Classroom Discussion: Professors Share Favorite Strategies for Engaging Students

IN THE TYPICAL college classroom a small handful of students make the vast majority of comments. As a teacher you want to create a classroom environment that helps students of various learning styles and personalities to feel comfortable enough to contribute as well as understand the importance of class preparation and active participation. To reach this goal requires a constant balancing act of encouraging quiet, reflective students to speak up and, occasionally, asking the most active contributors to hold back from commenting in order to give others a chance.

On The Teaching Professor's LinkedIn Group we asked members to share some of the strategies they use to engage students in discussion, manage the dominant talkers and the nontalkers, and steer a discussion that's gone off track. Nearly three dozen faculty members shared their techniques for prompting discussion. Below are excerpts of just a few of the strategies shared.

Bob Burdette, Assistant Professor of Accounting, Salt Lake Community College: No one method works for me to get my non-talking students to speak and the talkers to be quiet and listen. So, I try to change up the tool I use to get the desired results. On one day I will start working a problem on the whiteboard. I'll then give the marking pen to a student and thank them for volunteering. They get to come to the board to work the next part of the problem. After they are finished they pass the pen to another student to continue work on the problem. We continue this process giving as many students the opportunity to come to the board and teach small parts of the problem to the rest of the class. To remove the anxiety of coming to the board we give the student at the board the authority to ask for help from all the students still seated.

Another day I'll pass out two or three poker chips to every student. As we begin the discussion I ask each student to give me back a chip each time they answer a question. Rapidly the talking students use up their chips. Since they can no longer speak in the class it leaves the non-talking students to answer the remaining questions.

Another day I'll bring a deck of cards to class and allow every student to select one from the deck. Once I begin working a problem I'll stop and draw a card from the deck. Any student with a card higher than mine has to come to the board and continue working on the problem. If I have the higher card then I have to continue working the problem.

Warren Dittmar, Professor of English, Miami Dade College: A good foundation for interactive conversation is a relaxed atmosphere and an understanding by students that their ideas and opinions are important and will be accepted and entertained. Students must feel that their comments are going to be listened to and sincerely responded to. Establishing student trust and acceptance is an important aspect of their participation.

As an example of one technique that I use in my classes, I have a Burning Question Period that starts just before the beginning of class and runs through the first five or ten minutes. Students can ask any question about current world happenings, national problems, or any important issue to them. Their questions are always varied and create general discussion that includes vocal students as well as more reticent students. The issues are usual hot issues and generate strong reactions and controversy. They are required to substantiate their positions. This technique has generated regular interactions and open communication.

Erica Kleinknecht, Associate Professor of Psychology, Pacific University: I find that in lecture classes, most students don't read before-hand, they do so after class. When I want discussion, I create a series of writing assignments due at the start of select class periods. This gets them to collect their thoughts before class so they don't feel pressured to come up with something on the spot. Many students are afraid of being wrong. I also do what others on this list have suggested: small group discussion with one delegate who reports to the whole class. When I do both in one class, I get many more talkers.

Chitu Okoli, Associate Professor of Management Information Systems, Concordia University: Clickers are quite helpful. You ask a question, give people time to think about it (and they are allowed to discuss with their neighbours first), and then click in their multiple-choice responses. Before you tell the students the right answer, you ask people from each answer group (e.g. those who answered A, B or C) to justify their responses. This gets a wide variety of people to talk who wouldn't otherwise because 1) everyone has time to think and commit to an answer before you ask them to talk to the class; and 2) different people give different answers, so it's not always the same 5-7 people talking every time. Of course, even then, the 5-7 people problem pops up, so after these people have responded twice or so, you ask to hear from people who have not yet spoken. This approach has helped me hear from a lot more students, especially the more thoughtful but otherwise silent ones.

Mary Bart, Classroom Discussion: Professors Share Favorite Strategies for Engaging Students; Faculty Focus; July 9, 2012 [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/classroom-discussion-professors-share-favorite-strategies-for-engaging-students/] ; July 10, 2012

Summer 2 Term Ends - Aug 2
Exams - Aug 6
All Grades Due - Aug 8
Graduation Day - Aug 10
Faculty Workshops - Aug 23 & 24
Scott Lewis - Aug 29

Teaching Academic Honesty in the Classroom

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THE PAST FEW WEEKS have seen a flurry of discussion around cheating and academic dishonesty, a perennial issue made fresh in part by Centenary College's decision to discontinue a program in China due to the high incidence of cheating among the program's students. The incident raised the question of how to clearly communicate (and police) academic honesty, not only among international students but also among domestic students. Given that many cases of inappropriate academic behavior arise from a fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes academic work (rather than from an intention to cheat), relying on Turnitin and similar services to "catch" plagiarists is not by itself enough to address the issue.

We asked Tony Bates, president and CEO of Tony Bates Associates Ltd. and a key researcher on teaching and learning in the digital age, to offer a fresh perspective on how colleges can encourage the academic success of their students by addressing expectations around academic honesty more proactively.

Diagnosing the Issue

Bates suggests that the key issue is not getting students to adhere to rules, but getting them to develop the learning skills needed to succeed in an increasingly collaborative learning environment. Students need to be assessed not only on course content but also on critical learning skills, including:

- How well they reference sources
- How well they acknowledge the work of others
- Their contributions to collaborative work
- Their ability to separate their own contributions and conclusions from those of others in a collaborative learning environment

Attitudes toward intellectual property are changing. Students are used to open access to information on the Internet, file sharing, mixing and mashing media, cutting and pasting. - Tony Bates, Tony Bates Associates Ltd.

The difficulty, as Bates and others have suggested, is that the concept of intellectual property and what constitutes "cheating" is in flux both inside and outside of the classroom. Bates remarks, "What medical student now tries to remember all the possible drug interactions, but instead learns where to look up the information? If she did that in an exam, would it be cheating? The Hewlett Foundation and prestigious schools such as MIT extol the use of open content and the free flow of knowledge. Students

helping each other with their assignments used to be called 'cheating,' but is now called 'collaborative learning.'"

Three Critical Steps to Take

Given this climate, Bates recommends three critical steps to help students internalize academic integrity principles and develop appropriate learning skills:

- Create course-specific documents that clarify what academic behavior is not acceptable
- Use first offenses as teachable moments
- Integrate teaching on academic honesty and collaborative work into the first week of some first-year courses

"Some students will still cheat," Bates says, "even when they know the rules, and these cases should be identified and the institutional penalties enforced." But there are steps educators can take to help foster both an understanding and a climate of academic honesty in the classroom.

Clarify What Isn't Acceptable

Often rules, values, and principles about how to behave as a student are taken for granted, implicit, or unclear. You may know them, but often students don't. Institutional policy is sometimes buried deep in unfriendly documentation that is difficult for students to find or understand. Make sure students know where you stand from the very beginning of the course. - Tony Bates, Tony Bates Associates Ltd.

Bates recommends encouraging instructors to prepare a document that outlines "appropriate academic behavior." By supplementing the institutional policy on plagiarism with a course-specific document, an instructor can offer specific, concrete examples relevant to a particular course. Bates also suggests making sure these documents address more than just plagiarism in academic writing. Be clear on what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior in plagiarism, citation, collaborative work, sharing, and copying notes from other students. "Often these behaviors are not black and white," Bates warns, "but have shades of gray. You need to be clear with your students on where the boundaries are."

Use Breaches of Policy as Teachable Moments

Many institutions have adopted a zero-tolerance no-plagiarism policy (for instance, requiring instructors to assigning a failing grade for the course to a student who included plagiarized content in an assignment), but Bates worries that this strict approach sacrifices the opportunity for teachable moments.

"Instead of coming down heavily on a student who has broken the rules," Bates suggests, "make this a teaching opportunity the first time it occurs. Without identifying the student, give the example and ask the students what they think about this. When the discussion has run its course, give your and/or the institution's position, and make it clear that there are consequences if this happens again."

Integrate Teaching on Academic Honesty into First-Year Courses

First-year undergraduate courses present a critical opportunity to both reinforce policies on academic honesty and help students develop research and collaborative learning skills appropriately. During the first week of a course, an instructor can help set students up for academic success by walking them, interactively, through possible scenarios.

Bates offers one example of an exercise that has seen success in his own courses:

- Place the students in small groups of three or four
- Assign each group an exercise that involves finding information about one of the course topics (make sure to include guidelines on identifying sources and expectations for collaborative work)
- Ask each group to produce a page or two showing what they found
- Select three or four examples to discuss with the class the following week

When debriefing the examples, include discussion of whether these examples have followed the guidelines on citation and proper use of sources and the guidelines for collaborative group work. Bates suggests making this an ungraded (or minimally graded) exercise but having an open conversation about how the examples would have been graded, and why. "Encourage students to comment or ask questions, especially about how to assess collaborative work," he says.

Many issues and misconceptions your students have will arise during this first exercise, in a low-threat environment, as opposed to arising later during a critical point in their work. This exercise also allows the students to explore the issues while beginning their actual work toward the course's learning outcomes.

Daniel Fusch, Teaching Academic Honesty in the Classroom, Academic Impressions, August 19, 2010 [http://www.academicimpressions.com/ news.php?i=105&q=6229o396946gL], August 23, 2010.