



Better Classroom Discussions Are a Collective Skill

I have been growing increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of discussion in my courses. They are such perpendicular exchanges; I ask a question and students offer answers. Often I feel as though the quest for the “right” answer is defined in the student’s mind as the one I want to hear as opposed to the one that reflects individual feelings, thoughts, or insights.

This fall I instituted a group discussion assignment. During a 10-15 minute discussion, I act as recorder and evaluator, keeping track of key ideas and how they are explored in the discussion, and then evaluating the discussion as a whole, giving one collective grade to every individual present during the discussion. I’ve been using assessment criteria like the number of different individuals who contribute (as opposed to the number of contributions by one individual) and the number of elaborations and extensions offered in response to an idea. This structure changes both the tone and substance of the discussions.

And so it was with great interest that I read a recent article on improving discussion. Author Jocelyn A. Hollander points out the problems with many in-class discussions: people talking just to hear themselves, a few people dominating, the discussion occurring without structure, people not listening to each other, ideas being repeated, people not coming to discussion prepared, and people not paying attention during the discussion. Based on a review of the literature she identifies “two gaps in our thinking that keep us from having satisfying classroom discussions.” (p. 319)

First, she says, “we tend to view class discussion as an individual rather than collective enterprise.” (p. 319) She believes the literature on discussion has contributed to this oversight in our thinking by offering much advice on dealing with individual students and their problem

behaviors: the student who over-participates, the one who doesn’t talk at all or very much, the one who is always antagonistic. “We (and here I mean students as well as teachers) must see discussion as a collective process, something that is based on individual contributions but that goes beyond them. Discussion is accomplished by groups, not individuals.” (p. 319)

When writing about this problem, Hollander digresses to offer insights on evaluating discussion. She believes that evaluating individual performance in a discussion may increase the quantity of discussion, but it does not necessarily improve quality. She sees two issues here. First, being evaluated for points encourages individual students to focus on their contribution, what they have to say. There is no reward for listening to others and thinking about the overall substance of the discussion. And second, most grading schemes reward “the most naturally loquacious students, who are not necessarily the most insightful or prepared students.” (p. 320)

The second gap in our thinking that Hollander believes contributes to the disappointment many of us experience with class discussions results from our focus on discussion performance, rather than the development of discussion skills. “When we entreat students to contribute or give them rewards for participation, we evaluate them on the basis of performance. Yet few students have received any formal or informal training in how to be an effective discussion participant.” (p. 320) Being old and cynical, I would observe the same could be said of many faculty discussions in which I have participated.

So how does Hollander close these gaps with her classroom practices? She uses three assignments (descriptions of each are included in appendices accompanying Hollander’s article). First, she has

students write a paper in which they identify those factors that contribute to a good discussion. She notes that there is generally strong consensus among students on these factors and a list of them appears in the article. The class then talks about these features. Afterward, students write a self-analysis in which they describe their own discussion skills and set specific goals for themselves. Finally students evaluate their own progress and assess the quality of class discussions several times during the course. Hollander also designs class activities to develop discussion skills.

Hollander includes comments from students that attest to the success of these strategies and her own conclusions are equally favorable. “When I have used these strategies, class discussions have seemed more focused and less superficial.” (p. 325) Hollander’s analysis hits the nail on the head in terms of identifying valid reasons why those classroom “discussions” so frequently disappoint us and bore students.

Reference: Hollander, J. A. (July 2002). Learning to discuss: Strategies for improving the quality of class discussion. *Teaching Sociology*, 30, 317-327. ♥

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- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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Students, Faculty Perceive Student Evaluations Differently

A research team at Ohio University-Athens recently published a study in an important area of student evaluations: “the purpose of our research was to examine differences in student and faculty perceptions of student evaluations of teaching.” (p. 44)

The researchers were interested in both faculty and student perceptions across a variety of dimensions. They looked at variables that influence teacher ratings like course demands; variables concerning whether the professor is entertaining or has a pleasing personality; the influence of ratings on teachers like whether they contribute to grade leniency, affect faculty careers, or result in course changes; and variables related to how seriously faculty and students regard these evaluations.

The researchers discovered significant differences in perceptions for the two groups (in this case 331 students from four different academic areas and 81 faculty also from different academic areas). Listed below are some of the items along with the percentages of faculty and students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. The article contains much more statistical detail relevant to these perceptual differences about ratings.

- *Students give better ratings to instructors that teach less demanding courses.* Students, 29 percent agree/strongly agree; Faculty, 53 percent agree/strongly agree
- *Students base their course ratings on how entertaining a professor is and not necessarily on how much they learn in the course.* Students, 35 percent agree/strongly agree; Faculty, 47 percent agree/strongly agree
- *Student evaluations encourage faculty to grade easier.* Students, 12 percent agree/strongly agree; Faculty, 57 percent agree/strongly agree
- *Faculty make significant changes to course content based on student evaluations.* Students, 24 percent agree/strongly agree; Faculty, 44 percent agree/strongly agree
- *Students don't take evaluations seriously*

enough to provide meaningful feedback to faculty. Students, 33 percent agree/strongly agree; Faculty, 47 percent agree/strongly agree.

Students and faculty were also asked how they thought faculty responded when faculty received evaluative feedback indicating the course was too hard or the teaching was substandard. More than 45 percent of the students reported that the faculty did nothing as compared with only about 14 percent of the faculty indicating that was the response.

But faculty and students did agree about one aspect of evaluations. Almost 84 percent of the students and 80 percent of the faculty agreed that the way ratings are conducted should be changed. They also agreed that students need to be specific in their evaluations, and that faculty could benefit from peer evaluations of teaching.

The research team makes some insightful observations about these perceptual differences. “It is ... interesting to note that the two groups — faculty and students — almost seem to distrust each other. Faculty members assume that they can get higher ratings by grading more leniently, but students are less likely to agree that is true. Faculty members report altering classes based on SET [student evaluations of teaching], but while students are less likely to perceive any changes in classes based on their comments. Part of this distrust may be related to student concerns that faculty do not take evaluations seriously. That perceived lack of seriousness may lead to feelings of powerlessness on the part of students, which in turn may foster mistrust of their teachers.” (p. 47)

It sounds to us like a clear case for more and better communication for all the parties involved!

Reference: Sojka, J., Gupta, A. K. and Deeter-Schmelz, D. R. (2002). Student and faculty perceptions of student evaluations of teaching: A study of similarities and differences. *College Teaching*, 50 (2), 44-49. 🍓

Disastrous Teaching Experience at New Institution Teaches Many Lessons

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Ed.'s note: *Some months back we published a piece by Sharon Hollander called "Clinkers in the Classroom." In it she described an instructional strategy that didn't work. Because we can learn as much from our failures as we can from our successes, we invited other readers to share some of their less successful instructional moments. We didn't expect the brutal honesty found in the piece that follows. We laud this faculty member for his forthrightness, and although instructional mistakes are often situation and content specific (meaning what he labels mistakes might not always cause disaster), it is his model of reflection and analysis that we find most meritorious.*

I arrived at my most recent teaching position with 17 years of teaching experience. I had taught at the Universidad de la República in Montevideo, Uruguay, at the Universidad Simón Bolívar in Caracas, Venezuela, and at the University of California, Berkeley. I considered myself a successful teacher, one with good classroom rapport with students. I felt confident; I was overconfident. At this university I met my Waterloo.

I began by teaching two precalculus sections and calculus 3. Calculus 3 went reasonably well, but I started off on the wrong foot in both precalculus sections. Students and I disliked each other almost from the beginning. From there on, practically all classes became battles, in which both parties — students and instructor — were trying to prove a point. I was trying to convey to them that they were using the wrong approach, and they were trying to convey exactly the same to me.

The experience was painful and humbling. I promised myself that I would never, ever, teach precalculus again.

When my anger and frustration subsided, I had to recognize very grudgingly that I was not the excellent teacher I thought I was. There was still a lot about teaching

that I needed to learn. In retrospect, I believe I made a number of mistakes. Here's a list of some of the worst and in some cases how I tried to rectify them.

- I assumed that students are as motivated as I am. In reality, most students, especially in introductory or remedial courses like the ones I was teaching, couldn't care less about the content. In the case of math, they come believing that the content is boring and that they will never be good at it.
- I criticized the book and insisted that student use their class notes instead. Most students feel insecure. They need as many things to hold onto as possible. The book is one of them. If I discredit the book, I am taking away what they believe is their life preserver. I learned the hard way how much they resent that. Now I make the book our companion. I use it whenever possible and regularly encourage students to consult it in class.
- I did not take attendance. My rationale? I believed these kids were adults. They would understand that it was their responsibility to be in class. If they didn't attend, that was their problem. Now I take attendance every day and make it a part of the grade. Checking attendance sends a strong message. It says being in class is important — it matters. In my experience that message motivates students to take it seriously as well.
- I didn't let students use calculators in class or on tests. I reasoned that students should be learning concepts, the fundamental ideas. Students rely too much on calculators. They never learn that they can figure things out for themselves. But I underestimated how much students would resist the ban. Now I require the use of calculators. There's no student resentment, and I've come to understand that students who don't bother to learn the concepts are helpless even with their calculators.

I did teach precalculus again, in fact I

teach it every year now. I've discovered some approaches and strategies that do work. Here are some of my favorites:

- **Patience.** When students make stupid mistakes, like adding fractions wrong, making crazy cancellations, or forgetting what I just explained five minutes ago, I used to take it personally and become very angry. Students are very easily intimidated; an angry reply is almost sure to turn them off and discourage them from asking questions ever again. It is very hard to make students feel at ease so that they will ask the questions that they need to. It is a little like taming wild squirrels. One false move and they run away. They hide silently.
- **Forbidden words.** I carefully avoid words and phrases like easy, simple, straightforward, trivial, elementary, basic stuff, and you should know this. What is easy for me is not easy for students; that is why I am standing in front of the class.
- **High homework standards.** Require detailed explanations and justifications in homework and tests. Set standards from day one. If a project is unacceptable, I return it and let students resubmit. If it's unacceptable next time, they have earned a zero.
- **Tough Love.** Treat students with respect, but don't pamper them. Students know the difference. I have learned that you can care for them and still be very demanding.
- **Be informal.** Promote a relaxed atmosphere. For several years now I have dressed up for Halloween. It still amazes me what a difference a costume and a good laugh makes. I've had students tell me that this day changed how they felt about the course. They decided not to drop and to keep trying.
- **Use the SETs (even if you are tenured!).** Learn from students' comments on the Student Evaluation of Teaching forms.

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Internet Cheaters: Who Are They? Why Do They Do It?

Research continues to document that an alarming number of college students cheat. Some faculty fear that the Internet may be making this bad problem worse. Now students have easy access to sources (both free and fee-based) that offer term papers on virtually every subject. Mindy Lester and George Diekhoff wondered who these Internet cheaters might be. Are they a new breed, or do low-tech cheaters simply have a new method at their disposal?

To find out more, they surveyed students and obtained useable responses from 421 students in entry-level psychology and sociology courses at one university. They used a previously developed instrument that included:

- demographic information about the students
- inquiries about how much and via what methods they cheated, if they did
- how they reacted to the cheating of others
- the reasons why they cheated, if they did
- a cheating justification scale that measured how willing students were to justify their behaviors.

The researchers modified this survey slightly so that it asked specifically “if students had, during their college careers, plagiarized either a portion of or an entire

paper from the Internet.” (p. 907)

They also changed other items so that they included references to Internet cheating.

About 32 percent of this sample reported no cheating of any kind compared with almost 69 percent who reported cheating via traditional and/or Internet methods. Of those who reported cheating, 88 percent reported using traditional methods exclusively. Another 12 percent reported using Internet methods of cheating, but only about 1 percent reported Internet cheating exclusively.

When comparing traditional and Internet cheaters, the researchers found, “Internet cheaters and traditional cheaters did not differ significantly on the following variables: age, marital status, year in college, percentages in fraternities or sororities, percentages of scholarship or grant recipients, percentages who reported using their own savings to finance their education or the percentages who reported that they would be likely to report the cheating of others.” (p. 908) These data and others caused the researchers to conclude that “in many ways Internet cheaters are just exaggerated versions of their low-tech counterparts.” (p. 909)

They do, however, justify their behavior to an even greater extent. The researchers

wonder if this is because searching the ‘Net “feels” like legitimate research to many students. Internet cheaters are also even more likely to ignore the cheating of others, and they resent it less.

What can faculty do to prevent Internet cheating?

Researchers asked students what led them to use the Internet to cheat. Students answered time pressure, the convenience of the Internet, a belief that they won’t be found out, and dislike for the class or professor. Assigning a paper that is due in installments across a semester is one way of helping students manage time pressures. Faculty can also require that students attach copies of their resources to the paper and be vigilant in their efforts to identify plagiarized work. The article lists a number of websites helpful in this regard. And the way faculty interact with students may also diminish the motivation to cheat. Assignment designs (like creative topic options) also can make plagiarism more difficult.

Reference: Lester, M. C. and Diekhoff, G. M. (2002). A comparison of traditional and Internet cheaters. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43 (6), 906-911.

DISASTROUS TEACHING

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As imperfect as they are, the SETs are still a very good source of student feedback. Some of their comments are nonsense, or worse, spiteful, but most are done seriously and contain very useful feedback. When I first read the students’ comments from that disastrous first year, I became indignant. When I re-read them many years later, I was surprised to find sound advice in many of them — advice that I had failed to see then.

- Optional final project. I allow students with a strong B average to do a final take-home project instead of the final test. This option is usually gratefully accepted, since it removes the uncertainty of a final test (which is always comprehensive in my courses, and counts for a sizeable percentage of the grade). Even so, the final project assignment is designed so that it forces students to review the whole course in the process of working on demanding and creative problems.
- Cooperative learning. I now use it in all my classes, although I’m still searching

for ways to make it less time-consuming. Students are organized into groups of four people each (with small deviations). They work as a group outside class and turn in homework assignments (projects), one per group. In my experience, students come to appreciate collaborative work. Often I find the same groups still working together in subsequent semesters, even with different course content.

Today's Syllabus Fulfills Three Roles

What do you know about the history of the word “syllabus”? Would you be surprised to learn that it first appeared in the English language in 1656, and that when first used it referred to a table of contents? It was not until the late 1800s that the word “syllabus” started to mean lecture outlines and course dates.

Today academics use the word to refer to such course outlines, but the syllabus itself can fulfill different roles and functions, depending on the course and instructor. A recent article by Jay Parkes and Mary B. Harris provides the above historical details and identifies three main functions for course syllabi. They contend that these purposes should drive what content is included on the syllabus. These three functions plus recommended content are described below.

The Syllabus as a Contract

The authors say the first purpose of a syllabus is to be a contract. A syllabus sets forth expectations for behaviors of the parties involved. It “should delineate the responsibilities of students and of the instructor for various tasks, including attendance, assignments, examinations and other requirements.” (p. 55) With course details laid out in the beginning, the student can make an informed decision as to whether the course is appropriate for them, and the instructor can use the syllabus to adjudicate disagreements that may

arise during the course.

Because the syllabus essentially constitutes an agreement between instructor and student, its content focuses heavily on course policies like grading, attendance, late assignments, make-ups, and academic integrity.

The Syllabus as a Permanent Record

Here the syllabus provides evidentiary documentation of “what was covered in a course; at what level, scope and depth and for what kinds of credit.” (p. 57) The authors discuss the value of this role. “By providing details of what was covered, what students were expected to do, and how these outcomes and performances were assessed, syllabi can be quite helpful in efforts to evaluate both individual instructors and entire programs.” (p. 57) The authors caution about course syllabi that exist only on the web. Web-based syllabi are easily updated and revised, but those changes compromise their value as a permanent record. Faculty should print copies of all syllabi or keep an electronic copy of each syllabus used.

Obviously to function as documentation, syllabi need to include historical details like the date and title of the course, the department offering it, and the amount of credit given for successfully completing it. Also, it is important to include a complete listing of course

objectives, content, required texts, and assessment procedures.

The Syllabus as Learning Tool

This is the newest role for syllabi. The goal here is to use the syllabus to give students the kind of information that will encourage their development as learners. To accomplish that goal, the syllabus should contain a description of the instructor's philosophy of teaching. It might also include recommendations for successful planning for the course, time management, tips on how to do well on certain assignments and/or mistakes to avoid, and a clear delineation of pre-requisite knowledge and/or skills. For students missing or weak on skills, the syllabus might identify places or persons to consult for help.

The authors include an important reminder about all syllabi, regardless of the roles assigned to them. “A syllabus can serve students as a model of professional thinking and writing. If it is clearly written, organized, helpful, appropriately humorous, thoughtful, and perfect in style and grammar, it conveys to students that the instructor values these qualities.” (p. 58)

Reference: Parkes, J. and Harris, M. B. (2002). The purposes of a syllabus. *College Teaching*, 50 (2), 55-61. ♥

Class Size and Achievement: Mixed Studies, Mixed Results

We have noted in previous issues that the study of the effects of class size on achievement represents one of the earliest empirical inquiries into pedagogical effectiveness. First published findings appeared at the beginning of the 20th century. We have also reported that research results are mixed when it comes to establishing whether those effects are generally positive or negative. For example, some research documents that when the measure

of achievement involves content acquisition alone, class size appears to have no effect. But when achievement is enlarged to include abilities to retain and apply content, then results favor small classes.

And mixed results like these continue to be reported, as Linda Toth and Linda Montagna note in a review of recent research studies on the effects of class size published between 1990 and 2000. These authors identified eight studies: six quanti-

tative analyses and two qualitative. Three of the studies were completed in the field of economics, one in statistics, one in electrical and computer engineering, and three combined courses representing different disciplines. Of the six quantitative studies, four defined achievement in terms of course grade exclusively. The authors describe each study and conclude that the

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Part-time Faculty Satisfaction: Not So Grumpy After All

You know about part-time faculty — those poor itinerant scholars who shuttle between campuses and institutions teaching long hours as they search for permanent positions. And even though they may be teaching full time, they are not paid well, and often miss out on benefits and perks like an office. Poor souls, they must be totally frustrated, dissatisfied with their jobs, and looking for employment outside the academy.

James Soto Antony and James R. Valadez do not deal with the details that pertain to the use and misuse of part-time faculty in higher education. They know there are important issues there, but they are concerned with the stereotype of the frustrated, dissatisfied part-timer. They point out that perception has never been empirically validated. So they decided to ask what some might consider unpopular questions:

1. Do part-time faculty wish they could be full time and on the tenure-track?
2. Are part-time, non-tenure-track faculty members universally dissatisfied?
3. Are their full-time, tenure-track counterparts more satisfied?
4. Do any part-time, non-tenure-track faculty actually choose this status because they appreciate its flexibility and emphasis on teaching?

To find answers to those questions, the authors surveyed an impressive sample: 20,300 faculty, 37 percent of whom were part-timers. They used a multidimensional measure of satisfaction. In addition to asking for a global assessment of job satisfaction, they also asked for scores on three research-identified dimensions of satisfaction: satisfaction with personal autonomy, satisfaction with students, and satisfaction with role demands and rewards.

Not So Satisfied

Beginning with these three dimensions, they found that in terms of autonomy, that is, faculty authority to develop course content and to work independently, full-time faculty were more satisfied than part-time faculty — 3.26 to 2.95 (on a 4-point scale

with 4 being very satisfied). In terms of satisfaction with students (including time to advise students and quality of students), full-time faculty were not particularly satisfied with students, but they were more satisfied than part timers — 1.80 vs. 1.36 (on the same 4-point scale). And in terms of satisfaction with workloads, job security, opportunities for advancement, pay and benefits, full-time faculty were again more satisfied than part-time faculty but only slightly — 2.83 compared with 2.79.

More Satisfied

But the levels of satisfaction reversed when faculty were asked, “how satisfied are you with your job overall?” Part-time faculty listed a 3.21 (out of 4) average as compared with a 3.14 average for full-time faculty. These researchers note that both full- and part-time faculty are expressing moderately high levels of satisfaction overall. They go on to point out that for this item “contrary to popular perceptions of part-time faculty satisfaction, these data show that part-time faculty members report more satisfaction with their jobs than full-time faculty members.” (p. 47) And differences in scores for the other categories were smaller than would be expected from a group feeling significantly disenfranchised.

Antony’s and Valadez’ data further document this satisfaction in part-time faculty. They also asked respondents to report their level of agreement with this statement: “If I had to do it all over again, I would still choose an academic career.” Almost 59 percent of full-time faculty reported that they strongly agreed with the statement, but 65 percent of part-time faculty strongly agreed with it.

Their analysis also explored the demographics of part-time faculty in their sample, various indicators of job commitment, and their satisfaction as a function of where they were teaching, public or private college or university, and two- or four-year institution. But most notable in this large survey is the alternative picture of part-time faculty it presents. “Specifically, instead of being largely disenfranchised with

their status as part-time faculty, these individuals are in fact engaged in the kind of work they enjoy — work that brings them a degree of satisfaction.” (p. 55)

Reference: Antony, J. S. and Valadez, J. R. (2002). Exploring the satisfaction of part-time college faculty in the United States. *The Review of Higher Education*, 26 (1), 41-56. ♥

CLASS SIZE FROM PAGE 5

studies are “very methodologically diverse.” (p. 259)

As for the results, they “were as varied as the methods, with two studies showing no relationship between class size and achievement, three indicating a negative relationship, two showing mixed results, and another reporting a positive relationship between these two variables.” (p. 259)

The authors believe that results will continue to be mixed so long as studies are not more statistically and methodologically powerful. They identify several confounding variables that could affect the results. For example, they point out that since grade inflation results in a larger distribution in the higher grade ranges, then “studies relying upon class grades as the sole measure of achievement may be invalid due to the resulting restriction of the data range.” (p. 254)

Growing class size continues to be one way of responding to increasing enrollments and declining revenue sources. Being aware of what we do know about the effect of class size on achievement is important, even if the facts are far from definitive.

Reference: Toth, L. S. and Montagna, L. G. (2002). Class size and achievement in higher education: A summary of current research. *College Student Journal*, 36 (2), 253-260. ♥