

Take It Away, Use the Next Day:

Great Ideas I Took Home from the "With Different Eyes" Conference in Los Angeles

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"I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."

John Cage (1912–1992, experimental musician)

Great teaching requires a creative energy that has to be renewed all the time. My job is never boring. If it was, if I found myself staring at the clock and wondering why the time was passing so slowly, I'd find another job. One thing I love about teaching is how fun it can be. To make it fun, though, I have to constantly try new things to make my teaching better. One way to get these new ideas is attending teaching conferences.

On November 3 and 4, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend the "With Different Eyes" conference in Los Angeles, Calif. The conference was sponsored by the UCLA Writing Project and held at the UCLA Faculty Center, Hotel Angeleno and the National Writing Project's English Language Learner Network. Even though this conference concentrated on English language learners, the ideas I got from it are applicable to all subject areas. Briefly, I will explain the strategies I learned and I hope that readers can go to school and use them. I hope that you find as much fun and success with these activities my students and I have found.

Say/Mean/Matter (presented by Tonya Brady)

Many of our students struggle with paraphrasing. The Say/Mean/Matter model guides students through the process of citing quotations, putting the quotations into their own words and then explaining how the information is important to their research.

The teacher provides students with a graphic organizer with three columns, "Say," "Mean" and "Matter." In the "Say" column, students write a direct quotation and citation from a book, Web site or article. After that, students paraphrase the quotation in the "Mean" column. To explain how this information is relevant to the student's thesis/research, the student completes the "Matter" section. This organizer provides the outline for the final research paper.

Wall Talk (presented by Raquel Esteves-Joyce)

The teacher writes statements or phrases relevant to the current content on posters spread out on walls around the room. Students walk around the room and comment on each statement or phrase. Teachers can use this to initiate discussion/reflection. Perhaps this is a sort of silent fishbowl.

Take a Line for a Walk

This may best be used as a summarizer at the end of a lesson or for a homework extension of learning. Students copy one salient line from the assigned reading and use this line as a starting point for a personal piece of writing. I recently used this and was a little nervous about the outcome. However, the responses were amazing. My students copied a line from the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel and related it to their own life experiences. Their creativity amazed me.

Body Biography

This activity gives students a chance to talk to each other in a meaningful way and more deeply explore a character from a book or story. The teacher either assigns or asks students to choose a character from a book or story that made an impression on them. In groups or alone, students draw a picture of this character. Their picture needs to show various aspects of that character's identity. Creativity and imagination need to be encouraged. For example, if a character is very interested in money, their head can be represented as a dollar sign. Also, students can use thought bubbles to show what the character is thinking. My low-level students really enjoyed this project, and their drawings and explanations were a great assessment of their understanding.

Biography in a Bag

This activity is similar to the previous activity. The teacher distributes bags to groups of students. Either Ziploc or paper bags work well. Using what they have in their pockets and backpacks they fill the bag with objects that represent different aspects of the character's identity. They then share their objects and explanations with the rest of the class, either as a whole class or in small groups.

This activity can be used successfully with varied level classes. At first I was a little scared to try it but, in the end, I found that this is an amazing way to assess how students understand texts and characters.

Write Around

This is a strategy for peer editing and sharing. Students sit in a small circle. Students read each other's writing and then make comments. During the first round, students comment on the strengths in the writing piece. They pass the piece to the next student and keep passing it until it reaches the writer. In the next round, students suggest "Next Steps," or what needs to be changed to improve the piece. A final round could be added to include questions that may encourage the writer to include more details.

New Ideas

In addition to learning new strategies, I also had the chance to hear some new perspectives and philosophies on teaching in general.



A student explains his "Biography in a Bag" as it relates to a character in a book the class was reading.

New Ways of Approaching Comments on Students' Writing

Faye Peitzman, director of the UCLA Writing Project, discussed her sensitive approach to commenting on student's writing. The first thing a critical reader should do is skim the entire piece of writing. When addressing the writer, the reader should use the writer's name. Readers should start with encouragement and praise before offering suggestions for improvement.

Many of these tips can be found in her book, *With Different Eyes*, which she co-authored with George Gadda in 1994.