Six Best Practice Structures, Two Disciplines, One Instructor

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Six Best Practices
Structures, Two Disciplines, One Instructor
James Brewbaker

A common perception about teacher educators is that they preach better than they practice. Too many accomplished elementary and secondary teachers recall an education professor’s tedious class on the limitations of the lecture—delivered, sad to say, in a traditional lecture format. Too many accomplished teachers recall courses in which learning was measured solely through pencil-and-paper, short-answer recognition-and-recall tests that promoted cramming, test taking, and, too soon thereafter, forgetting the material in question. Too many accomplished teachers learned their craft in spite of faculty who were anything but pedagogical role models.

To the greatest extent possible, teacher educators should practice what they preach, should model those instructional strategies that they hope the next generation of classroom teachers will adopt and adapt to their own practice. Teacher educators need to be the guides and mentors who, ten years after graduation, are recalled as the source for enlightened, effective classroom practice.

Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar—in Methods That Matter (Stenhouse, 1998)—delineate an authoritative, convenient set of best-practice structures for teaching and learning that almost any teacher, whether at the primary, secondary, or college level, may incorporate into her/his teaching. These six structures (small-group activities, classroom workshop, authentic experiences, representing to learn, integrative units, and reflective assessment) are discipline neutral—that is, they may be used in one way or another in most mathematics, English, science or other classrooms with equal effectiveness. Though the particulars of these six structures may be more obvious than not, the reader may find Table 1: Six Best-Practice Structures Defined with Examples, following on page 55, helpful.

Daniels and Bizar’s claim that these six structures do, in fact, add up to “best-practice” is derived from their analysis of standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and numerous other professional organizations. They observed consistent recommendations from and across many or most of these organizations; these groups promote teaching at all levels that is, among other qualities, student-centered, experiential, reflective, and authentic.

As a teacher educator who wants to practice effectively more than preach about best practices, I use these six structures to a greater or lesser extent in every course. In many instances, my use of a strategy such as journaling or role-play is long-standing. Other strategies (Admit 1 Tickets, for example, a representing-to-learn strategy) are inspired directly by Daniels and Bizar. Their Methods That Matter is a required text in a graduate course, EDCI 6158: Trends and Issues in Middle-Grades/Secondary Education that I teach.
To use Pink/Green/Blue, first assign students to one of three groups or teams, Pink Team, Green Team, or Blue Team. I do this on the first day of class by distributing colored five by eight index cards as students enter the room. Students fold cards lengthwise, and, for the first three weeks or so of the course, they are used as name plates until I learn their names. They also learn that they will be, in a number of class sessions, members of the Pink, Green, or Blue team.

In a Pink/Green/Blue activity, students respond to a reading assignment by completing one of three pre-assigned tasks: (1) Pink writes a 100-200 word comment or reflection on the reading; (2) Blue reads comments and reflections of several other class members (the Pinks) and then sends a comment or response (75 words plus) to two of those students; (3) Green formulates three to five questions dealing with the chapter and, in class, leads a small-group discussion of the chapter. The three tasks are ungraded and, as a result, less pressured than other assignments.

In subsequent Pink/Green/Blue assignments, roles are rotated.

Using Six Best-Practice Structures to Plan ENGL 2145: Introduction to Poetry

When I learned last summer that early in 2004 I would have the opportunity to teach ENGL 2145: Introduction to Poetry for Columbus State’s Language & Literature Department, I immediately began thinking through the course, what I hoped students would learn, and how I might design a series of assignments and experiences that would help them learn. After skimming the syllabuses of several English faculty who taught the class, I decided that they seemed to have considerable leeway in how they approached the course—that is, Professors X, Y, and Z’s students were reading different texts, studying different poets and poems, and completing different assignments and papers. In my mind’s eye, I began thinking of the kinds of things I was doing in my other courses, EDUF 2215 in particular. I reviewed activities that were both productive and popular with students, activities that allowed me to set learning in motion rather than shove it down people’s throats.

Table 2: Infusion of Six Best-Practice Structures in Two Lower-Division Courses illustrates in general terms what I came up with for Introduction to Poetry. The left column encapsulates most of the best-practice strategies I use in EDU 2215, the product of three years of planning and nudging the course to a point that feels about right. The right column details most of what I am doing in ENGL 2145, the poetry class.

Please understand: I did not set up a nice little table as I planned the latter course. Rather, I found myself thinking along these lines: Okay, EDUF 2215 is rich in actual experiences because it requires forty clock hours of field experiences. How can I bring a strong element of authenticity to the poetry course, a course inevitably more bookish and less tied to real-world places and people? Similarly, I found myself thinking about representing-to-learn activities such as Admit One and Exit Tickets that I use to good advantage in EDUF 2215. I wondered, How will English majors respond to completing an Exit Ticket as they leave the room? Is this too cutesy, too gimmicky for them?
### Table 2
Infusion of Six Best-Practice Structures in Two Lower-Division Courses

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Establish heterogeneous groups for long term-projects, random groups or partners for limited tasks. Adapted Literature Circles to selected readings. Assign pink/green/blue discussions through Nicenet.</td>
<td>Small-Group Activities</td>
<td>Use heterogeneous groups for long term-projects, random groups or partners for limited tasks. Assign partners to research a contemporary poet and make presentation to class. Assign pink/green/blue on-line discussions groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set aside class time for major group (four students) investigation of an educational trend/topic/issue. Assign group presentation of their findings and points of view.</td>
<td>Classroom Workshop</td>
<td>Develop with students CSU’s Favorite Poems project modeled after Robert Pinsky’s <em>Americans’ Favorite Poems</em>. Set aside class time for planning, developing, and organizing the anthology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require forty hours of field experiences plus six hours of Professional Development Events. Engage student in planning authentic experiences for children and adolescents.</td>
<td>Authentic Experiences</td>
<td>See CSU’s Favorite Poems project (above); require a self-selected “something-real” activity, with these suggestions: field trip to poetry reading at Georgia Tech, participate in African American Read-In, submit poems to CSU student publication, among others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journaling activities such as Admit One and Exit Tickets; draw-a-teacher exercise; one-minute skitlets (a role-play review for final test).</td>
<td>Representing-to-Learn</td>
<td>Journaling activities such as Admit One and Exit Tickets; genre activities such as oral readings of selected poems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce students to “Dazzling Teachers: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow” (this is an interdisciplinary unit cutting across history, the arts, sociology, and professional education).</td>
<td>Integrative Units</td>
<td>You decide: how might we bring an interdisciplinary element to the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field experience reports (highly metacognitive, causing teacher candidates to self-assess their progress); draw-a-teacher exercise plus reflection.</td>
<td>Reflective Assessment</td>
<td>First-class/last-class write-about-a poem exercise; use of peer and self-assessment for partner research on a contemporary poet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To view these classes on-line, visit www.nicenet.org, and click “join a class.”

Class keys:  
ENGL 2145 Y90Z90E92  
EDUF 2215 65006A2
Several activities, assignments, and projects in the new poetry class please me, among them our in-class development of a poetry anthology modeled after Robert Pinsky’s *Americans’ Favorite Poems* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2000). Then poet-laureate, Pinsky issued a national call in 1998-1999 for “favorite poems” together with explanations as to why a specific poem was, to a given American, a favorite. In our copycat project, class members will submit three poems and explanations: their own favorite; the favorite of another student, professor, or CSU staff member; and the favorite of a family member or friend from outside the campus. This project fits the workshop structure well. It is also real-world oriented—that is, “authentic.”

I’m especially interested in seeing how a new exercise, First-Class/Last-Class Write-about-a-Poem, works out. At our first meeting, I distributed a copy of a poem minus the name of its poet. I instructed students, simply, “Write about this poem for twenty minutes.” I then had them seal what they wrote in an envelope. At the end of the semester, perhaps as a part of their exam, I will return envelopes, ask students to open them, and write once more, this time discussing how their perceptions of the poem have evolved over fifteen weeks and how, in particular, they are able to grasp more of what matters when one looks at and responds to a poem. This two-part exercise, it seems clear, will greatly enhance students’ ability to reflect on what they have learned during the term. It goes without saying that seeing what they write will reveal a great deal to me as well.

One month into the semester, both courses are perking along. The new strategy I am using in both, Pink/Green/Blue, works—that is, students understand and carry out the tasks assigned to each color group, whether the topic is one’s philosophy of teaching or the characteristics of the ballad. Pinks write thoughtful, engaged responses and interpretations of text materials on nicenet, Greens write their own thoughts back to the Pinks, and Blues come to class ready to lead all groups in a discussion of the materials.

**Conclusion/Summary**

Much is made in the literature about best practice. There are times that one might conclude that best practice is matter of semantics—that is, “What I do is best-practice. What you do is something else.” In their authoritative *Methods That Matter*, Daniels and Bizar demystify the notion of best practices in a straightforward, easy-to-follow manner. As a result, they provide a rich source for either relative newcomers or seasoned faculty who want their classes to impact students in powerful, memorable ways where the emphasis is on active, engaged learning. Two courses described here—EDUF 2215: The American Educational Experience and ENGL 2145: Introduction to Poetry—exemplify one professor’s application of their ideas.

**References**


Selected Strategies Based on Daniels’ and Bizar’s Methods That Matter

Exhibit 1
Dazzling Teachers—Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

Today we begin a six-week exploration of dazzling teachers. We all know what dazzling teachers are: those special human beings who, through a combination of knowledge, personal qualities and highly developed teaching skills affect their students in powerful, indelible ways.

Our exploration will focus on these inquiry questions:

1. In specific terms, what are the qualities of dazzling teachers?
2. What do recognized dazzling teachers have to say about their work, their preparation to teach, their ongoing professional development?
3. What should I do to become a dazzling teacher—do I possess the basic qualities to develop into such an individual?
4. What examples of dazzling teachers are there in literature, film, and television?

Among the activities and projects that you and members of your group will conduct are these:

- Interview or survey teachers and their students
- Read sections of Mike Rose's Possible Lives
- Visit websites of professional organizations including the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)
- View and respond to media representations of teachers such as “Boston Common” and “Mr. Holland's Opus”
- Create dramatic presentations or skits on your findings to share with members of the class
- Create web-based personal resumes for the year 2022 (by then you will be a dazzling teacher for sure!)
Exhibit 2
Authentic Experiences Exercise (EDUF 2215)

Two Items from our Nicenet Glossary

Authentic experiences: a structure or setting for learning based on real or realistic activities, goals, and experiences. Authentic experiences are one of the six best-practice structures recommended by Daniels and Bizar. School, many theorists agree, can be a sterile environment. Skillful teachers overcome this problem by bringing reality to the classroom or taking learners into reality. Examples: visitors to class, field trips

Eliott Eisner’s definition of curriculum: a series of planned events that are intended to have educational consequences for one or more students.

LangArts/Performing and Fine Arts

Grades K-5: Lillie Bailey, Kelly Grantham, Chiquita Jones, Amber Usrey,
Grades 6-8: Lakisha Freeman, Ashley Barrow, Jessica Pittman,
Grades 9-12: Sabrina Prophet, Anjelica Fetty, Holly Robbins, Richard Williams

Math/Science:

Grades K-5: Sarah Balak, Christina Holder, Tamara Payton,
Grades 6-8: Beth Zamarippa, Melanie Jones, Lori Klein,
Grades 9-12: Obadiah Booker, Buddy Kelly, Teresa Szabo, Josh Tate

Social Science/History

Grades K-5: Danita England, Ashley English, Ashley Thames, Adrienne Youngblood
Grades 6-8: Stephanie Billings, Amanda Free, Heather Kovacevich, Teresa Tsui,
Grades 9-12: Andrew Graham, Nicole Ligon, Joshua Tate

Assume that you will be in charge of twelve children or adolescents on a field trip to Cooper Creek Park tomorrow. Given your age group and content fields (above), what are your plans for an hour or so of authentic (real) experiences or events? What do you think will be their educational consequences?
Exhibit 3
Literature Circles Adapted to a Textbook Selection or Excerpt

Note: Literature Circles is widely used in reading, language arts, and English classrooms. This activity is an easy adaptation for classes on other, non-literary materials.

Instructions to Students: In this activity, you will play one of four roles, as follows:

January-March birthdays: As a Quotation Guru, you will select two important sentences to reread aloud to your group because they are important.

April-June birthdays: As the Connector, you will find and explain to members of your group two connections between the selection and your own experiences.

July-September birthdays: As a Terminology Freak, you will identify three key terms or phrases that group members will discuss.

October-December birthdays: As an Artful Artist, you will draw a visual representation of something from the selection to share. Members of your group will discuss what you have drawn; after that, you may explain your artful creation.

Read or re-read __________ in the chapter ____. Then “play your role” and be ready to contribute to your small group in twenty minutes. For today, your Artful Artist will lead the discussion.
Exhibit 4

Pink/Green/Blue

A. Example for EDUF 2215: The American Educational Experience

Pink/Green/Blue Team Responses (Parkay chapter 1). First, all students will read Chapter 1 in Parkay. Then, depending on whether you are Pink, Green, or Blue, do the following:

Pink: No later than noon on January 21, write (on the nicenet conferencing link) a 100-200 word comment or reflection on any aspect of the chapter. Identify clearly the page and passage you are commenting on.

Green: No later than 8:00 a.m. the following day (prior to class), read the comment or reflection of several other class members. Send a comment or response (75 words plus) to two or three members of the class.

Blue: After reading the chapter, formulate three-five questions dealing with the chapter. Be ready to show Dr. Brewbaker a written copy of your questions and be ready to lead a small-group discussion of the chapter and your questions.

B. Example for ENGL 2145: Introduction to Poetry

Read: Read poems by Elizabeth Bishop and Dylan Thomas plus two of your choice.

Pink/Green/Blue Assignment

Pink: No later than 4:00 p.m. on January 19, write (on the nicenet conferencing link) a 100-200 word response/analysis/interpretation of the Dylan Thomas poem.

Green: No later than 3:00 p.m. and prior to class, read the response/analysis/interpretation of other class members. Send a comment or response (75 words plus) to two students.

Blue: Formulate three questions dealing with the Thomas poem. Be ready to lead a small-group discussion of that poem and one additional poem of your choice.
James Brewbaker is Professor of English Education at Columbus State University. Formerly Chair of Curriculum and Instruction (1983-1995), he is poetry editor of English Journal. He edited *Poems by Adolescents and Adults* (NCTE, 2002) and won first place in poetry at the Sandhills Writers Conference in 2003 and 2004.