

Soft skills in the classroom

This year **Suzan Newberry**, advisor at **Campbell County High School in Wyoming**, extended her students' string of ICDC event wins to include three more first place finishes in the Series Events. You can see some of Suzan's advice in your Roadmap Planner at pages 41 and 76.

Suzan is committed to the competitive events as a teaching tool, with the competitive aspect second and the teaching aspect first. In previous articles Suzan has shared her dedication to teaching performance indicators and making sure her students perform well on the comprehensive test part of the role-plays. For this article, I asked her about her approach to teaching the soft skills.

Interactivity in her classroom and **modeling effective behavior** are the two benchmarks of Suzan's teaching style. The first step is to get students to write something in class or to speak in class. She poses questions to all members and says, "No one gets to be a lazy bump today." These can be simple questions or ones that ask for preliminary opinions on a new topic. "I teach for 90 minutes," notes Suzan. "We change gears a lot."

To make these interactions dynamic, she introduces timed tasks: "In three minutes, write down as many franchise operations as you can." The students are not aware of franchising, so this can be a hard assignment. But it gets them started. Once they have taken a step into the topic, even a tentative or ill-informed one, they are motivated to learn about the subject. So the first day on the subject is opinion: A company may be introducing a new product. After it's been tested, the company sees that it may be harming a small number of people. What should they do? Pull the product? Give a warning? (Many of these questions may involve ethical issues.)

Suzan introduces competencies through scenarios, which she describes as starting with mini-case studies. So if she asks the students what they think a company should do about toys from China that don't meet safety standards, at first they are largely unaware that there is an issue. Says Suzan, "This gets them out there talking. The next day they will have to have facts and figures. I'll tell them that opinions were yesterday. If you aren't prepared, you don't get to have an opinion today."

Suzan characterizes these exercises as simple things. "You don't have to plan big activities to teach. In fact you can't plan big activities all of the time." You can, like Suzan, hold a 15- to 20-minute debate on a real issue related to one of your competencies. A "competency of the day" can be illustrated by asking for just two or three sentences on an issue that involves that competency. "By test time, they'll know these competencies."

Classroom exercises that challenge, like these, start to develop skills that are valuable in role-play events. "It's important to think fast, not just be nice, in the presentation. This can be

taught in classroom activities." When Suzan challenges the students, they sometimes say, "We're not so smart." To this she replies, "Well, we don't know that. So let's pretend you are." There's a good dose of higher order skills in these dynamic challenges—organizing ideas and suggesting solutions. Problem-solving activities also produce self-confidence and willingness to risk having and expressing an opinion.

By teaching through the soft skills, Suzan believes teachers raise the level of academic ability in their students. She cites a recent winner who did not come to her as an "academic" student. After researching her passion—the real world of clothing design—and using that knowledge in her successful role-play performance, she is now enrolled in some AP classes.

Another of Suzan's techniques is making up games "to keep them going." For example, she'll place a student monitor in front of the classroom and then ask questions. The first hand up has a chance to either win points or lose points. The monitor keeps track.

As for listening skills, "They'd better listen," she declares. "We don't talk while someone is talking. I say things like 'What did you hear?' 'Repeat back—summarize back to me.' Most of the time I tell them to pay attention, I won't repeat what I'm going to say. Soon, if someone didn't pay attention, the other students say, 'But she told us.' They model and reinforce the behavior."

"We cover empathy. You can teach empathy. People in business can't just come across as thinking about themselves. In competition, those who find empathy hard probably don't do well. If I ask them what the judge said, they may not know. They have to acknowledge that the judge is there and has a part in it." Susan thinks some kids are more naturally good communicators. Others may think those kids are just playing up to the judge, but really some of the kids have figured out the importance of this empathy.

Suzan finds that being enthusiastic in class exercises is difficult for kids. "Kids tend to present in a monotone. I have to model the behavior of saying the same thing with enthusiasm. We always have an enthusiastic person in the class. They can model that student's behavior." Eventually they learn to be excited in their presentation. An exercise that helps is to have students introduce a classmate, but to challenge them to do it with energy. "I'll say, 'Be proud of the person you're introducing. There's something great about this person.'"

For Suzan, dealing with the extended soft skills in class is a matter of time management. It can be integrated into making the curriculum come alive. She finds that there are too many other things to deal with during role-play practice held outside of class. "I have to do it in class or it doesn't get done." Suzan feels that there is a lot of class time, and a teacher is wasting time if he/she doesn't model the soft skills in the classroom. "It's not easy to begin teaching this way every morning at 7:15, but is it easy to leave every day thinking you shorted the kids?"

Interactivity

Scenarios

Debates

Games

Listening

Empathy

Enthusiasm