves. Colleagues have found such an invitation effective in courses enrolling as many as 60 students. Such a letter can, of course, be adapted to various goals, including encouraging students to succeed in a demanding course and alleviating such worries as math anxiety or fear of contributing to discussions. Here is my version, in English translation:

Dear colleagues: [first names of students]

Welcome to our course on selected works of Victor Hugo, a writer whom many have called a genius, whom others have called a madman, and who remains a French monument. Whether or not you already know something about Victor Hugo, I'm happy that you will be accompanying me on this adventure of discovery and rediscovery of Hugo's works.

In this course we will be working as a team. We'll be discussing a lot, and you'll have the opportunity to explore and explain some aspects of Hugo's work that engage you personally. I will be there to help you understand, interpret, and pursue your research. We'll learn a great deal about Hugo's writings, but will also learn about him personally and about the literary and political movements of his period.

So that I can get to know you a bit, I invite you to write me a letter, in French of course, about the topics below. Please write an essay at least 500 words long (typed or word-processed, doublespaced), and E-MAIL IT TO ME BY JANUARY 14. Treat all the questions, but write a well-organized essay, not a list of answers. The order of your ideas depends on you, not on the order of this list:

- What will you be able to contribute to the course?
 - Consider your knowledge in a number of areas: for example, art history, French history, political movements, European and British literature, Hugo's works that you may know, and so on.
 - Consider, too, your skills: for example, Do you discuss well? Do you like to invite others to join in the conversation? Are you logical and analytical? Are you imaginative and creative? Do you understand and interpret images and figures of speech well? Do you speak and/or write well in French? Do you work effectively on a team? Can you help others learn?
- What are your goals for this course? What do you hope to learn? Please consider all the aspects of the course, not only information about Hugo's works.
- In your opinion, what's an effective discussion? What is necessary to create successful discussions? What are the roles of the professor and the students?
- What worries or concerns do you have about this course? What could I do to help you succeed?

Thank you very much for engaging in this dialogue with me. I'm looking forward to reading about your ideas and interests and to meeting you on the 15th.

Best wishes,
Marva Barnett

Works Cited: Panitz, Theodore. *Learning Together: Keeping Teachers and Students Actively Involved in Learning by Writing Across the Curriculum*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 2001: 2-6.