

When the Students Become the Teachers

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As teachers we all spend time trying to figure out how to make our classes exciting and offer the students something they'll really enjoy. But how can we make that happen? The first answer that comes to our minds might not be research, but maybe it should be. Even in the social sciences, or maybe *especially* in the social sciences, having undergraduates create and complete their own research projects is a formula for student and teacher satisfaction. In addition, doing their own research helps the students not only understand the concepts we're trying to present, but build on them and make them their own.

Sound labor intensive? Not so much. In fact, once students are given information on the type of research project they're being asked to do, with an example or two, their creativity takes off. In our communication classes the students develop such great research projects that when the next semester of students sees or hears what the last class has done, they rise to the challenge and come up with even better ideas, and then the cycle continues.



Ryan Wool, Tara Michaels, and Angel Saint-Hilaire explore how people get treated based on how much they have.

We all know that no matter how many times we read something out of a book, if we get involved in trying that something “hands-on,” that makes all the difference; the concepts become memorable.



Becky Roth, DeAnna Nix, and Robert Ekes see how they're treated when they appear in radically different ways.

In our Intercultural Communication class, we have a project called “Step Out.” Since empathy has proven to be such a great way to develop understanding between different groups of people, the students are asked to “Step Out” of their comfort zones for a day. They try to feel what it’s like to be a member of a different group, one that often encounters prejudice in our society. With this small bit of information, our students have been inspired to dress in Muslim clothing, try going through a day with a disability, even behaving as if they are homeless – all to see just how much prejudice is out there. To help them think through what they’ve learned, the students do a journal assignment on the experiment. The revelations in these journals are really amazing. Students say that through developing an experiment of their choosing, and seeing just a small piece of what some people have to face 24-7, they not only become more sensitive to the group they’ve chosen to emulate, but to other people in general.



Kaileigh Hollowood, seen here with her family members, set out to experience some of the discrimination that Muslims face.

Nothing could be simpler than an experiment like this. The students get excited about it and their journal entries flow. Even those who say they were dreading the experiment when it was first assigned often say that once they did it, they felt changed. And how many textbooks do we know that could do that?

We've all experienced it. If we want our classes to be more exciting, if we want our students to feel more enthusiastic, if we want the material to "stick," there's a resource out there who knows how to make it happen: our students. All we need to do is give them the chance.