hat do you do when students are bored? How do you explain content that seems too abstract for most students to understand? You could rely on the old standby: “You need to learn it because it’s on the test.” You could make the lesson “authentic” and tell students, “You’ll understand why this is important when you’re older.” But the best solution is to convert those lessons into learning experiences that are so fascinating that students cannot help but be drawn into them and hang onto every word and gesture. That is, you can teach the same content outrageously.

Outrageous Instruction links teaching specific objectives to students’ sense of imagination and how they view the world. The techniques of Outrageous Instruction make it possible to draw all students deeply into any content. These techniques work on even the oldest and most jaded students who are the most resistant to learning, particularly learning that requires thought and active participation.

These techniques evolved from my work with teachers in the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and Supermath programs (Pogrow 1990, 2004, 2005). These programs used imaginative alter-native contexts for teaching content and for developing both basic and problem-solving skills.

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The teacher uses a dramatic, humorous, and suspenseful storyline to create an imaginary context in which the need for the content objective is critical to solving a problem of interest to students. When the storyline taps into students’ sense of imagination and self, it is then “Creatively Authentic.” The creatively authentic lesson or unit then becomes the primary method for teaching that content objective. This is a departure from traditional uses of dramatic techniques in education, which tend to focus on self-expression for its own sake, for learning about theater, or for the reinforcement or enrichment of content already learned.

The best way to understand Outrageous Instruction is to observe a lesson. Meet “Dwight.”

Dwight’s Outrageous Lesson

I had observed Dwight’s high school sophomore class several times. It was a difficult class to teach be-
cause the majority did not like to participate and some delighted in being unruly. Most students looked bored, a group I came to think of as “loungers.” Whenever Dwight tried to teach new content, 15 minutes were lost to student groans, excuses, requests for pencils, requests to go to the bathroom, and so on. Sound familiar?

Dwight was getting frustrated with teaching this class, but he agreed to develop an outrageous lesson and use it to teach a critical learning objective.

The lesson begins. When the students finally are settled, a supervisor announces that Dwight is home sick, but there will be a special guest who will make them an exciting offer.

Dwight then comes in disguised with a huge, bushy, white beard and an Amish-style black hat. He is dressed in overalls and carries a real tree stump. He emphatically puts the tree stump on the floor and announces in a booming voice:

I am a master salesman and have heard that all of you in this room have wonderful social skills and would make great salespeople. I am here as part of a national search to find the next generation of salespeople to sell a new, exciting line of products, the next great product, a complete line of stumps!

By now, the students have recognized Dwight and are starting to titter a bit, though they are also curious. Dwight continues:

I see that you are skeptical about the importance and sales potential of stumps. Well, let me tell you all the things that you can do with stumps, and I am sure that in five minutes you are all going to want to know how to find out where you can buy one.

Dwight then talks like a TV car salesman for five minutes. He gives a confident, nonstop monologue about all the benefits of having a stump. He gives about a dozen reasons why everyone would want a stump; each reason is more outrageous than the one before.

Suppose you come home and have a terrible itch on your back. What can you do? Why, you can rub your back against the stump. You come home and it’s cold and your heater is not working, what can you do? You can burn part of your stump for warmth.

For you guys, having a stump is a symbol of manliness. Women look up to a man with a stump. Suppose you come home and find that someone has stolen all of your furniture — you can sit on your stump.

You can even serve food on your stump. And after you have eaten a wonderful meal, when you look in the kitchen for a toothpick, there are none, and you suddenly remember that you forgot to buy more, what to do? Break off a splinter from your stump and, voilà, you have a toothpick.

Of course, Dwight is just getting started. He continues:

And in addition to all the ways that I have just described in which a stump can enrich your life, there is more, much more. If you have a problem, you can confide in your stump, tell it your deepest fears and concerns — it will always listen and never argue with you.

If you do not have enough closet or shelf space at home, you can hang your socks or jewelry on your stump.

Dwight goes on and on about many other uses for stumps, occasionally pounding the stump on the floor for emphasis.

The students laugh politely or give skeptical looks. Above all, they are enjoying the moment and wondering where things are going and why their teacher is acting this way.

Lesson interruptus. Why, indeed, is Dwight acting this way? More important, what is he teaching? At this point, the reader may be as puzzled as the students. You probably cannot even guess the content area. The important thing at this point is that the students are engaged, attentive, and, above all, curious.

Lesson continued. After five to 10 minutes of nonstop selling, Dwight finally pauses and says, “I know that all of you now realize that you cannot live without having a tree stump and that all of you want one.” Of course, even though the students are having a great time, no one wants to buy one. Nonplussed, Dwight continues:

Unfortunately, I cannot sell you this stump, as it is my last one until I get my next shipment. However, I have an even better opportunity for you right now, as I am looking to hire one of you to be on my sales team. I want to see which of you can be a great salesperson like myself. This is a chance of a lifetime for a great career.

Dwight then picks up a shopping
bag and pulls out a series of common objects, such as a comb, a large piece of cardboard, and so on. He gives one object to the first person in each row. He then directs each row to form a team and take 10 minutes to come up with as many reasons as they can for why someone should buy their object. Each team must elect a spokesperson to present their ideas and to convince the rest of the class to buy their product.

The students quickly transition into groups. To my amazement, the loungers start taking leadership in the group discussions. Indeed, the loungers become the group spokespeople.

After 10 minutes of preparation, each team does a three- to five-minute presentation. The presentations are imaginative, and the former loungers deliver highly creative soliloquies that mimic the tone of Dwight’s presentation. I am amazed at the volume, variety, and creativity of the presentations because I suspect that, for some of these students, this is the first time they’ve volunteered all semester.

After the last presentation, Dwight says, “Before I announce the winner, I want everyone to write down the ideas that your team just presented for why someone should buy your product.” The students quickly shift modes and start writing. There is no whining or wasted time; the students are eager to capture their team’s ideas on paper.

Dwight then has one student from each team read their list of ideas. The students read in a very confident tone. There is none of the typical reluctance to share what they wrote. Dwight announces that not only are all the groups worthy of being hired as salespeople, he is going to give everyone a salesperson award.

In the last five minutes of the class, Dwight tells his students that they have just done something else that is very important: They have just written excellent persuasive essays. He notes that writing a persuasive essay is one of the district’s major requirements for promotion. Dwight announces that not only are all the groups worthy of being hired as salespeople, he is going to give everyone a salesperson award.

Dwight ends the lesson by saying in a very puzzled tone:

Hmmm. . . . I don’t understand why you found it so easy to write a persuasive essay when most students have so much trouble doing so. I wonder if the reason is something that you can use to continue to develop your essays. Let’s try to figure that out in tomorrow’s lesson.

What Can Be Learned from Dwight’s Lesson?

This lesson demonstrates the latent talent, ability, and creativity that reside within our most academically resistant students. That so many of the loungers quickly met the challenge is a tribute to Dwight’s imaginative approach. However, it also raises the question of why we don’t make a greater effort to create such alternative, dramatic approaches. What is clear is that, when teachers apply their imagination to teaching, students will apply their imagination to learning.

Why choose this lesson to teach outrageously?

Dwight knew that if he taught this critical first lesson on writing a persuasive essay conventionally, students would have tuned him out, and little would have been accomplished no matter how hard he tried to convince them that the topic is important. Indeed, I subsequently observed other classrooms in the district in which teachers were trying to get students to write acceptable persuasive essays — for the fifth time — with little apparent success. I also attended some staff meetings at other schools and at district headquarters, where everyone was complaining about how hard it is to get students to write reasonable persuasive essays.

The ease and enthusiasm with which Dwight’s students began to write creative persuasive essays demonstrates that many “problems” in teaching and learning are often the result of the failure of teachers and curriculum designers to be imaginative, weird, and bold.

Characteristics of Outrageous Instruction.

Dwight’s lesson illustrates many of the key characteristics of an outrageous lesson. He used the invented storyline (training them to become salespeople), and it is only in the last five minutes of the class that he reveals the true learning objective. Judging from the reaction of the students, his storyline and context were creatively authentic, which made deeper forms of learning possible.

The lesson also illustrates that the goal of Outrageous Instruction is to use highly dramatic methods as the primary method for teaching critical content. In other words, Dwight’s lesson is not reinforcing or enriching a lesson on writing. Instead of using a dramat-
ic approach to enrich conventional instruction, he is teaching in an enriched fashion from the beginning.

Another unique aspect of Outrageous Instruction is how role playing is used. Instead of the teacher organizing and directing the roles that students play — a process that takes a great deal of time and effort — the teacher plays the role. It is the teacher’s performance that efficiently changes the teaching-learning dynamic, and that produces the surprise and suspense that captivates students. Students have no idea what is going to happen next or even that they are, in fact, learning.

Clearly, Dwight’s lesson is highly original and masterful. However, it is not the extemporaneous work of a master teacher. He developed the lesson by applying the specific lesson-planning technique used to generate outrageous lessons, found in Pogrow (2008). This planning technique is generalizable to any content area and objective, and it guides the creative process. In addition, Dwight was not a master teacher, or even an experienced one. Rather, he was a typical, good, student teacher who was not particularly extroverted. In other words, any teacher can employ the techniques of Outrageous Instruction.

Advantages of Outrageous Instruction

Outrageous Instruction uses dramatic technique as a tool for teaching and learning. It is not only highly effective, it is also highly efficient. This may seem counterintuitive. How can Outrageous Instruction be efficient when it requires significant class time to set up the dramatic context? This time is more than made up by the reduced amount of time needed to maintain discipline, organize activity transitions, and get students’ attention. So instead of being able to organize only one or two transitions per period in conventional instruction, outrageous lessons often have seamless multiple transitions, from listening to the teacher, to reading, to writing, to reflecting. Therefore, the cumulative effect is that students learn the content more quickly. Generating student suspense and curiosity are the most efficient ways to increase and deepen learning.

In addition, an outrageous lesson speeds up and deepens learning not only for that specific objective, but also for the subsequent related lessons. As a result, Outrageous Instruction is valuable even during this era of standards-based accountability.

Of course, teaching outrageously every day is not practical or necessary. A little bit goes a long way. Even one or two such lessons are enough to have a major effect on student learning and attitudes. Such a lesson serves as an ongoing reference point. Even if this is the only outrageous lesson in an extended unit on persuasive writing, Dwight can continue to refer to the process as salesmanship and can continue to point out to students how good they are at it.

Teachers should prioritize converting a lesson (or unit) into an outrageous one when they know that it is a critical lesson that will not interest students, when it is content that students will find inaccessible, or when the teacher cares deeply about the objective and wants students to become engrossed in it.

Getting Started

Clearly, developing and teaching an outrageous lesson the first time is a leap of faith. Will I be able to make the techniques work? Will I look foolish? Will I lose control of my class?

Outrageous Instruction is so far removed from one’s comfort zone and conventional practice and the dynamics are so different than what occurs in the everyday classroom that it is akin to the first time you walked into a classroom to teach. Stepping back into that zone of uncertainty can be viewed either as something fearful or as an exciting opportunity to expand one’s toolbox. Indeed, when I first started training teachers to develop outrageous lessons, I was not sure what they would come up with, and I was constantly amazed by how original and creative their lessons were. What always started with reluctance, misgivings, and a sense of “that is not me” led invariably to those teachers feeling exhilarated by the results. All teachers have an untapped creativity that, when unleashed, produces amazing results. All it takes is a willingness to try.

I have never seen a teacher lose control of a class during an outrageous lesson — even when the lesson required the teacher to hide under a desk, to spend large parts of the period not looking at the class, or to run in and out of the room. It turns out that suspense is the most underused technique for maintaining classroom control. Indeed, the best form of classroom control and discipline is to surprise and fascinate students. Rather than viewing their teacher as foolish, students react to outrageous lessons as a sign that their teacher cares so much about their learning that he or she is willing to go the extra mile — which in turn leads to increased mutual respect and opens new lines of communication.

However, planning Outrageous Instruction requires a willingness to adopt a different mindset for that given lesson or unit — a mindset that is almost the opposite of that for a conventional lesson. Teach-
ers must embrace being imaginative, playful, and weird — three traits not typically associated with professional practice — and be willing to take a creative risk. In return, they will discover unexpected, and welcome, changes in student behavior and attitude. A teacher does not have to be an extrovert or a joker to be dramatic. Indeed, many of the top Hollywood stars are introverts in real life. The real personality key for teaching an outrageous lesson is the attitude that I will do anything to help my students learn.

All teachers have an untapped creativity that, when unleashed, produces amazing results. All it takes is a willingness to try.

Getting started as individuals. The best way for teachers to get started developing outrageous lessons is to form a study and development group with peers. Teachers can brainstorm with each other and push each other to continually add creative and humorous elements to their planned lessons. The initial goal should be for each member to present one such lesson a semester. Over time, teachers will develop a portfolio of such lessons. In addition, because students will encounter more such experiences in different classes, student attitudes toward learning will change. Principals can stimulate such development by having awards for the most outrageous lesson.

Getting started as a profession. We need to recognize that teaching with imaginative and suspenseful storylines that link content to students’ sense of fantasy is more effective than conventional teaching in many situations, and the rules for both types of teaching are almost opposite. We need to expand the definition of “master teacher” to refer to someone who can apply the best of both conventional and outrageous teaching — that is, someone who can teach by direction and also use fantasy and imagination to create suspenseful curiosity. A master teacher should be able to switch between the two modes of teaching and do a great job at both. At the very least, all student teachers should be required to teach at least one outrageous lesson.

Summary

Student boredom and superficial learning are epide-mics in American education. While we have made great progress as a profession in how to employ scientific principles of psychology to teaching and learning, we have made little progress in how not to bore students. We have not made progress in linking instruction to students’ sense of imagination, nor have we recognized that imagination is fundamental to the psychological and cultural characteristics of young adults. The resultant boredom and uninspired instruction is a major cause of dropping out for both students and teachers.

Outrageous Instruction enables teachers to add a new technique to their toolbox that totally reshapes the teaching process. The techniques provide a practical way for teachers, either individually or schoolwide, to realize the ideal that inspired them to become teachers: the vision of inspiring students. While external forces increasingly dictate what we have to teach, there is no reason to let them determine how we teach. There is no rationale in this age of ubiquitous entertainment on demand and YouTube exhibitionism why education should remain rooted solely in literal and simplistic presentation of content. Teaching some objectives outrageously is a critical tool for school improvement and for making teaching and learning exhilarating — even for seemingly prosaic content. Outrageous Instruction melds imaginative and dramatic teaching with the pragmatics of meeting standards.

There is a wellspring of untapped creative potential and imagination in both students and teachers that can be harnessed to the more effective teaching of key content objectives. But the teacher must be willing to create a Monty Python moment, that is, something completely different. Outrageous Instruction provides a practical way for teachers who are willing to extend their comfort zone to revitalize their instruction and stimulate student learning — and to have a ball doing so.

REFERENCES


