

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### *Priming the Pump for TL: The Q-Sort Technique in Use by UCO Faculty*

Overall it was quite gratifying to frame course concepts in a way that was highly meaningful to students. At the end of class, one student commented on how “cool” her mass communication classes were. I took “cool” to mean that the class was not just informative but meaningful and substantive. This experience has encouraged me to find other ways of incorporating active learning techniques into my classes.

UCO’s Central Six Tenets correlate in many ways with George Kuh’s High-Impact Practices (HIPs; Kuh, 2008). One HIP is active learning that occurs collaboratively among students during group assignments. The above description of student feedback after a particular type of collaborative assignment — the Q-Sort, which is done in class — was written by UCO Mass Communications professor Dr. Sam Lawrence as the completion activity from last semester’s CETTL mini-curriculum on active learning instructional strategies (picture below is of Sam receiving his completion certificate from UCO Provost John Barthell). Sam’s description of how he used the Q-Sort technique, and the learning prompted as a result, illustrates how Transformative Learning is both content-related and meta-cognitive for students.



Sam's written reflection about using one of the active learning instructional strategies shared and modeled during the mini-curriculum, presented below as a great demonstration of an instructional strategy that builds the kind of environment making it more likely that TL will happen, was the final component for participants in the CETTL workshop.

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From Sam's reflection:

In the second meeting of Interviewing Practices (MCOM 4403), I used a Q-sort to generate class discussion and ultimately learning. The night before, I struggled to find ways of teaching introductory concepts such as the definition and types of interviewing contexts. One option that I considered was having students write their own definition of interviewing and then comparing it with the authors'. I didn't pursue that approach because it spoke too much to the head and not enough to the heart. I needed a way of tapping into how interviewing fit into their experiences.

I conceived of the Q-sort as occurring in three phases. The first phase was asking individuals to recall a memorable interview experience (which could be positively or negatively toned). They recorded words and short phrases that summarized the experience (e.g., productive, waste of time, etc.). The goal was to come up with at least 6-10 summaries per individual.

The seating was arranged to form five groups of four members each. The second phase involved groups compiling summary words that applied to at least two members. The goal was for each group to list 6-8 shared experiences. These words were recorded on 4 x 6" index cards with a Sharpie. They were asked to write their descriptions large enough to be seen from the back of the room.

At phase three, each group turned their attention to the whiteboard with the oval, plus sign, triangle, square, star, and hexagon symbols forming six columns. A randomly selected group started the process by placing a word underneath the oval. Then the next group had the option of adding to an existing column if the word was related in some way to the previously contributed word (e.g., as a synonym or an antonym). So a group might add "formal" to a column in which "conversational" had already been placed. Or the group had the option of starting a new column under the plus sign if their word was unrelated to any of the oval words. The five groups took turns exercising these two options.

Afterwards, I checked with the class to see if they wanted to revise the placement of any cards. They suggested a few. The final result was this:

○	+	△	□	☆	⬡
Casual/ conversational	Sweaty...	Short	Solo/ group	Stunned	Vague
Informal	Nervous	Lengthy		Sexual Tension	
Conversational	Fast-paced	Tedious		Long/ <u>judgy</u> questions	
Unintimidating	Nerve- Racking	Productive		Awkward	
Easy-going	Confidence	Productive		Weird	
Conversational ↓ One-sided	Encouraging				
	Inspiring				

The process of publicizing these labels produced considerable interaction within and between groups. The “sexual tension” item, as you can imagine, generated its share of banter. Class members reformulated “nerve-racking” as “nerve-rocking” (while making “you rock” gestures). While these comments weren’t strictly “on task,” they made the activity fun (and helped to build the class culture).

We then came up with summary labels for each of the dimensions of interview experience.

1. The “oval” words were viewed as speaking to the tone of the interview.
2. The “plus sign” words were interpreted as indicating vibe (or feel) of the interview.
3. The “triangle” words seem to suggest the time-worthiness of the interview.
4. The “star” words suggested the abnormality (or unusualness) of their interview experiences.
5. The “rectangle” and “hexagon” columns had only one word and were not seen as meaningful dimensions.

I then asked students to tell stories that pertained to one or more of the dimensions that they had created. One story recounted a highly time-worthy interview in which an HR representative provided a comprehensive tour of the company (e.g., key personnel, as well as the cafeteria and wellness center). The student was impressed that the interviewer took time to help her to make an informed decision if she had received a job offer.

Telling these stories in the wake of the activity allowed students to better connect their experiences with one another. Those with negative experiences understood that they were not alone. They also understood that they had positive interviewing experiences to look forward to.

The activity took about 45 minutes and provided context for the following teaching points. First, interviews are not neutral facts in the world. They are events with personal and professional significance. Second, the goal of the course is to prepare you for interviewing experiences that lie ahead. I was able to segue into a mini-lecture that focused on how the authors' definition and list of interviewing contexts could be used to anticipate the diversity of future interviewing experiences.

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Kuh, G. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities. Available: