

“MY TWO CENTS” – A TEACHING TOOL

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Recently, there has been an initiative to increase the amount of writing in classes to give our students more practice in consolidating thoughts and communicating them in writing. There also are needs to have students interact with faculty more in classes, rather than having the instructor simply lecture for the allotted time, needs for course content to be relevant or updated to the world into which the students would graduate, and needs to have the student *perceive* the relevance of the material covered.

A couple of years ago, a student in my Introduction to Biology class finished a test and wanted to tell me more. Something had fascinated him during the period between tests, that related to material we had covered, and he wrote a paragraph he called “my two cents” at the end of the test, just to let me know that he saw something he thought was interesting and that the class material had allowed him to understand what he saw. It occurred to me that I could adapt this chance event into a teaching tool.

Since that semester, I have told my Introduction to Biology classes that each test will include a bonus question called “my two cents.” I ask the students to tell me about something they have witnessed (from television, video, reading, news, or real life) that relates to material we have covered during this test period. The intent is to have the students think about the material and to notice for themselves how it relates to their everyday lives (to have them make it relevant for themselves rather than just studying to pass a test). It also becomes an essay question and, thus, provides a mechanism for writing in the classroom.

I retain some of the better responses. Although faculty often have resources from the web or book companies to add questions or to relate modern relevance to course material, it seems to me that the questions raised by students themselves in a local situation might be the most relevant and applicable to them. Therefore, I use the comments from the “my two cents” questions gathered from the previous semesters to try to stimulate dialog during lectures.

For example, a female student once commented that she was considering selling her eggs because there was “good money” in it and “they” preferred women about college age for the paid harvesting of eggs. She and her friends had differed in their opinions about whether or not it would be appropriate. The main concern for many college students often is money rather than what the outcome would mean in the long term.

Obviously, the question of what all this would mean would be interesting material for discussion—if the eggs were used in fertilization and production of a child, who would be the mother? Is a mother defined best as whose genes are shared by the child or by who raised the child? Are there differences in biological, psychological, and sociological answers to the previous questions, and which, if any one, should be correct? If “who raised the child” is to be

the most acceptable answer in our present society, what happens if that child needs a family history for medical reasons? Should records about the egg-donor be kept for such contingencies, so people who resulted from egg-harvesting technologies could find their genetic mothers? Many such “mothers” want the eggs to be treated as cells, not as potential future offspring of their own. Are these questions difficult because we essentially have “stone-age minds trapped by a silicon-age technology”? Some comments from students can raise a battery of questions than can engage the class in discussion.

Although the potential for discussion is excellent, the instructor should be careful never to mention names of students who made comments, and in some cases it might be best to pretend that the questions are generalized and not specific to any students on our campus.

This approach seems to work well and has these benefits: 1) it represents a means of incorporating writing into the class; 2) it makes the students think about material and helps them look for the immediate relevance of their education to the world; 3) it can educate the instructor with valuable insights concerning what the students themselves are thinking or talking about; and 4) it provides perhaps the best modernization of topics for discussion in future (or present) lecture sections.

Biographical Sketch

Renn Tumblison received his B.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries from the University of Arkansas-Monticello in 1978, his M.S. in Biology from Arkansas State University in 1983, and his Ph.D. in Zoology from Oklahoma State University in 1990. Since then, he has taught in the Biology Department at Henderson State University.

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