

# Response

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I like the name tag activity Joan describes because

- *It is simple.* You don't need a great variety of materials to pull it off: construction paper, card stock, even plain white copy paper works with whatever motley mix of writing/coloring tools happen to be hanging around on office desks or in the recesses of desk drawers, or can be borrowed from children's crayon and marker stashes.
- *It is novel.* Students, particularly those in high school and college, maintain well-rehearsed "cool poses" about learning and the extent to which they should participate willingly and enthusiastically. Their expectations about what happens in English classes, for example, come up short when they enter the classroom and find the enticing clutter of paper, crayons, and scissors Joan described. Preconceptions and pretensions fade away, and what often emerges, even among adult learners, is that part of the students' personalities that enjoys fun and a challenge. The payoff is powerful: attention to task and a predisposition to learn because their defenses are lowered.
- *It is flexible.* As described, the name tag activity can be used with students from all levels and for a number of purposes. It is also an activity, however, that can be modified in a great number of ways. This flexibility contributes to its potential for a long shelf life. Classroom activities that successfully infiltrate teachers' lesson plans are those that offer more than one use for more than one situation.

## Thematic Variation

Since Joan first introduced me to the name tag project, I have tried it out on several occasions in a variety of writing courses. In each early instance, however, I used it as a stopgap measure, more to fill in the schedule than to serve as an integral part of the writing course. The

following comments detail a more recent use of the activity in which it served to provide both the initial activity for a writing course and the medium by which I was able to establish the course's goals in terms of what concept I expected the students to deal with and learn to apply to their writing.

### *The Situation*

I recently taught an advanced composition course in a highly compact and intense format (three ten-hour weekend sessions: three hours Friday night; seven hours Saturday) to a group of adult students working toward special education certification. The students were enrolled in an extension program designed to train special educators for rural and poor school districts that cannot, due to these communities' low pay scales and isolation, attract special educators from outside the immediate area. Given the course's truncated nature, my goal for the course was straightforward, even minimal, compared to the traditional semester-long version of the course: to change how they thought about themselves as writers. I wanted to work as much on the metacognitive level as on the level of text production. The most reasonable goal to strive for in three weekends was to get these students to think about

- how they think about writing
- how those thoughts influence (positively and negatively) their ability to write at the level demanded by their college curriculum and the professional community they are working to join

To start the discussion, and their transformation, I decided we would need to discuss how to analyze an audience and why thinking carefully about who would read their writing is important to their success as writers (and often liberating, making writing an easier task than it might have been in their past experience).

### *The Group*

The thirty students ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties, and most were in the program as part of the retraining they required in order to begin second careers. Several of the men had worked most of their adult lives in the local coal strip mines, which had closed as tightening environmental laws reduced demand for the local, highly sulfurous coal. Many of the women were displaced from jobs in the garment industry, which had moved offshore in search of cheaper labor. At least six of the women were long-term housewives forced into the labor pool by a husband's debilitating injury and illness or as a result of divorce.

Their college-level educational experiences were mixed. Some had junior college credit; two men had attended college for a year or two; one had a B.S. degree in journalism; for most their formal education had stopped at high school graduation.

With one exception, these students did not have much experience with writing, nor did they view writing as something they did well or had much hope of improving. The class consensus was, for the most part, “let’s suffer through these three weekends together and just get it over with.” During discussions in and out of the class, it was clear that writing, other than letters to family members and friends, played a negligible role in their day-to-day lives. What writing they recalled doing was linked almost exclusively to schoolwork and was viewed as a chore to complete.

### *The Problem*

Because I am a visual learner and very poor at remembering the names of people I have only just met, Joan’s name tag activity offered me hope. I took a chance and greeted the students on the first night with a supply-covered table. The second, more important reason for choosing this activity with these students was strategic: if I could just get these not-too-confident writers to think carefully about issues of audience, they would accomplish something of educational value in an otherwise troublesome setting. I knew that lecturing to them about audience would hurt my chances of getting through at the very start of the course. These students came to the first session having put in full days and a full week at work, many without going home or eating dinner before driving in. A lecture would encourage their passivity as well as reinforcing their bias that writing classes (English, to them) are inherently boring and tedious. Making name tags was active, and even if I had to spend twenty to thirty minutes of the first session cutting and gluing paper and other materials with the students, it would be time well spent.

### *Tasks*

**Stage One: Collect and Distribute Names Tags.** Like Joan, I collected the finished name tags after about thirty minutes, placing them in a box to hide them from view. Following a fifteen-minute “introduction to the course” session, I circulated around the room asking each student to reach into the box and draw out a name tag (if they picked their own, they returned it to the box quickly and chose another).

**Stage Two: Observe (5 minutes).** With name tag in front of them, the students were to look at the tag and nothing else for five minutes

(I had to reassure them several times that I was serious.). During that time they were to notice as much as they could about the tag's features and construction.

**Stage Three: Record Details (3 minutes).** With only three minutes to complete the task, students were to record or list as many of their observations about the name tag as possible.

**Stage Four: Draw Inferences about Author (10 minutes).** While they were recording details, I wrote the following instructions on the board and gave them ten minutes to complete their responses:

Without trying to guess who it is, describe the person who made the name tag in front of you. What does it tell you about them? How does it get this message across?

Amid groans and protests, the students began, and with an occasional note of encouragement along the lines of "Keep going, keep pushing the description," and "You still have several minutes to use," students wrote descriptions that were notable for a number of reasons. Most wrote multiparagraphed texts of several hundred words (many admitted they would not have believed they could have written that much on any topic). Most responded in great detail, although employing a variety of formats (such as narratives, lists, objective/third-person observations). Most responded without getting too worried about whether they were writing well or correctly (again the majority admitted that previously they almost always worried about these issues).

**Stage Five: Develop a Strategy for Working with this Person (10 minutes).** I added a further instruction:

You have just been informed that the person who made the name tag you hold will be your partner in a very important project. Take ten minutes and develop a plan for establishing the best working relationship possible using the information you have gathered so far. What should you remember to do/not do and say/not say.

**Stage Six: Presenting Name Tag Authors (3–5 minutes per student).** Students presented their conclusions about their name tag creator and the strategy they would use to work productively with this person on a project. Although the first two or three speakers were somewhat hesitant, soon the class was so involved in their descriptions and strategies, I had to call time for every subsequent presenter in order to move the process along. Also, although I had not said that the makers should identify themselves, after someone gasped at how

accurately the recipient of her name tag had read her, we all identified ourselves after our tag was discussed. And, more often than not, the readings were accurate and revealing.

### *The Outcome*

Although I had yet to talk specifically about the writing process or specific assignments for the course, students had participated in what amounted to an intensive two-hour workshop exploring audience and effective strategies. We had covered much of the same ground I would have covered in a lecture but in a manner that fit the show-me-how-it-works learning style typical of these students.

During the final hour, we discussed audience and how to adapt one's writing to meet a reader's needs. We chose three particularly interesting name tags and placed them at the head of the conference table, established our task as one of writing an informational report to explain to these three people what abilities a special education curriculum should develop in prospective special educators, and raised the following questions:

- What questions about special education might these people ask?
- What could we assume they already knew about special education?
- What can we infer about their attitudes toward higher education?
- What specific abilities will they recognize/not recognize as important in a special educator?
- What tone should we take in talking to them about special education?

### **Postscript**

I asked that the students bring their name tags with them to class the following morning, explaining that I needed them to help me keep all their faces and names properly linked. Interestingly, the name tags reappeared at each of the remaining five sessions and were continually referred to as we discussed, worked on, and assessed the course's assignments. At the end of the course, when I asked for volunteers to donate their name tag for my files and research, no one offered. Instead, several cited their need to hang on to their tag so that they would have an example to use in adapting the activity to the special education classroom.