Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #19: Encouraging active participation in between the First and Last Five Minutes of Class

A voluminous body of research supports the notion that students’ learning is enhanced when they participate actively in class. *Asking and answering questions, contributing to class discussions, working with classmates to solve problems, and other similar kinds of activities can result in better understanding and mastery of course material as well as enhanced enthusiasm about what they are learning.* Building upon earlier tips, today’s Faculty Matter Teaching Tip consists of suggestions of things you might do with the time in between the first and last five minutes of your classes to create a climate where students are willing – even eager – to participate.

**Two key constructs – Do you see evidence of them in your classes?**

Several decades ago, David Karp and William Yoels coined the term civil attention, to refer to students who were, technically, abiding by classroom behavioral norms – appearing to follow the instructor’s presentation, taking notes, nodding or chuckling at appropriate moments, suggesting that they were “engaged”, when really, their attention was at least partially elsewhere. (Karp and Yoels, 1976). From a distance such behavior appears cooperative. In actuality, while it is not outwardly disruptive, students who engage in it are robbing themselves of the opportunity to get much out of their presence in class, and they are doing little to enrich to experience of their classmates.

These same authors also introduced the notion of consolidation of responsibility, the observation that absent concerted efforts on the part of the instructor, a small handful of students is typically responsible for the vast majority of verbal contribution to the class. The rest of the students sit in silence – some are relieved not to have to talk, others are frustrated by the dominance of a few, and others do not care one way or the other.

**Encouraging more wide-spread active participation in discussion**

*Make sure you’ve created a “safe” and inviting space in your classroom, where students feel comfortable speaking up.*

- *Consider how your students likely perceive you.* Would they say you are approachable? Personable? Fair? Interested in them and their well-being? Although it is always wise to use self-disclosure judiciously, share your enthusiasm as well as your personal experience as it relates to the course content. Students who feel welcome are more likely to participate.

- *Consider how you have responded when students have offered answers that were incorrect or irrelevant.* Have you invited them to explain or elaborate upon their thought process? Have you conveyed that their answer, while non-ideal is some ways, may have moved the conversation (and the learning) forward? Have you responded similarly to students whose contributions were more obviously correct or pertinent? Have you consistently enforced standards of civility and mutual respect among the students in the class.
Point to ponder: Most “talkers” sit within a few feet of the instructor, where they can “connect” more easily.

- Encourage more students to contribute by moving around the classroom (space and furniture permitting).
- Make eye contact with students throughout the room, not just those who sit in the front few rows.

Another point to ponder: Many “quiet” students simply need time to compose their thoughts before they are comfortable speaking up.

- Buy time. As you pose a question to the class, explicitly instruct students to write down a few notes or reflect before answering.
- Refrain from always calling on students who are the first to raise their hands.
- Encourage students who have not yet spoken up to join in the discussion (“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken up...” or Let’s hear from some in this part of the room...” and then remember to wait for someone to contribute.)
- Be sure to acknowledge first-time or infrequent contributors. You may want to do this discretely, as you circulate about the room or after class.
- For more ideas along these lines, consider additional resources discussing “wait time” and related constructs.

Ask questions that will likely lead to productive discussion.

- Yes-no and factual questions do not typically lead to extended conversation. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions. (“Why do you think that?” “Can you explain your reasoning?”)
- Be careful that your conversational prompts are clear. The “talkers” in the class may be eager to respond to anything, even if they are not sure what you are talking about, but the “quiet” ones may be all the more reluctant to speak up of they are not sure what you are driving at. It may take a series of “scaffolding” questions to move through a multi-faceted or nuanced topic that you would like students to talk about.

Try a variety of structures for engineering class discussions.

- Have students consider a topic in pairs or small groups before inviting whole-class discussion. Circulate as students talk in small groups. Call on individuals or groups strategically (“Would you mind if I call on you when we come together as a whole class? That was a really interesting observation you made...”)
- Assign students to categories – numbers, colors, types of flora & fauna, etc. – and solicit participation by group (“Let’s hear from someone who is a ‘Red’ now”). This can lessen the threshold for shy students.

In future posts, we will consider a variety of ways to engage students actively in class through group activities in class. In the meantime, for additional suggestions pertaining to today’s topic, see, for example, advice on the Washington University in St. Louis Teaching Center website. Please add your own strategies using the comment link on the Provost’s Academic Spotlight blog under the category “Faculty Matter”.