



Reflective Teaching Portfolio

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I admit it—I'm a gimmicky teacher. I learned this long before I became a professor, back when I taught junior high students in a summer program in the Bronx. Although some professors might not admit it, the goals in junior high are exactly the same: hold the students' attention, teach them some material and, most importantly, get them to think for themselves. A good gimmick can help with all three goals. I make extensive use of images, audio and video in the classroom, but most importantly, I take a great deal of care in how I use each image, each clip, and each document, so that the class is well-paced and unfolds to maximum effect.

I remember the first time I thought up a college-level lesson plan that I was proud of. For homework, I had each student read a different short selection (2-6 pp.) written by a left- or right-wing activist or politician from the 1960s or '70s. I told them all to come to class in character, and encouraged them to come in costume. On the day of the class I had them go around the room, introduce themselves, and say one thing that was wrong with America. Then I had them stand up and mill around the room, talk to each other in more detail, find others who shared their values, and then sit down with them and write up a political platform and a strategy to put it in place. Then the class reconvened as a whole, each group presented its platform and strategy, and the students discussed them in character and then out of character. That year (and most times I've used the exercise since), the right wing coalesced into one group with shared goals, and the left wing broke into several groups that, even within each group, could not agree on much. All on their own, they'd learned one of the most important lessons of that era. Aside from the group comprising Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Phyllis Schlafly and some "forgotten Americans", the only one that held together was one that included Ken Kesey, Charles Manson, and assorted hippies. Manson, played by a large linebacker from the Duke football team, rambled on and on about how LSD unlocks freedom, and the need to dose the water supply, until a student from another group finally interrupted by asking, "Mr. Manson, what exactly is it that you do?" "Oh," he replied quickly, "I kill people," and seamlessly dropped back into his speech. The room exploded in laughter, which I generally think is a good sign of learning.

In this portfolio I have included syllabi from the two classes I currently teach at FIT, plus some of my gimmicks:

- audio clips from walking tours I conduct during my class New York City and the Invention of America (though not from the walking tours the students themselves develop—I gave up asking if I could tape them long ago, because the answer has always been no);
- the final exam from that class (the directions are in the liner notes of the cd);

- some photos of World War II propaganda that my students from the U.S. History survey course have created and drawn on the board, reflecting material from Studs Terkel interviews to which they had already listened; and
- the extra-credit final exam from that class (I stress writing skills over memorization, and so give students the option in the survey course not to take any exams).

I also want to point out the unorthodox use of textbooks in the survey course, which is spelled out in greater detail in the syllabus. There are two textbooks—Paul Johnson on the right and Howard Zinn on the left—and every week two students are responsible for reading fifteen or twenty pages from one or both of the textbooks and coming to class with a paragraph to read to the class, one question about the paragraph for me, and one discussion question for their classmates. Thus, each student in the class hears many passages from both textbooks over the course of the semester (and reads along in her own copies as the passages are read aloud), but only reads a small portion on her own. This is another way in which I have chosen to stress depth and critical thinking over a superficial understanding of large amounts of material. The discussions that grow out of this exercise are generally lively and often connect historical material to fundamental social, political, and cultural questions we face today. For example, last week a question about New Deal policies led to a discussion of the unpaid internships that most FIT students are required to complete, and whether they violate the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Fourteenth Amendment. In any history classroom, but especially at FIT, students need to see how historical questions affect their lives, and I put a much greater emphasis on this goal than covering material that students will soon forget anyway.