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# Just Tell Us What You Want

**Marilla Svinicki**

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Mike Smith was assigned a history section of one of those writing across the curriculum courses, the kind where he was supposed to introduce students to the joy of writing as a learning experience. On top of that, it was a required state history course the contents of which most students had in high school. So he was pretty sure students would be coming into the course with bad attitudes right off the bat. But he loved his subject and knew how exciting it could be once you understood the mysteries and problem-solving aspects of history instead of just concentrating on learning facts. He was determined to introduce his students to that aspect of the discipline.

To do this, he decided to use some fairly innovative techniques for teaching history as well as writing. First of all, since most of the students were in-state and already knew something about the geography and popular myths of the state, he could set them to researching how place names and myths came about, all the time concentrating on the process of historical research rather than memorizing facts. Then he decided to have them interview and write journals about long-time residents of the state and how their personal histories reflected the traditional state history. Instead of regular history texts, he got copies of old magazines and newspapers from the area and had students read and draw conclusions about the life and times of the ordinary people based on what was considered important enough to print. Then he was going to have them use the same process with current newspapers and magazines.

He thought all these things would be a lot more interesting than the usual recitation of facts that constituted the bulk of most history courses. He was really quite excited about the course plans. About three weeks into the course, the first "exam" was scheduled. It, too, was innovative. Instead of multiple choice, true-false facts, he asked the students to reflect on the significance of events in the period they had just been analyzing. They were to speculate on what would have happened had certain conditions been different. Their

performance wasn't very good, but he chalked it up to a lack of experience with this type of exam and assured them that they would do better next time—not good enough for them, however! The students were definitely up in arms over the exam grades, and there was quite a confrontation in class with three of them complaining about Mike's unorthodox approach.

Mike left class quite shaken, but determined that his new procedures would stay because they were intended to get the students to think instead of just memorize. A few days later, the department chair called Mike into her office and said that the irate students had complained to her as well. Their complaints seemed to center on their inability to see how they were being evaluated and where the course was headed. They felt at sea because they didn't feel they were learning any history at all. Mike never answered their questions and was impatient with them when they asked for clarification. And these weren't shlock students who were complaining; they were solid students with good academic records.

"Just what are you doing in that class, Mike?" challenged the chair.

## Use of the Case entitled "Just Tell Us"

The main focus of this case is the problem that instructors have when they try to adopt an innovative instructional format for which the students have not been prepared. There are two major sets of issues related to the problem. The first deals with what happens between the instructor and students. When these issues are the desired focus, questions to guide the discussion might include:

1. What does an instructor do if his/her methods are different from student expectations?
2. What effect does an unusual teaching/testing procedure have on students?

Issues and sub-questions that should come out include:

- student patterns of learning and preparation.
- student developmental stages and what happens when they are confronted with challenges.
- ways of easing students into new learning methods.
- ways and times to introduce new instructional methods.
- appropriateness of innovation in various parts of the course.
- appropriateness of innovation in testing.
- informing students about what they are getting before they register.

A second major issue in this case has to do with departmental lines of communication and how they can be handled. In this case we have students complaining to the chair who then calls the faculty member in for a talk. The overall guiding questions to focus the discussion might include:

1. What is the appropriate avenue for student complaints about teaching?
2. What should the chair do if students complain? And how should an instructor respond?

Issues that should be addressed if this focus is raised include:

- role of the chair.
- appropriate grievance procedures in a department under different problem circumstances.
- relationships between instructors, students and administrators.
- appropriate procedures once a complaint has been registered.
- relationships between the chair and faculty members.
- involvement of other faculty in day-to-day teaching decisions.
- whether chairs should be forewarned about changes.

- how a faculty member can respond to challenges to his or her methods.

In facilitating case discussion, I prefer to have the participants work in small groups initially to discuss the situation and voice their opinions. Then the large group discusses the case in response to questions that I pose. An interesting way of approaching this case is to have different groups represent the different constituencies, faculty member, chair, and students. Each group identifies a desired outcome and suggested ways of achieving that outcome. The three can then be brought back together for a discussion. The need to represent a different perspective often makes the discussion more insightful for each participant, particularly if the group is very homogeneous. With this case it is easy for faculty to blame the students quickly for being too rigid. By having to represent the students' perspective, at least one group gets experience in seeing things from the students' point of view.