

Teachers' Retreat June 2008

Basic Research and Discussion

Andy, Clara, Milt, Yuriko, Zorana, Caleb and Christine -- Steve as intermittent note taker

Looking at topics and focusing research:

- We began with Andy sharing some of his thoughts on how to get BRD classes up and running during the first term. He explained that he begins with **one-week topics from current news stories**.
- (Andy has kindly added the following section to my skeletal notes, and I have edited a bit - Steve)

Homework preparation for the following week's class includes summarizing the key points of the stories in note form, preparing comprehension questions, opinion statements, and discussion questions. In class, students take turns sharing these with others. After a couple of sessions of this, the skills acquired through these short presentations of information to each other should enable the students to work through longer 4-week cycles for presentations (For the final presentation, the students are in groups of ideally 3 and present a final or more polished version of their presentation). Presentations last around 10 minutes, followed by comprehension questions and then discussion for about a further 10 minutes or so.

Also, the students work through various organizational frameworks for their presentation notes and discussion: for example, for a controversial / divisive issue, such as capital punishment, an introduction - arguments for - arguments against - concluding opinions. Whereas a social problem -type issue may be better presented by:

Problem - Introduce the problem
Cause - Discuss the causes
Effect - Discuss the effects
Solution(s) Propose solutions

However, this is a rather rough distinction and within a social problem issue such as eating disorders, while nobody is likely to argue for anorexia as being a good thing, measures to combat it, such as whether or not introducing legislation to control the fashion industry is a good idea, could divide opinion.

- Milt noted that it's important to help the students **develop confidence and ability by helping students to understand and focus on the research process** in the first term before moving on to more difficult activities in the second term, such as "For & Against" issues.
- It was agreed that, especially during the first term, **teachers need to choreograph the term carefully to ensure that the students gradually develop comfort and confidence with pair discussion, note-taking approaches, developing research, and presenting their research** to one or more students.
- Clara noted that often **students need "baby steps" which may require making cycles longer than first planned**. In this regard we agreed that beginning with one- or two-class "cycles" can help students develop comfort with such things as pair-work discussion and note-taking, but eventually the students will probably need cycles of 4, 5 or 6 weeks even.
- Milt noted that it is very important to take small steps to in order to build confidence. He also mentioned that he has had good results with having students work with **"learning partners"** -- someone to "touch base with" on assignments, approaches and problems.
- Everyone is beginning classes with **"free chat,"** in particular trying to get students to talk to different people each week to build class familiarity and esprit de corp. **Putting students together in random pairs (rather than letting them talk to those they know) seems to work best.**

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Steve apologies for taking radically truncated notes that, at this point, he can hardly decipher. Any additional comments from those who took part would be much appreciated.