

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Contextualized Learning Using Rhetorical Strategies

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

Working collaboratively with faculty from different disciplines, English department faculty develop contextualized composition assignments to align with other pathways (e.g., STEM, social sciences, allied health, criminal justice, business). The idea is to make the writing course germane to student interests and to expose students to the language, culture, and communication style they will use in their discipline. Instead of recycling the same old assignments (like a conventional research paper), the faculty contextualize the learning experience, engage students in applied learning opportunities, and use other high-impact practices to better prepare students for the real world. The assignment described hereafter originated for use in a humanities pathway, and students worked individually, not in groups.

The instructor asks students to think about a variety of themes while they read *Salvador* by Joan Didion:

- the imagery of daily, commonplace murder and abduction
- totalitarian governments under threat, the use of terror by a totalitarian regime, and the undercurrent of the effects of terror campaigns on the civilian population
- the civilian population under threat and death squads

- rebel forces and civil war
- U.S. government complicity in criminal acts

After completing the book, students write a 2,000-word “what if” essay using rhetorical strategies. They must imagine themselves as they are now, with the added twist of somehow being involved in the El Salvador conflict during the oppressive civil war between 1980 and 1992. Students select from a list of roles (see below) and must describe what role they would play and why. The essay, written in the first-person point of view, should leverage at least three elements of the book to support their reasoning and must accurately describe the roles of government and the opposition relative to the role they selected. Students share their essays in class through brief, informal presentations.

Students choose from the following roles for this specific assignment:

- Salvadoran government military soldier
- Salvadoran rebel soldier
- Salvadoran paramilitary death squad recruit
- Salvadoran citizen informant for the government
- Salvadoran citizen informant for rebel forces
- Salvadoran citizen caught in the middle pressured by both sides

- Salvadoran citizen who witnesses abductions and killings of fellow citizens
- American photojournalist who witnesses body-dumping grounds
- American military advisor advising Salvadoran government troops
- American diplomat
- American CIA field operative
- Catholic nun or priest, knowing that Catholic clerics have been the target of brutal murders

Notes From the Instructor About This Innovative Teaching Practice:

This collaborative approach to developing composition assignments started as a faculty-led initiative with support from the administration.