

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Script Interpretation and Performance

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

Interpretation and performance allow students to bring history to life by engaging in modern interpretations of historical pieces. The course in which this method is used is a Theatre History course, which is not usually performance-based. Performance is brought into the class by having students work in groups to analyze a historical text (typically a script), translate it into contemporary language, and perform it. One example is asking students to translate and perform “La Vida Es Un Sueño” by Pedro Calderón de Barca—a Spanish script from 1635. This particular script is not only written in Spanish, but it is written in a highly sophisticated prose that is not easily translated. As such, students must work together to translate the script and understand the meaning. Students are encouraged to use contemporary language, slang, colloquialisms, and profanity (if appropriate) in their translations to fully express the meaning of the piece.

As the students work through their interpretations, the instructor meets with each group to ensure that they are moving in the right direction and to offer guidance. The instructor also uses this time to ensure that each student is participating—by doing some of the research, taking notes, offering suggestions, or generally contributing to the conversation. After the piece has been translated into contemporary language, the group must perform the piece for the class. The students who take this class are typically

theatre majors, so the performance piece comes more easily to them, but the work of translating the piece to more fully express the meaning pushes the students to work harder and help each other. This particular activity is used several times throughout the semester when covering especially challenging scripts and takes place during one 75-minute class period. As such, the instructor selects pieces of the script in advance that she thinks the students will be able to work through and perform in that time.

Classes are typically small, so there are usually only two groups of four or five people. It is difficult to achieve variety with the groups because the class is so small, but the instructor tries to ensure that the exact same group of people do not work together every time.

How to Ensure Participation in This Innovative Teaching Practice:

By actively engaging with groups and talking to each participant in the group, the instructor ensures that students are actively involved in the group process.

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This type of activity may also be useful for literature courses, where students are reading classic novels that use forms of writing that are unfamiliar to students or difficult to understand, such as Shakespeare.