

As a scholar I study 19th century American texts by women in science; as a teacher I use the principles of the scientific method to help students take control of their own learning. The scientific method includes asking a question, doing background research, constructing a hypothesis, testing that hypothesis, analyzing data, and communicating results. I believe the underlying thought processes behind these steps are just as necessary for Literature and Composition as they are for the sciences.

Throughout the semester, I employ discussion practices in which students steer the conversation; sometimes in the form of presentations and discussion leaders and sometimes in less structured ways. In one particular activity, titled “The Discussion Game,” I employ the format of a game in order to encourage students to speak up. The game is most helpful in classes dealing with difficult texts that cause students to be reluctant to engage in conversation with each other or at all. I give students a list of ways to add to the discussion, including asking a question and introducing a new interpretation. The whole class gains points each time a student adds to the discussion, and the students get excited about the prospect of beating their score from the last class period. In the end, students begin to work together to lead the discussions, taking turns moving the conversation forward with questions and answers, multiple hypotheses, and evidence from the texts.

In using this activity I have found that students are more likely to open up if I allow them a space in which to discuss among themselves. However, this does not exclude me from steering the conversation, adding historical or contextual information, or bringing the class back on track if they stray off topic. At first, students often defer to me when I speak and I must give them a push to take the conversation back; however, as the semester progresses, they quickly realize that I am a part of the conversation and not holding the “right” answer. I have used this activity for discussions of rhetorical analysis, writing strategies, nature in poetry, gender expectations in *The Coquette* and many other diverse topics.

From my research, I have learned that those who struggle against barriers to their education, their freedom, and their voice often have the most meaningful contributions to make. I want my students to recognize the power of their ideas and their voices in my classroom. I open a space for these discoveries through our discussion practices and through assignments. I often assign creative or multi-modal assignments in both my writing and literature classes. In the nature unit of my Introduction to Literature course I give students a chance, after we have read nature writings in a wide array of genres, to do some creative writing. They choose a genre we have read and write a piece detailing their relationship to nature while following (or consciously undermining) the conventions of the genre they have chosen. They then write a reflection explaining their choices and how writing this piece made them more aware of their relationship to nature and/or to the genre they chose. Students enjoy the freedom and creativity of this assignment while they learn about nature writing, genre, and themselves by articulating their choices.

The skills students learn in completing creative and multimodal projects and in evaluating the genres/media that they are surrounded by every day are transferable to life within and outside of academia. I want to give students the tools, whether in a composition or literature class, that allow them to see themselves as makers of knowledge. I want students to learn to think critically, to make meaning for themselves, and to be confident in the idea that they have something to add to the classroom no matter their background. Employing the scientific method gives students a structure within which they can build these skills.