University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

To Improve the Academy

Professional and Organizational Development
Network in Higher Education

1985

Silk Purses

Calvin B. Peters

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad>

Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Peters, Calvin B., "Silk Purses" (1985). *To Improve the Academy*. 87.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/87>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in To Improve the Academy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Silk Purses

Calvin B. Peters

University of Rhode Island

Truth be told, it can't be done. The pop quiz, the points for attendance, the points for participation, the extra credit, the early exam, the make-up exam, the practice, and countless other distortions of proper academics have failed to make a dent in the ennui which grips the majority of students. Perhaps, and I think this is a long shot, these and assorted other practices have made students appear more eager (usually judged by their mere appearance—a fact subject to influence by the awarding of points), but I think none of us believes such gimmickry has thoroughly motivated students to engage a course, much less a discipline, with genuine intellectual curiosity.

So, why keep trying? Why indeed. The fact is many don't, and with good reason. After all, if every trick in the book (and some you thought up yourself) has been tried and found wanting, why not simply resign yourself to casting pearls before swine and get on with it? I believe there are a number of good arguments against such resignation, but it is not my intention to adduce them here. No purpose would be served by such an exercise; motivating

faculty members to seek to motivate students—well, truth be told, it can't be done either.

With what, then, am I left? Among other things, a suspicion that there remain a number of faculty who, despite the proved ineffectiveness of the methods, persist in trying to motivate students to set about studying and learning with real eagerness. It is to this group of die-hards that I want to address the remainder of my remarks.

In a sense, there doesn't seem to be much to say. If nothing works—and at the risk of overstatement, I believe none of what follows works either—why go to the trouble of sharing anything? The answer is simple. Just because these ideas don't work doesn't mean they aren't fun. And if you have devoted yourself to a hopeless task, you may as well have fun while you're at it.

What follows, then, are eight specific, feasible, and I think fun suggestions for waging war on ennui. Mind you, you'll still lose, but you'll go down smiling. A final caveat: These suggestions are based on experiences in a large (300-plus students, nearly all not motivated) course in which the acquisition of skills in thinking and the development of a desire for learning were regarded as more important than the mastery of a set of facts. Should you desire to employ these suggestions in a different context, some adjustments may have to be made.

SUGGESTION 1

There is a school of thought that holds that students are like mules: first you've got to get their attention. The attention-getting device recommended is a grade, preferably a low one. Whether there is any wisdom in this approach or not, there is, I believe, some merit in the idea of early and frequent examinations. Exams, particularly good ones and particularly those that evaluate more than memorization, are difficult to write. True enough, but you have to admit that each exam you give adds up to two classes you don't have to lecture—one to give it, one to go over it. Still, it is not a good trade-off unless there is something to be gained. There is.

An examination schedule that includes an early exam (say, the end of the third week) plus frequent additional exams (say, the seventh week, the eleventh week, and a comprehensive final the fifteenth week) offers some specific additional advantages. First, it provides you and your students a gauge of their progress. They will know early on how they stand, how well they are studying, how well they can perform the kinds of tasks you expect of them. Second, an early and frequent examination policy allows time for adjustments. If your students do well on concept formation (“Which of the following is an example of . . .?”) but poorly on application items (“How would Freud respond to a claim that . . .?”), you can reallocate your efforts in the hope of alleviating this problem. Finally, the early and frequent use of examinations highlights their true function—devices to promote learning. Frequent examinations give proximate goals to which classroom activities can be referred. In addition, the review of an examination—explaining why the correct answers were correct, and, perhaps more important, explaining why the incorrect answers were incorrect—can illuminate the modes of thinking and reasoning you are trying to develop.

SUGGESTION 2

Help is best given before it becomes a cry of despair. “Is there *anything* I can do?” And, if you take the first suggestion, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to provide assistance to your students. Before each of your examinations, you will want (remember, you’re the one who is devoted to this hopeless task) to schedule a couple of organized help sessions outside your regular class meetings. I usually give examinations on Fridays, so I schedule help sessions on Wednesday nights and late Thursday afternoons. Don’t let the “organized” throw you; not much has to be done. I think the best way to organize help sessions is to distribute a week before the examination the question stems that will appear on test day. These stems organize the help session for you. “What’s the answer to 12?” “I don’t understand 14.” From there, the session

becomes a battle of wits. Your students seek, in ever more clever ways, to pry out of you precise answers. You graciously refuse to be fooled and offer instead valuable study hints, sample solution algorithms—"To answer 15, you need to do three things . . ." You do need to insist that the session begin and continue with students doing the asking. Surely, you don't want to give an additional lecture. One more thing. Don't fret about distributing your questions. They are, after all, the things you want your students to be able to do. Worry more about writing questions that test more than memorization and about transforming perfectly good application questions into rote by giving away answers to some wise guy 18-year-old who is more clever than you think.

SUGGESTION 3

Each of us has had an encounter like the following: "I don't understand why I did so poorly. I read the books, I came to every class, I took notes, I came to the help sessions, I studied for hours. When I got to the test, I just couldn't do it. What can I do?" "Try harder," we reply. Or, if we are on a campus that has one, "Have you gone to the Study Skills Center?" The answers don't seem very satisfying, either to us ("There must be more like this one.") or to them ("But this is the only course that gives me trouble."). What can be done?

If you are ready for some additional heartbreak (and who isn't?), you can create your own study skills workshops. It is not so hard as it sounds, but it can be more infuriating than you imagine. The process is relatively straightforward. Select several specific study skills that you suspect may account for the tried-and-failed syndrome. I identified *ex nihilo* note-taking, text-reading, studying, and test-taking. Schedule a workshop on each skill and advertise them. Very simple, very easy.

The not so simple and the not so easy part is planning and conducting each workshop. (This isn't the heartbreak; not yet.) While the activities in each session are important, it is crucial that the materials you use be actual course

materials. Use a videotape of your last lecture. Use passages from assigned reading. Use actual test items. The virtue of the illustration of study skills with your course material is that students can develop skills inductively rather than having to transfer general skills to the specific circumstances of your course. Okay, but what do you do?

Show videotaped portions of a lecture. Ask students to take notes. Ask them to compare their notes with each other's and with their previous notes. Show another portion. Take notes yourself. Explain why you took the notes you did. Establish a set of note-taking guidelines. Show the original portion again. Have them take notes using you and the guidelines as a model.

Or, give them a set of exam items with some memory, some concept formation, some application questions. Have them answer the questions. Ask them to explain how they eliminated incorrect choices. Show how a question is structured. Explain how to discover what is being asked. Design a general algorithm for attacking questions. Demonstrate its use. Give them a few more questions for practice.

The variations are, of course, endless. Be imaginative, but concentrate on the development of skills, not content. Oh, now for the heartbreak. Don't be surprised if your turn-out is low. It seems many students want better grades without doing anything different. Don't give up though; those who come benefit. But then, they were probably motivated to begin with. An artifact of this suggestion appears in Figure 1.

SUGGESTION 4

There is perhaps nothing more stultifying than listening to a lecturer, any lecturer, day after day. Most of us know that, so we try to build into our courses some alternative activities. Ah, discussion. Now there is an activity that with the motivated can be productive and uplifting; with the unmotivated, it is clearly a different and dismal story. Can anything be done with discussion to motivate students, especially when you've got 300 of them? The

Soc. 202-01**DO YOU:**

TAKE NOTES DURING LECTURES THAT MAKE NO SENSE WHEN YOU STUDY?

TAKE NOTES THAT MAKE SENSE BUT HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THE MATERIAL ON THE EXAMINATION?

READ YOUR ASSIGNMENTS AND FIND YOURSELF UNABLE TO MAKE SENSE OUT OF THEM?

STUDY FOR HOURS ONLY TO FIND YOURSELF UNPREPARED FOR THE QUESTIONS ON THE EXAMINATION?

USUALLY PICK THE WRONG ANSWER WHEN YOU HAVE NARROWED DOWN A MULTIPLE CHOICE ITEM TO TWO CHOICES?

If your answer to any of these questions is "yes" (or even "sometimes" or "once in a while"), then you will want to plan to attend the special **YOU CAN DO BETTER IN SOCIOLOGY** workshops. These workshops are designed to help you take better notes, understand what you read, study more efficiently, and decipher multiple choice test items. Each of the workshops will deal with actual course material in a way that will enhance your academic skills. At the same time, you will also increase your comprehension of the concepts and ideas of SOC 202. Each session will involve you in an active way (through discussion, role playing, and practice) in improving your learning abilities. Plan now to attend.

Thursday, February 24, 4:00–5:30, C-275

"WHAT DID HE SAY?": TAKING BETTER NOTES

(Bring your notes from class and your book)

Tuesday, March 1, 4:00–5:30, C-277

"IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME": UNDERSTANDING YOUR READING

(Bring your books and reading notes.)

Thursday, March 3, 4:00–5:30, C-275

"PREPARATION AND PERSPIRATION": STUDYING EFFICIENTLY

(Bring your books, your reading notes, and your notes from class)

Tuesday, March 8, 4:00–5:30, C-277

"TESTING, 1, 2, 3, TESTING": TAKING TESTS

(Bring your old test and quiz.)

FIGURE 1. Study skills workshops announcement.

answer is: no, you can't motivate them; yes, you can try, even with 300. Here's how.

First, don't forget everything you know about discussion activities. Remember that small groups work best, that specific tasks are better than vague ones, that short

tasks are better than long ones, that feedback is essential. With those things in mind, arm yourself with a handful of blank cards and venture forth.

What I want you to do is break up into groups of about four or five—lean across, turn around, bend down, just make some groups. Once you have done that, I want each of you to come up with a list of words that you associate with Karl Marx. They can be anything—ideas, adjectives, positives, negatives, anything. Then, I want you to use these words to write a short profile of Marx. I'll give each group a card to record its profile. In a few minutes, I'll collect them, and we'll see what kind of fellow Marx was. You don't need to worry about whether or not you're right. I want to know what you associate with Marx—tell me what you think of him.

That's it. I'd give this exercise 10-15 minutes, collect the cards, read aloud a sample of them, comment on those, give a brief sketch of my own, and consider it a job well done.

Of course, there are many different kinds of tasks that can be utilized in this way. Lists, explanations, solutions, reasons, and so on. It is useful to tie directly some of these activities to instructional objectives: "This is the sort of question, the kind of thing, that you will confront on the examination. So, this is a good opportunity to practice and to gain some sense of where you stand in terms of your understanding." One thing you will notice is that some people won't be doing what you say. But don't worry. They don't listen to your lectures either.

SUGGESTION 5

A tried and false (remember, none of them is true) method for motivating students is to encourage them to express their opinions about the sorts of things discussed in class. In small classes, this is often done through essay assignments: "Give me your opinion about . . .," "Take a position on . . .," "Tell me what you think about" Simply because you've not got a small class is no reason to give up the essay. Sure, you're thinking, have your

assistants read them. What if you haven't got any? Still, don't give up the essay.

The problems with essay assignments for large numbers are reading them without losing your mind and returning them to students in a reasonable time. These two problems can be solved relatively simply by staggering your assignments, due dates, and topics. For instance, break your class into, say, ten essay groups. Give the first group an assignment the third week of the semester, due the fifth week; give the second group a different assignment the fourth week, due the sixth week; and so on. Oh, you will still have to read them all, but not all at once and not all on the same topic. I suggested to my students that they limit their essays to 300 words. I was able to read, evaluate, and to some extent respond to 35 a week without being hopelessly overburdened.

SUGGESTION 6

Advertising, despite its tastelessness, has a few lessons for all of us. Among them is: If you want people to get interested in a product, have a contest. And the more contest-like, the better—announcements, entry blanks, prizes, and, of course, winners. The basics of running a contest are simple. (1) Find a medium of expression that is slightly exotic. I, for instance, have picked out art and limericks. (2) Tie the substance of the contest to the substance of your course. "Draw a picture of . . .," "Write a limerick about. . . ." (3) Be willing to give the entrants—each of them—something they value. I have settled on extra credit points, roughly two percent of the course total per contest. (4) Design announcements and entry blanks. This is important. You can't expect them to think it's a contest if it doesn't look like one. (5) Have a prize for the winner.

Contests are easy and silly. They do, however, let students know that academia is less serious than meets the eye. Some artifacts from this suggestion appear in Figures 2 and 3.

FIGURE 2. Margaret Mead art contest winner.

ANNOUNCING
THE FIRST ANNUAL
CHARLES DARWIN MEMORIAL
LIMERICK CONTEST
WIN POINTS AND PRIZES!
All you have to do is write a limerick:
Could Anything be Easier or More Fun?

Yes, friends, once again you can make your passage through Sociology 202 a bit easier with a few fun filled hours of imaginative thought. THE CHARLES DARWIN MEMORIAL LIMERICK CONTEST promises to be one of the highlights of the academic year. You won't want to be left out.

Entering is easy. All you need to do is select a topic bearing on evolution and human society and write a limerick about it. The limerick must be five typewritten anapest lines with an AABBA rhyme scheme. There are no other restrictions! Let your mind run free!

Oh yes, the prizes. Each entry (one per student; my apologies to you budding poets) will be awarded one bonus point. The entries will be judged by a panel of independent experts on the bases of originality, content, humor and cleverness. The author of the winning entry will be awarded a cash prize of \$5.00 (American) plus a lifetime membership in the Sociology and Anthropology Club. What could be more valuable?!

So start now! You can win five bucks writing rhymes for Chuck. The contest closes at 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, April 24, 1984.

FIGURE 3. Contest announcement.

SUGGESTION 7

In addition to the planned contest that I've just described, there is also the impromptu, in-class contest. The guidelines are much the same. You still need prizes and still need winners. But you don't need announcements, entry blanks, and—for those of you who believe the limerick isn't proper—you don't need an exotic medium. Here's what I suggest. (1) Design a multi-part task that will form the substance of the contest. A set of interpretation or

application questions will do the trick. (2) Have your students work in teams (three to five students each). This way, the one or two motivated students may infect a few others. I know; unlikely. (3) Have each team complete in class one part of the contest task. Collect these and use them to winnow the entrants to a manageable number of finalists. (4) The following class day, announce the finalists and have them present orally to the class the completion of the rest of the contest task. (5) Pick a winner. You can use judges or applause or your own judgment. Just pick one. There you have it.

This sort of contest has some advantages. The foremost among them is that it can involve students in high level learning in a way that is non-threatening. Of course, it can bring a little pizzazz and variety as well. An artifact of this sort of contest appears in Figure 4.

SUGGESTION 8

It is never too early to start. Your first class will do; indeed, it is a must. Don't let your students get a leg up on you the first day. Don't let them sit there while you drone on. Or, even worse, don't let them sit there until you've passed out the syllabus and then let them go. If you want your students to engage your course actively, be sure they do so on the first day. Sure, they may not yet know anything, sure, they may not have their books; sure, they may not be ready to take notes or even to listen really. They can, however, be encouraged to do something other than just sit.

The chief consideration here is that the activity be something students can do without preparation and without needing to know anything. What you want to show them is that their participation is both desired and expected. A couple of activities come to mind.

Using the discussion technique described earlier, ask students to compile a list of the ten greatest events in the history of the world. Or, the ten greatest people. If you are more adventuresome, ask each group to develop one question about anything they'd like to ask you. The content

of these activities is not important. Your solicitation of and response to student-generated information will go a long way toward establishing an atmosphere that encourages active modes of learning.

Read their lists of events or people—as many as you can. Comment on some, on similarities, on who or what is

REMARKS ON MARX IN CLASS CONTEST

QUESTIONS ???

ALL QUESTIONS DEAL WITH CRITIQUE OF HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT

1. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE GERMANS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN HISTORY?
(TO BE ANSWERED TODAY)
2. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE ABOLITION OF PHILOSOPHY?
3. WHO ARE THE PROLETARIAT AND WHY ARE THEY CRUCIAL TO MARX'S IDEA OF CHANGE IN SOCIETY?

* ALL ANSWERS MUST BE IN YOUR OWN WORDS;
NO QUOTING ALLOWED THE JUDGES WILL
DECIDE WINNERS BASED ON ACCURACY, COHERENCE,
COMPACTNESS

FIGURE 4. Notes on overhead transparency for an in-class contest.

on the list and who or what is left off. And, if you must, show how what they think is important is connected to the content of the course. If you go the question route, be prepared for anything. Reading the questions in a disbelieving tone and with a shake of the head will suffice even in the stickiest situation. But try to answer as many as possible—or as many as good taste allows. You'll find, I think, that the questions will carry the day. The point, of course, is to get something from students other than blank stares. Doing it early will make it easier later. And it is more fun this way. Really.