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GIFT: The Six Word Memoir

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This exercise takes place on the final day of class in my Business Communication course. The semester has been devoted, largely, to the idea that the fewer words used in business communication, the better. I use Coco Chanel's quote about accessories—"Never add, always remove"—as a guideline for composing and editing both writing and speech. The goal is to get students to realize that, in almost all business communication, less is more, especially in today's business world where much communication takes place electronically. But students also come to realize that "less is more work," and that concision and brevity are more difficult to come by than long, effusive communication:

I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one.
– Blaise Pascal

Rationale

This exercise, while fun and often amusing, connects to a real need for students to realize that business communication needs to be immediate and concise, and that no one has the time to read long or long-winded documents. We have stressed this throughout the course, even when we discuss resumes. For example, most of my students think of a resume as an autobiography, which must include everything they ever did in every job they ever had. I ask them to think of a resume as more of a memoir than an autobiography; that is, I ask them to construct their resumes in terms of what gave meaning to their lives, or, more importantly, what might be significant about their lives to a prospective employer. I do not accept a resume over one page.

Connections

This notion of brevity—that "Elegance is refusal"—pervades the course, and connects to speeches, memo writing, letter writing, and every form of persuasive business communication. The students are asked to revise and to edit with concision in mind. I insist upon short sentences, short paragraphs, and no unnecessary words. And when students are asked to encapsulate their life in only six words, the lesson is brought home to them, I believe.

Directions

We begin the class by reading Hemingway's famous (and perhaps apocryphal) Six Word Novel, *For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn*.

We then talk about the enormous layers and level of meaning that can be contained in six words. The students are then asked to compose, in class, a Six Word Memoir. They are cautioned not to write a credo or belief, or a general statement about life, or how they see it. They are asked specifically to find six words that shape or give meaning to their life experience to date. I do this toward the end of the semester, when the students know each other well, are comfortable in class, and are much more likely to be open about their lives. The results have been extraordinary. Some examples, from my undergraduates:

“Left drugs for good. Lost husband.”

“Still overcoming not being a boy.”

“Fell in love but mother didn't.”

“Always strived for less. Mission accomplished.”

“Meant everything to someone who didn't.”

“You killed yourself. It killed me.”

“Daddy left. Talk about trust issues.”

Use as G.I.F.T.

It seems to me that this exercise in self-reflection could be explained and replicated within the short span of a G.I.F.T.S. session. The respondents would be able to understand the exercise, learn its relevance, and actually compose their own Six Word Memoir in the allotted time.

References

This idea had its genesis after I read a book called “Not Quite What I Was Expecting,” which reported the results of a similar exercise conducted by the editors of SMITH magazine, an online publication. Over time, I connected the idea to other components of my pedagogy and syllabus, and incorporated it into my course.