

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 6 Spring 2009

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 6.1 A New Start

*Denise Stephenson and Holly Ordway*

Happy New Year and welcome back! As the new co-editor of GIFTs, Holly says, “I’m delighted to accept the baton so graciously passed by Dana Smith in the last issue. It’s been a pleasure working with Denise to help prepare this selection of GIFTs: I hope that you enjoy them too!”

A new semester: an opportunity to polish up our lessons, try new things, and above all, get to know a new set of students and rise to the challenge of helping each of them succeed in our classes. The Spring is also a time to appreciate our southern California setting: for those of us who visited family in cold, gray, cold, snowy, cold locales (sense a theme here?), the sight of the Pacific Ocean viewed from the Oceanside campus is a gift in itself.

This edition of GIFTs offers readers three different ideas, all of which have interdisciplinary application. **Nancy Lee’s** GIFT tackles the perennial question of helping students understand course expectations by focusing on being clear and specific. We know what our syllabus language means, but do students? Nancy explains how working out the specifics of course expectations, such as defining “timely” in terms of returning homework, benefits both instructors and students. Read this one soon; it’s sure to help with that ever-important first-day-of-class discussion.

**Shannon Jager** provides us with a detailed example of a “process analysis” assignment using Lego® blocks, in which students build a Lego® creation and then write directions for another group to replicate the creation. Yes, toys in the writing classroom! Kinesthetic learners (like us) benefit greatly from hands-on activities to make

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### 6.2 Setting a Fuller Context for Course Expectations

*Nancy Lee, Physical Sciences*

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*Shannon Jager, Letters*

### 6.4 Offering Student Choice in Assignments

*Holly Ordway, Letters*

#### Submissions

Submissions are always welcome. There is rolling on-line publication and print distribution during FLEX week.

Please submit work to M/S 9 or [dstephenson@miracosta.edu](mailto:dstephenson@miracosta.edu)



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[www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter](http://www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter)

abstract concepts more concrete. Here, Shannon explains how this activity helps students grasp the importance of clarity in writing and the need for revision. Not only that, but the activity itself can be used to teach English vocabulary, awareness of audience, and group interaction skills.

**Holly Ordway's** GIFT focuses on assignment design. She explains how giving students limited, carefully designed choices can make assignments more meaningful for students and more interesting for instructors as well – a win-win

situation! Holly works through several different approaches to offering choices, and closes with four tips for successfully using choices in student assignments: balancing difficulty level, promoting accountability, using scaffolding, and being willing to experiment.

No matter what your discipline, there's something for you in this collection of GIFTs. Enjoy, and have a great semester. 🎁

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### 6.2 Setting a Fuller Context for Course Expectations

*Nancy Lee, Chemistry*

Students don't always understand our shorthand. In fact, our syllabi don't always communicate as fully as we would like. With expectations, this is particularly true. I developed a handout I call, not surprisingly, "Course Expectations" which delineates more precisely what students can expect from the course and from the instructor, along with what the instructor will expect of them. The document uses the criteria for evaluating tenured faculty along with some of the questions from the student survey as a framework. These two sources are often ignored as we write our syllabi, but I found them quite helpful. For example, one of the items in the student survey is an evaluation of faculty returning graded work in a timely fashion. In this new document, I stipulate how the phrase "timely fashion" translates to various graded items in my course (see table).

Another section discusses mutual respect. While talking about the expectations, I mention that they need to refrain from rolling their eyes or making sounds when others are talking or asking questions. Time and again this has proven

beneficial in stressful conditions that would have otherwise led to less than respectful behavior between the students in class.

The document includes a variety of information. Some of the most useful sections are: Treat all students fairly; Workload for general chemistry; Encourage questions, comments and discussion in class. Stating expectations of students is common in syllabi, but I find that students understand such expectations more clearly when delivered in the context of how I agree to meet their expectations.

I also point out that in my class students will think deeply and thoughtfully about concepts instead of just memorizing them. These combined expectations make a huge difference, especially with less mature students.

I go over this document with the class. I benefitted greatly from composing the document, as I identified areas where there were prior gaps in communication with the students' expectations of me and the course; then I was able to pinpoint

solutions. In addition, the class flowed much more smoothly for students and instructor because we had a common framework for our respective expectations during the semester.

To view the complete Course Expectations Document, please go to the GIFTs website <<http://www.miracosta.edu/StudentServices/WritingCenter/gifts.htm>> or contact Nancy directly. 🎁

#### Prompt return of student work

	Guarantee	In Practice
Quizzes:	1.5 weeks	1 week or less
Midterm:	1.5 weeks	1 week or less
Homework:	1 week	usually next class period
Lab Reports:	2 weeks	1.5 - 2 weeks
Other:	1-2 weeks depending on the assignment; papers take a little longer to grade	

*One example of the specific expectations Nancy provides.*

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### 6.3 Process Analysis Game

*Shannon Jager, Letters*

“Process analysis” is a more common type of writing than many people realize. In business it is common to write a “procedure” document for a particular task, or as part of a job description. Process writing is more complex than it appears at first glance, and a practice activity such as this will stay in students’ minds longer than oral or written instruction.

In the “Process Analysis Game,” students work in teams to build Lego® objects and then write directions for another team to follow. Students will discover the necessity of including every step of a process to ensure that the audience can achieve the desired result. This hands-on

activity has several goals:

- to use language skills to work together in a team in a fun, low-stakes situation
- to communicate clearly to an audience
- to engage students in a concrete activity with visible results where failed communication comes out in often humorous ways
- to practice transition words and other instructional terms in describing a process (for non-native speakers this might include *first, second, next, finally, and remember to, or be sure to*, as well as prepositions of location such as *on, under, beside, adjacent...*)

To begin, divide the students into teams of three or four. Show examples of Lego® blocks, and discuss as a class ways of describing the blocks; agree on a common term for the connecting pegs or bumps on each type of block.

#### Process Analysis Group Directions:

1. With your team, carefully examine the blocks you have been given, noting the size, shape, and color of each. Experiment with different ways of connecting the blocks to each other.
2. Create something – anything – using ALL of your blocks. It doesn’t have to look like an object in the real world – it can be completely imaginary.

You may trade one or two blocks with another team or with the bag of extra blocks, if you need a particular size or shape to achieve your design. For example, you could trade a red rectangle for a blue square.

Do not let any other team see your object. Finally, give your creation a name.

3. List all the steps you would take to re-create this item. Appoint one person to write down the steps while the rest of you describe them. Begin your instructions with the phrase, “How to make a \_\_\_\_\_.” After you have listed all the steps, read over them together to be sure you all agree and that nothing has been omitted.
4. Draw a picture of your creation, noting the color of the blocks on your sketch, so that you can remember what it looks like. Then disassemble (take apart) your object and put the blocks back in the bag, along with the instructions you have written for making it again. This should not include the diagram.

Review prepositions of position and transitional expressions.

Give each team the sheet of directions on the preceding page and a bag containing six or seven medium-sized Lego® blocks of various colors and types, keeping some in “reserve” for possible trades. Have the teams sit in different parts of the room so that they cannot see each other’s work.

\* \* \*

When students have finished the activity, have each team trade bags of blocks and instructions with another team. Each team should then attempt to recreate the exact object the first team made. After everyone has finished, have each team show what has been made, following the directions given, and have the original team evaluate it, showing the sketch they have drawn.

Have the teams discuss what went wrong, if their creation wasn’t duplicated by the other team. How or what would they need to change in their directions? How could they make the writing more clear? Would a diagram help?

This activity takes about 15 minutes. It is an excellent way to involve kinesthetic or tactile learners in the writing process as well as demonstrate the necessity for writing clear instructions. It can also be used to lighten the mood in the room, to build community among students and to demonstrate how miscommunication has real consequences.

The “Process Analysis Game” originated as an activity for an upper-division technical writing class. The students found that it’s easier to build something than explain to someone else how to build it. The activity and follow-up discussion helped them become more receptive to revising their own process papers.

I have also used this activity in ESL classrooms for language practice. While students at first think of it strictly as a game, they quickly see the importance of using correct prepositions. The visual and tactile experience of the game also helps them learn and retain the meaning of the various prepositions. 📦

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### 6.4 Offering Student Choice in Assignments

*Holly Ordway, Letters*

Giving students choices in assignments can be a win-win situation. For students, increased choices promotes buy-in to the task and engagement; students also learn how to manage their own choices. For us, providing student choices means more variety, so we can stay fresher and more interested during grading. Offering an element of student choice also teaches critical thinking and allows students to go in-depth in areas that we don't have time to cover in class.

However, we all know that "free choice" doesn't mean "good choice"! Here are some suggestions on how to incorporate choices into assignments without creating a free-for-all.

#### To Choose or Not to Choose, That Is the Question

Let me start by saying that "student choice" is not a panacea. If you want students to cover certain areas of a subject, be sure to specify that they do so. Don't assume that students will choose a topic that matches your objectives, unless you provide guidelines for them to do so.

Next, there is such a thing as "too much" student engagement. Some topics are controversial! The benefit of controversial topics is that they generate immediate interest; the drawback is that they often generate more heat than light. If you allow "hot" topics, be prepared to deal with them. You can focus and nuance the

"hot" topics, or limit the options. Alternatively, you can ban them entirely. My experience is that while some student engagement enhances student work, too much engagement hinders it, as students become so committed to their ideas that they are unwilling to listen to constructive feedback. My own preference is to avoid deeply controversial topics and let students hone their thinking skills on interesting or challenging topics of a more neutral character.

#### What Kind of Choice?

There are two basic ways to offer choices: in mode of presentation and in topic.

To offer choice in mode of **presentation**, you might assign a particular topic and then allow students to choose different ways to present their findings: in a paper, oral presentation, poster, group activity, etc. The upside here is that it allows for different kinds of learning and engagement. However, I have learned to tread carefully. Not all modes are the same in terms of learning, so be sure that all the allowed options bring students to successful completion of the learning objectives for that assignment. Note that students will probably gravitate toward the perceived "easiest" mode, so be sure that all modes are equal in substance. Likewise, be cautious in allowing work in modes that you don't feel confident in your ability to evaluate. As an English instructor, I haven't a clue what differentiates an "A" musical composition or drawing from a "B" one!

The other option is to offer choices in **topic**, with a common mode of presentation. For instance, in my Literature 120 class, for our World Mythology segment students choose a particular culture and prepare an essay and presentation

about the myths and folklore of that culture. For a health class, students might do poster presentations on their choice of public health issues.

I find choice of topic to be the easiest way to provide student choices.

### The Nuts and Bolts of Offering Choices

Here are two ways to think about structuring an assignment to allow choices:

1. Use a single prompt, but a selection of readings to choose from to answer the prompt
  - Examples: A close reading paper, with a choice of poems; a history paper analyzing causes of war, with a choice of wars
  - The benefit here is that having the same prompt helps ensure fairness in evaluation; it also ensures that all students will engage in the same conceptual activity.
2. Use multiple prompts, based on the same reading or content area
  - Example: Students study *Macbeth*, but some focus on character analysis, others on theme, etc.; or students research arthritis, but some focus on prevention, others on treatment.
  - The benefit here is that students can draw on class lectures and discussion

to inform their individual projects; this approach also ensures that all students will engage with core material.

### A Few Tips

#### Consider difficulty level in your choices.

Are all the options of equal merit, not too hard or too easy? For instance, my first essay in English 201 asks students to write an analysis of a poem... chosen from a list of six. Often students ask if they can choose their own poem, and I tell them “no”: I have chosen the options because they are rich enough to write a full paper about, while not being too difficult for this level.

**Promote accountability.** Set a date for choices of topic to be made and recorded. Don’t let students change topics at the last moment. Being strict promotes discipline and helps prevent plagiarism.

**Use classroom activities to scaffold independent work.** Schedule “check-up” times, asking students to bring in drafts, plans, ideas so you can check on them. These scaffolding activities can take from ten minutes for a brief check-in to an hour’s lesson, depending on the focus of the class.

**Be willing to experiment and revise your assignments.** The “choice” assignments that work well for me have gone through at least three or four revisions! The good news is that I’ve learned a lot from testing choices and seeing what works and what doesn’t. ❧