Great Teachers’ Seminar Questions

One-page paper describing a personally attempted instructional innovation:

I teach operating a sewing machine by comparing it to driving a car. This usually works really well for me. Almost all of my freshman have learned how to drive by the time they get to MCC. It’s really a perfect metaphor. Both activities are pretty much the same regardless of what specific vehicle (or sewing machine brand) you are using. If you can drive a Chevy you can drive a Ford, all cars are basically the same, just like all sewing machines are basically the same. What you learn on one you can apply to all other makes and models. I came up with this teaching strategy because I realized that students who’ve never used a sewing machine before are intimidated by all the gears and dials on the machine just like I was the first time I sat behind the wheel of the car—there were too many things to pay attention to all at once. Eventually driving becomes a “Zen” thing in that we become so good at it it seems automatic and we don’t pay attention to all the individual dials and gizmos anymore and just relax and drive. Most of us usually do this daily and quite safely and that’s how I wanted them to feel about sewing.

The first thing I do is name and point to all the parts on the sewing machine and tell them what car part they are equivalent to: The foot feed is the gas pedal, it’s on the floor exactly where it is in a car. The power switch is on the side and also turns on your “headlights” at the same time. The foot of the machine is your tiny “car” that drives down the “road” of your fabric. There’s a reverse gear just like on your car. You can go fast or slow just like in your car. The only thing that’s not like your car is that there is no steering wheel on the sewing machine, instead you get to steer the road! In real life the car moves and the road stays put, but in sewing, the car stays put and you move the road. I make them copy me and name and point to all the parts explaining what each one does. Once they can do this, then I have them draw straight lines onto their fabric to sew on. These are the “roads” that they must “drive” down. The next step is the actual sewing.

The first thing they have to do when they sit down at the machine is make sure it’s ready to go. They have to turn it on, the lights come on automatically “for safety” because we always drive with our lights on. They have to place the “road” under the “car” or foot of the machine. Then we pretend that we’re driving the DeLorean from *Back to the Future* so we have to take the car out of “hover-park” and put it down on the road. That means lowering the foot onto the fabric. They have to make sure it’s “in the right gear” for which stitch we want to do. Then we slowly drive out of the “driveway” three or four stitches, then we realize we forgot something in the house, so we put the car in reverse and back up three or four stitches, that’s called a “backstitch” and we have to do it at the beginning and the end of every road we sew on. Once we’ve done that, then we’re ready to drive to grandma’s house. So we drive straight down the road all the way to Grandma’s house (or the end of the fabric). When we get there we need to then “reverse” into the parallel parking space outside her house, then pull forward into the space, or sew off the edge of the fabric. This is doing another back stitch. Then we can take the “car” off the road and put it back into hover-park while we visit Grandma, otherwise known as raising the foot of the machine and pulling the fabric away. All done. Then they get to practice this same thing another 10 or 20 times until they can do it in their sleep. Just like Driver’s Ed.

One page paper describing a problem you haven’t found a solution for yet:

My problem that I haven’t yet found a satisfactory solution for is one of motivation and personal responsibility. I teach Costuming, a class in which the whole point of the class is learning how to sew and then sewing the costumes for each production. It’s a freshman level class and one in which non-majors are allowed and encouraged to register. I don’t expect any prior sewing experience or knowledge. Projects are designed so that at five weeks into the semester (after completing four projects), the students should be fairly proficient at using the sewing machines and should be able to follow simple directions to construct a costume. The class is divided into lecture and lab hours in which the material is taught/demonstrated in the lecture period and students are supposed to return during lab hours to practice what they have learned by doing the four projects as well as working on costumes for the show. They are required to do 48 lab hours over the course of the semester. I also teach stage makeup and Stagecraft II in which the sophomore students are required to also put in 48 lab hours in either the costume shop or the scenic shop for a portion of their class requirements and grades. My problem for the entire twenty years of doing this is getting the students to come back and actually do the work to make the costumes. Here are the various things I’ve done to increase the likelihood that students return to do their lab hours:

1. I have always had a sign in sheet with stamps so that after they sign in and later sign out (and I remind them to do that before they leave) I stamp their page so that we both agree that yes indeed, you actually were here those hours. I still do this.
2. Whichever of my students were cast in a show, that student was assigned their own costume to make. I thought that would motivate them to be held personally responsible. Some of them it did, but others did not. And of course not every student was cast in a show, so that didn’t motivate those students to do anything.
3. At first I wanted consistency in that I wanted all the freshman to come in on TTH and the sophomores to come in MW and the work study students to come in on Friday as well. I made them stick to this schedule but it became impossible if students were cast in the opera (or spotlight which rehearsed MW afternoons) or if they ended up in any other afternoon course. So pretty quickly I had more exceptions to the rule than not.
4. So then I just made them fill out their schedule and tell me who will be in on what day so I can have work prepared for them. I wrote it all up and posted it so we would all know who was scheduled to work. But even that highly visible contract didn’t make them show up and work.
5. I also used to give them the option of doing 10 hours a week and only working on one of the two/three shows a semester so that they’d have either the first half of the semester off (to work part time) or the back half off. Very few people took advantage of this.
6. I gave up on the schedule contract and just asked that they did 5 hours per week every week. At the end of the week I could easily see (on the sign in sheet) who’d done their 5 hours and who hadn’t. They lost points off their grade for not getting their 5 hours in every week, regardless of what days they did it on.
7. Now I don’t even do that. Too many of them have part time jobs that I have to accommodate. Now I just ask that they get all 48 in at some point before the end of the semester. I try to accommodate their part time jobs’ schedules as well as let them make up hours that they’ve missed due to illness or if they need an afternoon off to study for a test or write a paper.
8. Lab hours became worth 20% of the grade. They were not motivated by losing 20% of their grade. I still had a student who did zero lab hours one semester, so...
9. I included a caveat in the syllabus the next semester under the attendance policy that if they did zero lab hours they would not earn a B in the course even if they made 100s on the rest of their assignments. My reasoning stated that 90% of their learning took place during lab hours so if they did zero lab hours they could only at most learn 10% of the material, so that even if they had 100s on all assignments, if they did zero lab hours, they got an F. I still had at least one person do zero lab hours. But a significant portion of my students still only do 50% of their lab hours. The sophomores are the worst about getting all their lab hours in.

So that’s the one issue of just getting them to show up. The other larger half of the problem is getting them to take ownership of the work. I tell them every semester, I don’t make the costumes, that’s not my job. It’s my job to design them and then to teach you how to sew, it’s your job to make the costumes. I already know how to do this, I don’t need any more practice. You however, need all the practice you can get and this is the only way you’re going to learn is by doing. I am peppy, perky, optimistic, friendly, and very approachable. I tell them that it’s OK to make mistakes, I plan for them to make mistakes, I buy extra fabric so that we have enough for when they make a mistake. I think that I am an easy person to work for. I don’t expect high quality work, I do expect an effort to be made. What I see a lot of is an attitude of “I’m here so I deserve an A”, even though they spent most of their time not actually working. They are constantly on their phones, they hang out and chat with each other like they are on coffee break rather than at work. They act like they have a choice about what work they do while they are in lab hours and if I say, what we need to do today is clean, they say, Oh, well, I have a test to study for or a paper to write and they leave! They don’t take care of our supplies, they don’t clean up after themselves, they don’t put things back where they found them, they don’t follow the rules of the shop, even after we go over them the first week of class. I constantly have to tell students not to put food or drinks on the cutting table. They don’t respect the space or the money it takes to run it, they don’t respect my time or each other’s time. And granted, not all the students behave like this, if they did there would never be any costumes and all the shows would be performed by naked actors. But there is a huge problem and it all comes down to they feel no personal responsibility toward the process of learning this craft nor toward the product that we put on stage for our community to see. When they don’t show up and do their part, it makes the strain on me and the rest of them that much greater to do the work they left undone. I tell them this the first day of class and I swear for some of them it’s like, “Challenge Accepted!” I once even had a threesome of high school buddies who came here together who later confessed to me that instead of working during crew, they’d go around and “unwork” which meant undo work others had done. This was seriously a thing for them that they did to amuse themselves. I don’t know how to fight this.

1. Any single teaching strategy or device has enhanced your teaching effectiveness:

When I assign a paper or project, I not only give the students specific directions for completing the paper/project, I also give them 2-3 examples of an A project or paper done by former students, as well as a grading rubric for how points will be calculated so that they can easily identify the things that I want them to do, how someone else did that, and the exact things I look for to assign points. After I started doing this I realized I got less questions about their assignments leading up to the due dates, the grades were better overall, and best of all, I haven’t had ANY arguments from students about their grades on their projects, because grades are no longer subjective. The grading rubric really helps the students focus in on what is actually required out of all the possibilities of things they could design or write about. In other words, I tended to have students who would over-write or over-design their papers or projects and get all detail-oriented and completely miss the meat and bones of the assignment. It seemed silly at first to have to write down that they will lose 10 points if they don’t mention the name of the costume designer on the film that they are writing about or if the figures on their watercolor paper weren’t AT LEAST ten inches tall. But after seeing that the grades improved after implementing this simple strategy, it was clear that for my theatre students, I had to show them the forest so they didn’t get lost in the trees.

1. One copy of a book which you have found helpful or inspiring.  Your selection will become part of a browsing library at the retreat.  It does not need to be limited to teaching.  **(Bring to the seminar)**