"The Most" Successful Literature Review Activity

by Amy R. Wainwright

As an instructor of introductory-level literature courses at the University of North Florida, I often find myself at the end of the semester standing in front of total strangers. My warm, engaged, lively students have disappeared, and in their places sit gaunt, anxiety-ridden young people facing only their second or, at best, third set of college finals. They are staggering under a full load of courses and their minds are overflowing with information. I don't always give a final exam myself, but I think it can be a good idea—even in a literature course. If the course has succeeded, students should be able to formulate and compose a critical argument about a piece, or several pieces, of literature within the time frame of a final exam.

But when students are saturated with facts and figures from a number of courses, how do I approach reviewing for a final in a way that will not only help them recall objective knowledge from literature, but keep them practicing critical inquiry and argumentation we have spent so much time on during the semester?

At a recent session of the Jaxwrite Writing Project here in Jacksonville, I joined a number of teachers from all grade levels in learning several games that might be adapted to provide valuable learning experiences in a variety of subject areas. One of these games, originally entitled "Apples to Apples," would, I felt, meet the twin goals I have for a final review in my Introduction to Literature course.

I adapted the game and entitled it "The Most." Here are the rules:

- I divide my class (usually about 24 to 27 students) into six groups of roughly four people each. I use already-established peer review groups, so students are accustomed to working with each other and can assemble in groups quickly.

- In a 50-minute class, the game is played for six rounds, with each group sitting out one round to serve as "judge." This way I am not the judge, and that leaves me free to keep track of time and keep score.

- Prior to the game day, I design a set of playing cards (I use small index cards) to deal out to the six groups. Each card has on its face the name of one of the pieces of literature (short story, novel, play, essay, even a poem or two in some cases) that we have studied during the semester. Below that is the name of a single significant character from that work. Each group receives several cards, depending on how many characters we have studied. Usually it works out to approximately six cards per group, so I occasionally have to recycle some cards during play to keep each group's hand relatively full.

- In addition, I design a set of six "Most" cards—one for each round of play. On each of these cards will be printed a fill-in-the-blank sentence that begins with the words "The most...", For example, "The most misuderstood character in the literature we have read this semester is..."; or "The most mean spirited character we have read about is..."

- Prior to beginning play, I will read aloud the "Most" card to students and ask them to confirm for me the definition of the operative adjective used within the sentence. This way I know they are all looking for the same character trait. Then the groups receive two minutes to pick one of the characters in their hand of cards and prepare a brief argument regarding why that character should be ranked as the most. The group functioning as judge for that round may spend the time arriving at some criteria for evaluating arguments, or discussing which character they would pick themselves.

- I then go around from group to group (always starting with a different group, so groups get to argue in varying order) and ask one person from each group to stand and give their team's collective choice and argument in 45 seconds or less. The group spokesperson may not remain the same from round to round; since there are six rounds, each person from each group must function as spokesperson at least once. Arguments should include specific facts, traits, behaviors, or events that show the chosen character as possessing the operative trait for that round. Ultimately, I like students to back up their claims with specific page numbers from our text(s).

- Arguments may also refute those provided by other groups about their characters. This is another reason I alternate the order in which groups give their arguments.

- After all five participating groups have stated their cases, the judging group confers and makes a decision regarding which group gave the most thorough, specific, and convincing argument. The winning group is then given the "Most" card for that round as evidence of their victory.

- This process continues with another group serving as judge until all groups have served. The group with the highest number of "Most" cards at the end of the period is the winner. I give winners anything from a small prize to a few extra-credit points, depending on the class level.

Initially, students tend to be a bit self-conscious, hesitant, and vague in their arguments. However, by the time we have played a couple of rounds, they are not only able to come up with very specific evidence regarding their choice of characters, but are usually able to locate exact page numbers for their evidence and effectively refute the arguments given by other groups. When I tried "The Most" in my Introduction to Literature class this spring, the students became so involved that their arguments exceeded time and had to be "gonged," and they demanded to have a tie-breaker at the end of the period, even though class time was over. So we stayed a few extra minutes.

Most importantly, students in that class did quite well on their final, citing more direct examples and quotes and explaining their relevance more convincingly than I often see in entry-level English essay exams. The students and I both think that "The Most" game was directly related to their high performance.

Amy R. Wainwright is an instructor of composition and literature at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. She is a TC with the Jaxwrite Writing Project.