Strategy V: Dyadic Essay

I did this right away on Thursday, 8 December, the day after your presentation. It sure seemed like an excellent way to engage all of my students, “force” them to do an assignment that had already been given, have them productively interact with one another during class, show off what they know and learn from a fellow classmate that they could improve their mastery of the topic.

The class chosen was Anatomy & Physiology which is made up of a diverse group of learners primarily juniors and seniors. I had previously given them four long answer questions they needed to write answers for in advance of an upcoming chapter test on the nervous system. I had a strong suspicion that no one in the class had yet started on these essays since they’d been assigned just the day before. The assigned topic read: List the four events that lead to transmission of a nerve impulse across a synapse.

The assigned reading included a page in out text book along with an excellent diagram. The crux for the students was that out text shows the process in six steps and I always teach and assess it based on four steps i.e. it’s easier to remember four steps than six AND it forces them to reorganize and evaluate the six steps and synthesize of four-step process of their own. I also tasked them with creating and defining a vocabulary of seven to 12 terms needed to understand the process. Their final directions were to write this like you were explaining it to a sixth-grader. They got a kick out my example of how “a sixth-grader would confuse a neurotransmitter with a Transformer™. This also gave them confidence in their own knowledge because we discussed how everyone in the class KNEW what a neurotransmitter was, and could name three of them and their function. This was an added and unforeseen benefit.

My initial time estimate of 15 minutes was too low so I extended the time by 10 minutes. Students then paired up and compared their answer to the model answer. I left it up to them to develop a final vocabulary list of a maximum of 12 terms. I couldn’t see how they would possible reach 12, but you always have those students who will reach whatever maximum number you have and I didn’t want them to spin their wheels generating a list that was longer than I thought it should be.

The results were outstanding! I would have loved a classroom visit during the activity. I thought about your description of the “Think-Pair-Share” chaos and was stunned by the performance and behavior of my students. They were all much focused, quiet beyond belief and on-task. The results were just as impressive. I did take more class time than I expected, but when I compare this time to the results I expect on the test it certainly will prove the time was well spent and EVERYONE had the assignment completed and turned in. I guarantee you even though this is an upper level science course I would have had at least 10 percent not turn it in on time and a couple not at all!