

# A Collection of gifts



Issue 18, Fall 2018

## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 18.1 In This Issue...

*Janette Larson*

As the guest editor of GIFTs, I'm pleased to present a collection of articles that almost defy categorization, but still complement each other. It is pedagogical Caldo de Res!! The unifying thread is student engagement through innovative practices. They are all Great Ideas For Teaching.

As instructors, we are used to asking students to complete a task or an activity to learn material or sharpen a skill. However, asking them to think and reflect on that learning can fall through the proverbial cracks. **Joe Salamon** makes a compelling argument for the value of metacognition and details his metacognition notes assignment. Metacognition can be met with resistance from students initially, but by building a semester-long set of notes, Joe has been able to create a space for students to work through challenging material and recognize advances in their knowledge and/or skills.

**Daniel Ante-Contreras** shares a classroom session idea where students are literally asked to play. Daniel outlines an activity where students creatively and collaboratively engage to build a game surrounding a gender issue, then engage their rhetorical skills to build understanding of the concepts they studied leading up to creating their games.

**Tyrone Nagai** guides us through a multifaceted activity called the six-word memoir that provides an opportunity for students to express themselves and connect with peers while engaging in the writing process. This fun and creative activity can have multiple functions that Tyrone details in his piece.

As part of MiraCosta PDP's ScholarScapes initiative, **Sean Davis** presented a TED Talk-style introduction to Project Based Learning. It was Sean's presentation of the innovative possibilities of PBL that led to **Lisa Fast** trying out the practice.

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*Janette Larson*

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#### 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)



Teaching  
Academy

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

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She shares her activity and the meaningful results in this issue.

Following that, **Rick Cassoni** offers some timely advice on how to foster a community in online courses through specific forum posts and regular video presence. If you've taught online before, you know that making a connection with students is vital for student engagement and academic success.

As you begin this semester, when a class activity or assignment works really well (brand new or tried and tested), consider capturing it in writing for other faculty and sharing with GIFTs.

<sup>1</sup>Caldo de Res is a Mexican beef and vegetable soup, and like most soups the ingredients simmer together to create the unique flavor profile of the dish. With nearly all the food groups present, it certainly qualifies as hearty sustenance. 🍲

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### 18.2 Developing Expertise via Metacognitive Diaries

*Joe Salamon, Physics*

Metacognition is frequently defined as thinking about thinking; in the context of learning and teaching, it is more frequently expressed as thinking about learning or learning about learning. Simply put, metacognition involves reflecting about one's learning. In any type of learning cycle, it is the key step to cementing the understanding in any given learning moment. This skill is one of the defining characteristics of expertise.

In my flipped Physics classes, I ask my students to write metacognition notes online once a week. These act as diary entries for students to keep track of their learning and graded solely on effort. Generally, I provide them a word count goal of about 200 words, and prompt them with questions that force them to step back and consider their progress on the current week's topics. In fact, even asking a simple question such as "What topic(s) did you struggle with this week?" provides an effective springboard for contemplation.

The effect of weekly metacognition notes on student performance and critical thinking is quite noticeable over the course of an entire semester: students with more focused and reflective entries perform better on summative assessments. In fact, this effect is causal, and not just a correlation. The improvement can be traced directly back to the quality of self-reflection per entry, and the best students use their older entries as study guides to determine whether they still

understand material from earlier in the semester.

The effort-based grading is crucial for students to make the most of this exercise. More specifically, a student that is around the suggested word count and has spent the majority of their writing on self-reflection deserves full credit. This type of low-stakes grading allows the students to use the exercise as a way to explore the technical vocabulary from the subject matter. Additionally, from the instructor side, the entries act as a barometer for the entire classroom's understanding by opening a window directly into the students' thought processes on the topics at hand.

With further feedback and input from an instructor, this assignment can provide a valuable sandbox for a student to ruminate and experiment with their ideas on the matter in a non-classroom context. Ideally, instructor feedback should focus directly on the students' learning cycles in the context of a growth mindset. For example, in Physics, it is common for students to have problems with drawing free-body diagrams. A good way to respond to a student reflecting on their performance on that topic could take on the form, "You did struggle with free-body diagrams this week, but don't worry: we'll be getting much more practice over the course of the semester! Review them when you get a chance."

Consider giving weekly metacognition exercises in your classes a try. Whether you are teaching in the humanities or sciences, the feedback cycle created by self-reflection allows every learner to kickstart the development of expert-like thinking. Although the student might not appreciate the effect on a week-to-week basis, they will thank you for the exercise towards the end of the semester once they start looking back at their old entries. 📖

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### **18.3 Play Space: Using Student- Designed Games to Facilitate Active Reading and Learning**

*Daniel Ante-Contreras, English*

In my classes, I create a lot of activities that meld together skills that I emphasize: understanding academic arguments, critically thinking about culture, and finding the intersections between scholarship and everyday life. In English 100, I have students read Henry Jenkins's article "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces" as an example of an academic essay. My students read the essay at home. For our class meeting, I create active learning stations that help students understand the argument, and its importance, without just going through Jenkins's paragraphs. Instead, I pull out some important quotes and attach them to activities: one involves students playing some of the games that Jenkins cites at our classroom computer; another station involves my students reflecting on their experiences as children with play spaces: they write down some of the places they played as a child, and then discuss in their group how gender was an underlying factor of what they could or could not do as children. There are a couple of other stations, as well.

During these sessions (which take place over two class meetings), I have had most success with one activity that specifically ties academic ideas to a specific cultural praxis. I have each group design—on paper—a game that

would address Jenkins's goal of creating games that both boys and girls would enjoy while teaching them important skills. (For Jenkins, it is important that boys be exposed to emotional literacy and that girls be given "free" play spaces where they aren't limited.) Each group receives a handout with questions on it, from "Who are your characters?" to "what are the rules of your game?" Students get competitive with this activity and incredibly creative, trying to find ways to—in some way, big or small—tackle issues of gender inequality or at least reflect on assumptions we have about gender. One of the more interesting games that one of my groups conceptualized went like this: you play as an alien archaeologist who travels to Earth, a planet that has long ceased to host life. The goal is to recreate how gender worked on Earth by sifting through clues that you find in the game.

After they complete the games, one representative of every group circulates through the other groups trying to "market" the concept of the game to them, flexing their rhetorical skills. To me, this activity is important not only because it helps students understand Jenkins's argument and better grasp the components of an argument (anecdotes; textual examples; broader scholarly debates), but also because it instills the idea that arguments also have real-world applications and that the cultural artifacts students engage with daily have deeper implications. They aren't necessarily just "entertainment." It also abstracts the process of reading, demonstrating that comprehension is not just about attempting to absorb information mechanically. Reading also involves, ultimately, an ongoing process of testing ideas and reflecting/reporting on the results. ❏

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### 18.4 The Six-Word Memoir

*Tyrone Nagai, English*

An activity I use to remind students about the importance of the writing process is the six-word memoir. The activity is based on *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*, which is a book edited by Larry Smith and Rachel Fershleiser.

I start by reading 15-20 examples of six-word memoirs to the class. I select memoirs ranging from humorous to sad to poignant. I also select memoirs from both celebrities and obscure writers.

Next, I ask students to write their own six-word memoir. I explain it is something they will read to the class and show to a peer, so it should be something they feel comfortable sharing. I only give students 60 seconds to write their memoir. I encourage them to write the first six words that come to their mind, even if they do not form a complete sentence or thought. The six words could be a list, for example. Also, if students write more than one six-word memoir in 60 seconds, then it's fine. Spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation do not have to be perfect.

Once the 60 seconds are up, I ask each student to read their six-word memoir out loud to the class. If a student does not want to share their memoir out loud, then I don't require them to do so. Here are two examples:

*I put my shoes on everyday.*

*Broken girl, but still striving success.*

In the next part of the activity, I ask each student to write a paragraph based on their six-word memoir. The paragraph must contain all six words from their memoir, but they can be used in any order. For example, they could use all six words in the first sentence of their paragraph, or they could write six sentences and use one word from the memoir in each sentence. Students could also mix and match, so they might have two sentences without any words from their six-word memoir, and two sentences that each use three words from their memoir. As long as they use all six words in a paragraph, then it's fine. The content of the paragraph is just an elaboration, explanation, or riff on their six-word memoir. The students have 10 minutes to write their paragraph.

After the 10 minutes are up, I ask students to trade their paragraph with another student in class. I ask the class to read their peer's paragraph and write one open-ended question or specific observation about the paragraph. Students also have to write "Edited by [student name]" on the bottom of the paragraph, so I can identify each student's question or comment. If I have enough time, I show some examples of peer review from Richard Straub's article, "Responding--Really Responding to Other Students' Writing." One of the points I want to emphasize is that the question or comment should be at least 6-7 words long for it to be effective. Also, it is best to write the comments on the margins of the page or at the end of the paragraph. The class receives 5 minutes to do this short peer review.

Once the peer review is done, students return the paragraphs to the original writers. The class has 5 more minutes to edit, add, revise, rewrite, or respond to their peer's written remarks. After students finish this step, the writing part of the activity is over. I collect the paragraphs and ask the class a few



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questions, such as “How did it feel writing with time limits?” “How did it feel reading another student’s paragraph and giving them a question or comment to consider?” “How did it feel incorporating or responding to a peer’s question or comment?” “What did you think of the overall quality of your writing?” This is an open discussion, and I am looking for one or two different students to answer each question. We discuss the idea that all writing has time limits, even take-home essays that are due in two weeks. We also talk through how it can feel uncomfortable to read a peer’s writing and give them feedback on it. I also emphasize that revising is very important, and all published material has been edited and revised multiple times before it is released.

I remind the class that the stages of the activity--writing a six-word memoir, composing a paragraph using words from the memoir, giving peer feedback, and responding to that feedback--mirror the writing process I like students to use during the semester: prewriting, drafting, editing, and revising.

Overall, this activity not only provides a microcosm for the type of writing process I would like students to use, but it also offers

an easy introduction to giving and receiving peer review comments. It is also an effective icebreaker and informal writing diagnostic.

Most importantly, the six-word memoirs give each student a chance to say something about themselves in class, and they get to explain their memoir in more depth to a peer through their paragraph. In *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy*, Laura Rendon describes one professor who found that “writing became a tool to connect students to the deeper aspects of themselves” (94), and as a result, writing became a contemplative practice for students rather than an abstract exercise.

As I review the writing from this activity, I craft a one-sentence comment to each student to reflect what I learned about them from their paragraph. This helps build rapport with each student in class and acknowledging students’ lived experiences is an application of validation theory, which answers Rendon’s call for “faculty and staff to get closer to students, to reach out to students to offer assistance, and to help students make social and emotional adjustments in college, if not in their personal lives” (35). ❧

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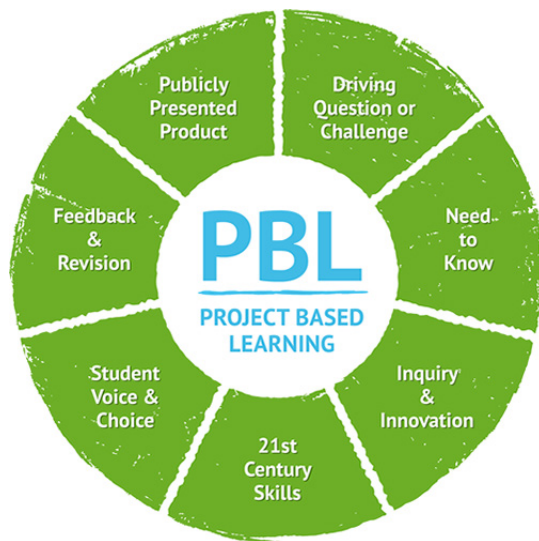
## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 18.5 Project-Based Learning

*Lisa Fast, Psychology*

According to Sean Davis, Project Based Learning is “a student-centered approach in which students learn about a subject through the experience of identifying a problem and offering potential solutions that are publicly presented.”

Davis utilized PBL in his Gender Studies course as an optional final project that became a meaningful experience for students.



#### Tenants of PBL:

1) *Establishing real-world connections in the projects* : Students came up with a central question to pursue and also figured out how to engage the campus community with this question.

2) *Building rigorous projects that are core to learning* : Students determined they wanted to have a student panel with moderators and would invite the MiraCosta community to attend.

3) *Structuring collaboration for student success*: Students were given feedback by peers and students fulfilled set roles in the project.

4) *Facilitating learning in a student-driven environment*: Instructor checked in to facilitate learning with built in time for reflection and revision. But, students made the decisions.

5) *Embedding assessment throughout the project*: Grading occurred at each step of the process of putting together the panel. The grade was based on all the components along the way, not the finished “product.”

#### “But, Does it Work?”

According to multiple sources, in comparison to traditional instruction, students participating in PBL:

- Become more engaged, self-directed learners
- Learn more deeply and transfer their learning to new situations
- Improve problem-solving and collaboration skills
- Perform as well or better on high-stakes tests

Sean said that PBL is one of the many ways of enacting “the educational dream,” which is providing better instructions to our students than what was provided for us in the past.

More information on Sean’s presentation and links to other sources can be found in the [Joyful Tidings page in Canvas](#).

I’ve been soaking up Jim’s emails and Sean Davis’s video about Project Based Learning (PBL)<sup>1</sup>. What grabbed my attention was the possibility that PBL could equalize the

learning environment for students. An article from one of the links that Jim shared says, “The research on project based learning tells us that it closes the achievement gap for underserved populations” (<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/project-based-learning/>). In its pure form, PBL involves creating an opportunity for students to work together over a significant period of time to investigate a real-world problem of their choosing. This is believed to foster “21st century skills,” such as critical thinking, working well with others, etc. Before devoting a significant chunk of time to PBL in my classes, I wanted to first dip my toe in the pond. The following is about my toe-dipping experience.

I chose to test run PBL in PSYC101 because many students in this course are in their first or second semester of college, and this is the course where I see the most variability in academic preparedness. Because PBL is believed to be more accessible to a wider variety of students (compared to other teaching methods), PSYC101 seemed like the ideal class to give it a go.

With this being my first attempt at PBL, I wanted an activity that could be completed in one class meeting. So I created one that was intended to give students an opportunity to develop several skills that are known to be challenging for most students in a PSYC101 class. These included: (1) deciding on a research topic, (2) operationally defining all the variables in the proposed research, (3) providing a priori predictions about how the results would turn out, and then (4) sharing their proposed research with the class. In the past I’ve used a lecture-based format to teach these skills. This time I briefly summarized the relevant concepts in about 25 minutes, gave students about 35 minutes to complete the PBL task, and then asked them to share their ideas with the class for the remaining 10-15 minutes.

### **PBL Task - Group Activity: 3 - 4 people in each group:**

- 1) Choose a topic:
  - Does having a pet have an effect on well-being?
  - Can video games be used to improve memory?
  - Does spending time on social media have an effect on a person’s feelings of loneliness?
  - Is it true that people are more likely to “meet the one” when they least expect it?
  - How can student’s attention during college lectures be improved?
- 2) Determine what you want to know about the topic and indicate what type of research method will be used.
- 3) Explain how all variables will be measured (operationally defined).
- 4) Provide a prediction of what you expect the results to be.
- 5) Share 1 – 4 with the class.

### **How Did It Turn Out?**

*Results on a Homework Quiz:* On a multiple-choice quiz that tested what they worked on in the PBL, students averaged 86%. This was a smidge higher than classes in previous semesters, whose averages were usually 82-83%.

*Results on the Exam:* On the multiple-choice section of the exam that tested what they worked on in the PBL, there was no difference between the average scores in my current classes and those of prior classes (who did not take part in PBL). However, the current classes kicked serious butt on the essay question, which asked them to explain how they’d study and operationally define trust. These were some of the best answers to an essay question that I’ve ever seen, and I enjoyed grading them (that’s a HUGE plus).



*Results on an Informal Student-Self-Report Survey:* After receiving their graded exams, I asked students to provide feedback about which class activities they believed most helped them to master the concepts they were tested on. Approximately half believed that the PBL-based activities were the most helpful, while about half believed that the lectures were most helpful. This is consistent with previous semesters when I've asked for feedback—there seems to always be a group of students who prefer to learn via lecture and a group who prefer to learn in groups .

Finally, in my personal observation of the PBL activity, it appeared that students were *very* engaged; it fostered student-student relationships more than any other activities I've tried, and it definitely challenged them. Moreover, students were motivated and energetic up until the minute class was over. The only negative I observed was that some students became lost and confused during the activity, and they seemed too uncomfortable to seek clarity from their peers. I stayed after class to follow up with them (there were maybe 3 or 4 students out of 40 who seemed confused), but they were unable to articulate where they got

“stuck.” This is one problem that I find easier to address when using a lecture because I build each concept, and I can stop when I see a confused face. However, getting left behind can happen in any group activity (not just PBL), and the more I use PBL, the better I will get at figuring out how to prevent individual group members from falling behind.

### What's Next?

I think I'll roll up my jeans and wade into the pond by expanding the number of single-class PBLs in PSYC101. I would like to have one Project Based Learning activity (that's completed in one class meeting) for each “section” of the class. So, one section would have a PBL activity about science in psychology, another on the biological approach to psychology, another on consciousness, etc. From students' engagement with the content, to their ability to explain how to operationalize a study through their written essays, the test run showed me that it is well worth the effort to continue to explore the pedagogical impacts of PBLs. 🎁

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## Great Ideas For Teaching

### 18.6 It's All About Community!

*Rick Cassoni, Computer Studies and  
Information Technology*

We all know that in our on-ground courses, we can make or break the semester in the first five minutes of the first day of class. Those initial minutes are crucial. I would contend the same is true for an online or hybrid course.

I have had great success with an "Ice Breaker Forum" that students complete in the first week of my online courses. I have a template for my information that students, copy, reply, paste, and update that asks them to provide their name, current job (if any), major, goal for *this* course and beyond, study styles, hobbies/interests, and one (or a couple of interesting) things about me. In addition to the entry, I also require students to either post a picture or avatar in their Canvas profile. By creating a connection with me (the instructor) and each other (classmates), a greater sense of community is built in an online course. I also have students reply to each other's entries for extra credit, so there is excitement getting to know each other, plus a bit of extra credit to create a buzz!

In addition to this forum assignment, each week I create a short intro video that goes over the week's tasks, highlights, and comments from the previous week. I have three secret words throughout the video that students need to listen for, so that they can earn extra credit.

The objective for both the "Ice Breaker Forum" and the weekly videos is to create a community with virtual relationships that are similar to what a student would experience in an on-ground course. I don't want students to feel like they are just slogging away on their own for 16 weeks.

As far as results, I have had many students comment on the sense of connection with others, as well as indicate that they were apprehensive about taking an online course. I hope (and assume) that the experience in my online courses have swayed some students to think that the online delivery method can be a positive one. 🎁