

Creating Scenarios: Problem-Based Learning

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Introduction:

Connecting learning to the "real world" is often a battle cry for modern educators. Longing to make their teaching immediate and relevant, teachers look for innovative methods to bring the outside world into their classroom arena. Contemporary social issues and perennial historical events permeate the landscape of the college campus and somehow, manage to seep into our lectures and discussions. And if they are not there, then they are simply part of the vast rumblings occurring among our student body. Their interests are our interests; their desires our desires.

This paper and (accompanying workshop) is designed to acquaint you with a handful of the methods available to make "learning relevant to your students' lives." Granted, not all teaching can be seen as relevant and real, but often, teachers and students can connect as problem-based learners with a little creative help on behalf of the instructor. Knowing what to include (and what not to include) can be often helpful in creating scenarios that resemble what your students are thinking and feeling.

I am talking of '**Creating Scenarios: Problem-Based Learning**', a teaching technique (or better yet, series of techniques) designed to make your instruction "come alive" in a fashion that will both challenge your students to think on their feet and to think critically about the choices they make. The objective is to involve students in an active, hands-on approach to problem solving so they become intimately involved in their lessons and in turn, develop into critical, creative, and liberal thinkers. Liberal is defined here in the best sense of the word - open, honest, and thoughtful

Here are some ideas for involving students in creative exercises.

1. Let's Warm-Up

Before students - or for that matter, anyone can begin to "make fool of themselves" before their peers, they must feel comfortable with who they are and how they feel in front of others.

Simply, people need time to warm up before engaging in creative play. So, a good sure-fire technique is to loosen your students from the shackles of their pens and texts and do a few warm-up exercises. Something to get the juices going. Jumping up and down. Running in place. Making silly faces. Having a staring contest. Anything, to get them going and feel "slightly different" than they usually do in a formal classroom setting.

This lighthearted attempt to "change moods" from seriousness to frivolity is a necessary step if you want all students to participate in creative dramatics.

2. Let's Improvise

Teaching, I believe, is a performing art. And good teaching requires that knowledgeable and perceptive instructors think quickly on their feet. One technique to involve students in problem-based learning is to have them improvise possible scenarios. They can openly discuss and think about a "given scenario" by pretending to be people involved in the scenario.

Suppose, you are discussing an issue welfare reform, race relations, even a biological principle then you can establish a scenario where your students become players in a "real life drama involving your issue." Two students improvise an encounter single mother being denied welfare; two students arguing about affirmative action policy; an infectious disease wanting into a human blood vessel and together, they talk their way through the scene.

Please note that since this is not a polished performance endings are not needed; the process is what matters and sometimes, ambiguous endings are the very best.

3. Let's Play "What if?"

What if you were poor and homeless? What if you were a victim of rape? What if you were in a foreign country and did not know the language? What if you were the victim of a racial slur? What if you were on death row? What if you lost your ability to see? What if the world exploded tomorrow?

Obviously, you can play the "What if" game until your head does explode, but these exercises can be both informative and enjoyable if you select topics that are appropriate for your subject matter. The humanities and the sciences provide ample opportunities to design imaginative scenarios to motivate critical and creative thinking.

Students can be assigned such "what ifs" and in small groups, act out possible scenarios. Or they can write and draw their solutions. Both attempts are designed for students to think "outside the box" and to underline the essentials in critical thought.

4. Inside this Moment

Decision-making is the hardest skill to learn. What should I think? What should I do? Will my friends like me? Will my parents approve? Will my girlfriend disown me? Will my hair fall out? (Hey, it happens.)

Give students possible scenarios: "You are the admissions counselor for a university and you can only take a limited number of students. Given a list of students with various profiles, whom would you take? Students with the highest scores? Students who are most active? Students with diverse backgrounds? Students whose relatives are alumnae? Students who are athletes?" Or "You are a judge and you have a child in custody who has committed murder. Would you allow them to be tried as an adult? A child? Sent to a juvenile home? Spend life in prison?"

Provide your students with explicit scenarios so they can decide how they would act given the specific circumstances. They can act, write, or present their decisions.

5. Change the Moment

Acting is reacting and a fun way to teach "thinking on one's feet" is to invite two participants to begin an improvised moment. And then, unexpectedly, have someone enter the situation and begin talking about something totally unrelated. Out of nowhere, the third person changes the topic and focus of the improvisation.

For example, two people could be discussing the latest political scandal and a third person can walk in - unannounced and begin complaining about the weather. Then, when ready, a fourth person can walk in and begin moaning about their terrible boss. Followed by a fifth person wanting to sell the other four a vacuum cleaner.

The idea is to provide a process where student actors can begin to think on their feet in an even slightly more spontaneous fashion than a straight improvisation.

6. Let's All Talk At Once

Arguing is sometimes America's favorite sport - at least, in the comfort of our living rooms, so why not allow some of that "friendly bickering" to seep into the classroom. Here's how.

Two participants select a hot topic to discuss abortion rights, gun control, school vouchers, welfare payments, prayer in public schools and they begin discussing the issue calmly. As in polite society, they allow for each side to air their views before they voice theirs.

Then, to rev it up a notch, tell the participants to start "talking at once." Instead of waiting for someone to stop talking, just keep talking as if you just can't wait for your opponent to finish. The result is both hilarious and informative because the constant talking will reveal deep seated feelings about current issues and how these feelings begin to shape political opinion and common consent. This is quite good for discussion starters.

7. Brainstorming!

Not every problem has a single solution. If you are fixing a car, you might have one or two options, but usually, in life the options are as varied as the problem itself.

Divide your students into small groups and provide each with a marker and a pad. Give them a topic - drugs, school violence, handgun control, campaign finance reform, and ask them to brainstorm as many possible solutions for this problem as they can imagine in a given time frame.

When time is up, compare and discuss solutions. Then, ask students to come up with a quick skit where all their brainstorming ideas are presented. The idea is to present a multi-faceted view of a world concern.

8. Peacemaking

Negotiating settlements is something lawyers and diplomats do well. They spend their working hours, hammering out solutions to complex social and moral dilemmas.

To teach this practice and to inform and entertain, I encourage your students to brainstorm a list of problems inherent in to their studies. This is good method for review.

Then, two students select a topic to discuss from opposing viewpoints. Once the talk becomes heated, appoint another student to negotiate a settlement. And of course caution the two arguing to hold their ground. And then, watch the fireworks sparkle!

9. Imagine Yourself as Someone Else

I know. Sometimes we would like to be someone else. And that is not is always possible, but for the purposes of this exercise, let's pretend that it is.

Have your students pretend to be something out of the ordinary a world figure, a literary character, or maybe, an inanimate object (say a vegetable in a refrigerator) and then ask them what it feels like to be them? What are they thinking? What do they consider their greatest accomplishment? What troubles them? What inspires them?

Then, place this character in a given context: Lincoln at Gettysburg, Armstrong on the moon, a soldier in the Gulf War and ask them to emote their feelings and frustrations. What are they thinking? What are they doing? What can they tell us about their imaginary journey back in time?

At first, nervous giggles will appear, but in time, seriousness will prevail as students learn to think in a whole new context. Of course, world and historical figures can be assigned and students can prepare extensive research about their person in preparation for their character impersonation.

10. You Are There!

This last scenario is an extension of "Imagine Yourself as Someone Else."

Simply, students pretend to be an historical figure in a given time and place, and other students act as reporters on the scene. Eyewitness news comes alive as students take fake microphone in hand and

interview characters in an imaginary world. For example, students can pretend to be soldiers during the American Revolution; Bolsheviks during the Russian revolution, or Chinese dissidents during the recent uprising. And in the midst of this organized chaos, eager reporters can be chasing down the principle players and conducting on-the-spot interviews.

The result can be a dramatic presentation of what it might have been to be there.

Conclusion

Creating scenarios for understanding human conflict is another technique to provide a forum for innovative and provocative classroom discussion. True, no acting exercise can replace a straight reading and discussion of a given concern. Acting is, at best, superficial and one-dimensional. Complexity is best handled on the printed page. Still, acting can be an effective catalyst for discussing a subject's ambiguities. Teachers and students alike can begin to examine the feelings implicit in dramatic presentations, leaving time later to underscore the complex inherent dynamics.

Furthermore, when teachers use acting to encourage creative solutions, they should always allow for understandable nervousness to follow. First, students laugh, then they think. First students get in the mood, then they become whom they are impersonating. This trial by error look at the world mirrors the process of real life decision-making. Not every solution is arrived at on a long yellow legal pad.

Sometimes, anger is involved. Sometimes, shouting. Sometimes, laughter. Students must feel free to roam for a decision and teachers must provide for them the freedom to explore.

Creating scenarios for problem-based learning takes time. Time must be spent cultivating a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable to "be silly," yet, responsible enough to make informed and wise choices.