

## Exploring Social Issues through Critical Reading and Persuasive Writing

### Goal: To emphasize and develop sound essay-writing skills

#### Team Members:

Roger Kalin, Goshen High School (English)

Cindy McKay, Orange-Ulster BOCES (Technical Reading & Writing)

Alison Miller, SUNY Orange (English)

#### Students in Target Group:

1. 9<sup>th</sup> grade Honors English students (contact time: 40 minutes/each day)
2. 12<sup>th</sup> grade Security Academy students (contact time: 1 hour/once a week)
3. Freshman English 101 students (contact time: 75 minutes/twice a week)

#### Objectives:

At the completion of this assignment, students will demonstrate the ability to do the following:

- critically read selected fiction and nonfiction works on a specific social issue;
- formulate and clearly express an opinion about a controversial social issue in three ways: orally, via online forums, and in formal writing;
- write an organized, developed, and supported persuasive essay which follows the conventions of standard written English.

#### Proposal for Instructional Plan:

1. We three teachers will select a social issue for focus. (Currently we are exploring the death penalty, loss of privacy, or censorship)
2. Students will read both fiction and nonfiction works that relate to the selected topic. Teachers will guide students in discussing both sides of the issue.
3. Students in all three classes will discuss the topic via an online forum such as MOODLE.\*
4. Teachers will continue regular classroom instruction of essay writing skills.
5. Finally, students will write an organized, well-developed 5-paragraph essay which makes a claim about the issue and supports it with examples from the text(s) and/or other reliable sources, including personal experience and interview/discussion with others.

#### Time of Implementation:

We anticipate this project taking 1-2 weeks, in late September or early October. Possible extension of this assignment may be determined following our assessment of the students' participation and performance.

\*MOODLE is an online classroom community where teachers can establish a controlled discussion space where students can interact, either in "real time" or posting to a forum over an extended period of time.

## Final Reflection

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### Instructional Plan:

1. Teachers selected controversial social issues for focus (the death penalty, loss of privacy, and censorship).
2. Students wrote a “pre-essay” on one of the topics, a persuasive piece providing their opinion and support. Essay was graded.
3. Students read both fiction and nonfiction works related to the selected topic. Teachers guided students in discussing both sides of the issue.
4. Students discussed the topics via the MOODLE online forum.
5. Teachers continued regular classroom instruction of essay writing skills.
6. Students wrote a second, “post-essay” on the same topic, again with a persuasive focus and supporting the student’s opinion with examples from the text(s) and/or other reliable sources.
7. Second essay was graded and compared to pre-essay for assessment of learning and development of writing/persuasion skills.

### **Project Results**

- Grade Improvement
- MOODLE Participation
- Increased Awareness of College Rubric/Expectations

### **Challenges and Obstacles**

- Time Constraints
- Realistic Goals
- Topic Choices
- Technical Difficulties

### **Student Feedback**

- Enjoyed debating/interaction with other students
- Enjoyed the challenge of the assignment
- Appreciated insight into college expectations
- Applied knowledge & skills beyond the immediate project
- Enjoyed using MOODLE (\*see attached)

### **Suggested Changes**

- Participate in essay training & review sessions
- Allow more student choice on topics
- Allow more time for project
- Use with 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders

## Final Reflection: Student Feedback to MOODLE

### Positives

- I really liked interacting with other students and hearing the sophisticated conversations that took place.
- I liked that you could write your thoughts on your own time, without interruptions.
- I liked that you could express your feelings without having someone judge you for it.
- It opened my eyes to the other side of the argument, and that helped when I wrote my final essay.
- I liked how it was open to only a couple of classes and not the whole world.
- I think MOODLE did help me with my final paper because it helped me to better organize my ideas and read about some other points of view.
- It helped us to have controlled arguments.
- It helped with my essay in that I found I had to come up with a new argument which I later found very useful.
- It allowed us to show each other just how much we really know.

### Negatives

- Didn't like the setup of the website and couldn't find what I needed.
- Had a hard time figuring out how to log in.
- Not enough people participated.
- It was hard to navigate and see who had replied to your comments.
- I didn't like being edited or being punished for using slang when I was writing in a hurry.
- I disliked that some people didn't take it seriously.

*"It was just like MySpace but learning."*