

OWI Symposium Presenter Handout “The Provoker”

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I do not consider myself much of an actor, so adopting teacherly “roles” in face-to-face instruction has never been a core aspect of my teaching. But in an online writing course (OWC), I have found I can assume writing personas through written message boards. (Much of the material here is derived from “‘The Provoker’ Discussion Board Threads” article I co-authored in *Online Literacies Open Resource* with former student Lisa Schepis-Myers.)

I call these Provoker threads. The Provoker is a contradictory anti-voice, and teachers can use these threads in straightforward ways in their courses. Several times during the term I compose a discussion board prompt using a pseudonym that takes extreme, playfully antagonistic positions on various topics likely to ignite debate. The Provoker is a rhetorically edgy, devil’s advocate-type voice. The teacher posts using an alias, although the teacher should introduce the “guest,” at least initially, and facilitate the Provoker’s posts. I primarily use this approach in first-year argument-/persuasion-centered OWCs.

Provoker threads allow me to debate students without the pressure of “arguing” with the professor. Students develop arguments using logic, rhetorical skill and creativity, and evidence, as they find the (often gaping) holes in the Provoker’s claims. With the “official” (i.e., grade-distributing) Professor in the background, students write with verve and passion while also composing solid, arguments. They must think through written, sometimes emotional, argumentation. Provoker threads also help create community, as students often work together to take down the Provoker, which can be particularly worthwhile in an OWC. Term after term the Provoker threads elicit some of their best writing.

I find the process enjoyable too, as I am competitive and debate them head-on in ways that would be difficult as their teacher. To make these threads work most effectively, the instructor should actively follow the thread. I create a mid-week synopsis post, in which, following Collision et al., I provide a synthesis of the students’ posts. Depending on the message board system, I often simply post the synthesis post from my own alias, incorporating the Provoker’s material into my own posts.

Provoker threads are usually the most popular threads in my courses. In a recent OWC, when at the end of the term I asked students to identify favorite threads and posts, 12 of the 14 who named a favorite cited either threads or individual posts from Provoker conversations. Working together, the students “defeat” the Provoker by week’s end. He slinks into the rhetorical ether, and the “real” Prof. Warnock pops in and congratulates them. The experience is enjoyable, and it is good online writing pedagogy as well as good overall writing instruction.

References

Collision, George, Bonnie Elbaum, Sarah Haavind, and Robert Tinker. *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*. Madison, Atwood Publishing, 2000.

Warnock, Scott and Lisa Schepis-Myers. “‘The Provoker’ Discussion Board Threads.” *Online Literacies Open Resource*. May 2020. https://www.glosole.org/warnock_schepis-myers_the_provoker_discussion_board_threads.html