

Dianne Bragg
GIFT submission

Making the First Amendment Real: Creative Ways to Encourage Students to Learn Their Freedoms

When I first began teaching Mass Communication Law and Regulation about seven years ago, I was struck by how few of my students were even vaguely familiar with the First Amendment and the freedoms it guarantees. As I contemplated ways to achieve my goal of making this vital piece of our American constitutional heritage personal to my students, a few ideas came to mind. First, I decided it was necessary for my students to understand how little they knew about even the most basic wording of the First Amendment. I began an exercise that has worked quite well for several years. On the first day of class, I have students clear their desks except for an index card I have handed out to them. They are instructed not to write their names on the card. The students are then instructed to write, to the best of their ability, the First Amendment. I tell them that if they cannot remember the exact wording, simply write what they know, even if it is just a list of the rights they think are in the First Amendment. Most of them simply stare straight ahead with horrified looks on their faces. I take up the cards and use them in a Powerpoint Presentation I have created, which I share with them during the second class. I begin by showing them the First Amendment and then go to sites such as the First Amendment Center. Then, I show a slide presenting how many rights students in our class knew. For example, this past semester the breakdown was as follows:

- No rights: 15
- One right: 37—(mainly speech/a few religion or assembly)
- Two rights: 15 (usually speech and press)
- Three rights: 30 (usually speech, religion, & press)
- Four rights: 21
- Five rights: 7 (four were really close to wording)

I then show slides with some of the more interesting answers, including these:

- Freedom of religion, speech and other stuff
- The right to bear arm; the right to bare arms
- The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
- Four Score and 7 years ago, our fathers...so that we could live
- The right through Congress for freedom of speech against the press
- The government has no right to take away our abilities to watch porn, football, & NASCAR

Second, I then tell the students that each of our three tests will have a place for them to write the First Amendment in its entirety. It has been interesting to see that many of the students truly are embarrassed that they did not know the First Amendment and the majority of them do memorize it completely.

Third, along with this memorization, I added another component to help my students learn the First Amendment. I developed a Facebook page for the class, [UAMC401Law](#), and challenge students to upload videos of themselves reciting the First Amendment in interesting places and in interesting ways for extra credit. The creativity many of them have shown has been astounding. A few examples are:

- One student recited it from the courtroom where the Dred Scott case was decided
- Several students have recited it in front of various state supreme court buildings and the United States Supreme Court building
- One student who was a broadcast major working at the Alabama Public Television station, WVUA, had several of the anchors recite parts of the Amendment and including outtakes
- Several students have sang, rapped, and danced while reciting
- One student staged a short skit
- Several students together made a video where they filmed themselves as they played on the words, i.e. crossing a bridge for “abridging”
- One student filmed several students of various nationalities on campus reciting parts of the First Amendment in their native language

There are many more such examples. The students are able to view and like each other’s videos, and I am able to post comments. It has become so popular that students come into my class already thinking about how they will make their videos. This has made me aware of how engaging the activity is for them, but I have also learned how much it has helped them reach my objective that they learn the First Amendment and understand what it means. On more than one occasion, I have encountered former students who immediately tell me they have not forgotten the First Amendment. Often, they will recite it for me, wherever we are, even in a public place. They are very proud of this accomplishment. It has happened at a beachside restaurant in Gulf Shores, Alabama, a doctor’s office in Birmingham, Alabama, and in several other cities and airports outside of Alabama. Even more importantly, they internalize the Amendment’s meaning. Just one example is a former student who sent me a tweet that she was able to explain to friends why it was constitutional to burn an American flag in a protest, as they had seen on television.

I believe these teaching ideas have challenged and engaged my students in ways that have made the First Amendment real to them. I believe these activities have helped to ensure that my students leave my class not only as better media practitioners, but also as better citizens.