



Class Participation Evaluated by Peers

Most instructors opt to include class participation in their courses. Many seek to promote it. Generally, students are encouraged to participate by some sort of grading scheme. But evaluating individual contributions and promoting a substantive, intriguing discussion at the same time is no small task. Consequently, many instructors end up evaluating participation subjectively, relying on an intuitive sense of who spoke, how often, and saying what. Besides worries about the objectivity of such a system, this approach “forces the instructor to adopt two fundamentally incompatible roles simultaneously: the support role of creating learning opportunities in the classroom, and the evaluative role of grading participation every time a student verbalizes his or her thoughts.” (p. 24)

Mainkar, the author of the article referenced below, uses this problem and the work of others to identify two more problems that are frequently a part of participation grading schemes. First, students contribute not because they have something to say, but because they want the points. They craft these contributions in their minds as other students are speaking. As a result, what they say rarely follows from what has just been said, thereby making the discussion disjointed rather than a series of exchanges that flow in the direction of some logical conclusion. And finally, not all students are equally ready to contribute. For some (frequently those from other cultures or of ethnic minority backgrounds), having to participate in class may cause much stress and anxiety.

Mainkar has developed (and used successfully for four years now) a system that tackles these problems. “Students are the

primary evaluators of discussion participation on a daily basis.” (p. 24) Here’s how the system works. Every day one or two (usually two) students evaluate the contributions of the rest of class (between 20 and 30 other students). They do so using a sheet (a sample of which is included in the article’s appendix) that lists all students by name and differentiates contributions into three categories: attendance (awarded for listening and not engaging in disruptive behaviors), straightforward comments (adequate contributions), and insightful comments (superior thinking). One point is awarded for attending but not participating in class, two points for one or two straightforward comments, and three points for three or more straightforward comments. Insightful comments are worth more, but students cannot earn more than three points per day. Evaluators earn three points on the day they evaluate their classmates. Each student evaluates only once during the course. Mainkar has found that the two evaluators’ scores agree to a high degree. (Data documenting the extent of agreement is included in the article.) Daily participation scores are averaged and converted into a number between 0 and 100. If a student never participated but attended class regularly, that student would earn 77 out of the 100 points.

Individual differences are accommodated by letting students decide whether their participation grade counts for 10, 15, or 20 percent of their total course grade. Students make this determination about halfway through the semester after they have received adequate feedback, which is provided every few weeks. The system

itself is not launched until the third or fourth week of the semester, giving students a chance to feel comfortable in this particular class setting and with the participation system itself.

Mainkar admits that the system does involve more administrative work for the instructor. Students’ participation is scored daily, and those scores must be recorded, averaged, and shared with the students; but given the system’s effectiveness at overcoming some fundamental problems associated with the grading of participation, the extra effort seems justified. The article also contains some useful suggestions on how the system can be streamlined and used in smaller classes. It is an interesting approach with many potential adaptations.

Reference: Mainkar, A.V. (2008). A student-empowered system for measuring and weighing participation in class discussion. *Journal of Management Education*, 32 (1), 23-37. ♥

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**Editor**

Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.
E-mail: grg@psu.edu

Magna Editor

Rob Kelly
robkelly@magnapubs.com

President

William Haight
whaight@magnapubs.com

Publisher

David Burns
dburns@magnapubs.com

Creative Services Manager

Mark Manghera

Art Director

Deb Lovelien

Customer Service Manager

Mark Beyer

For subscription information, contact:

Customer Service: 800-433-0499
E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com
Website: www.magnapubs.com

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Should Instructors Provide Students with Complete Notes?

Course management software programs make it especially easy for instructors to provide students with a set of complete lecture notes. It seems that more instructors are doing this, as witnessed in the regularity with which students ask that the instructor's notes be posted. But is giving students a complete set of notes a good idea?

Previous findings (like those of Kenneth Kiewra, highlighted some years back in this newsletter) recommend against this practice. Kiewra's research demonstrated both a process and a product benefit of note taking. The process benefit accrues when students make selections about what to note and when they use at least some of their own words to record that material. When students record lecture content using their words, it becomes easier for them to connect new material with things they already know. This process benefit is lost when students are provided with complete notes. Even so, students prefer teacher notes because they think that having the content in the instructor's words will better prepare them for exam questions.

The product benefit of note taking obviously comes as a result of having a product, in this case a set of notes, that can be reviewed and studied subsequently. It is generally thought that instructor-provided notes enhance this benefit because students don't have to worry about losing notes (they are always available online) and because the material in instructor-provided notes is sure to be accurate.

However, a recent study confirms Kiewra's earlier findings—but with an interesting elaboration. In this study, psychology students received either a complete or a partial set of instructor notes. The partial notes included major headings and titles made up of definitions and concepts, but students needed to write in the additional information. In both cases, students were instructed to download the notes and bring them to class. About three-fourths of the students complied with this directive.

The researchers looked at the impact of the complete versus the partial notes on

exam scores, final grades, and attendance. They found that those students who received partial notes performed better on the third and fourth exams and earned significantly higher course grades. They did not find “differential effects of note type on class attendance.” (p. 10)

There was one other “noteworthy” effect. On the final exam, the students who received partial notes performed better on conceptual questions, those questions that involved “application of a theoretical concept to an example that required additional mastery of the material beyond the definition.” (p. 8) Researchers speculate that the students with partial notes had encoded material throughout the semester, and when confronted with the large amount of material they needed to know for the final, they understood more and so had to rely less on memorization.

Based on their findings, these researchers recommend providing students with partial notes. Giving students some notes conveys the instructor's sensitivity to their concerns about getting the material they need from a lecture. If those notes provide the outline or structure of the material, students can concentrate on understanding the information rather than on trying to figure out how to prioritize and organize the material. Partial notes also clarify what students need to be writing and still retain the process benefit of note taking by forcing students to encode some of the content. The researchers summarize their results this way: “Partial notes ... may provide a nice balance in terms of providing students with some notes, which they report as helpful, and still requiring encoding and higher-level processing of information, which will ultimately improve learning and performance.” (p. 11)

Reference: Cornelius, T.L., and Owen-DeSchryver, J. (2008). Differential effects of full and partial notes on learning outcomes and attendance. *Teaching of Psychology*, 35 (1), 6-12. 🍎

Saving Academic Lives

By Ike Shibley, Penn State Berks
Ias1@psu.edu

I recently read two wonderful books on the medical profession, one by Jerome Groopman (*How Doctors Think*) and the other by Atul Gawande (*Better*). I've been thinking about how closely the tasks of teachers and doctors are aligned. Teachers have patients, although we generally call them students. Our "patients" also come to us with problems of one kind or another, usually a deficiency of knowledge or trouble with learning. Whether it's in the classroom or in the office, we must try to diagnose learning difficulties that range from cognitive to emotional to physiological. The most striking similarity between the medical and the teaching professions is that both require caring practitioners. Groopman and Gawande make the importance of caring for patients breathtakingly clear.

In *How Doctors Think*, Groopman argues that physicians must treat the patient, not the disease. In medicine, specialists get more praise because of their extensive knowledge of specific ailments;

yet specialists in many ways have an easier job because they have fewer options to consider. A general practitioner must try to narrow a set of symptoms into a possible diagnosis and then select which specialist a patient needs to see. As teachers, we also deal with many students who present non-specific ailments but still need an accurate diagnosis if they are to be helped. Specialists in a discipline might know their content area incredibly well, but knowledge of a discipline helps little when dealing with the average patient. In a sense, the best teachers are general practitioners: those who diagnose student problems and direct them to the resources that help them remain in school and continue their academic lives.

Groopman discusses a study of physician wait time that illuminates the time restrictions that exist within the medical profession. A physician usually asks the patient to describe his or her symptoms, and after an average 18 seconds, interrupts the patient. Wow! But how often do teachers fall into the same trap? Understanding student issues and needs requires extended listening; yet our time is so precious—

papers to grade, papers to write, meetings to attend—that we often rush to judgment about our students. We rely on stereotypes, concluding that students are lazy, unorganized, belligerent, or arrogant, without trying to truly understand what lies behind those behaviors. This rush to judgment causes us to care for students in ways that may not address important learning needs.

Gawande's *Better* is worth the read for his exploration of the question "How do I really matter?" He makes these suggestions to doctors: "ask unscripted questions" (getting to know the patient), "don't complain" (an all-too-common pastime in the medical profession), "count something" (scholarship), "write something" (share the results of your counting and think about ways to matter), and "change" (physicians too often get into ruts). Each of these five suggestions applies to the teaching profession in uncanny ways. The best teachers matter because they get to know their students, they remain optimistic despite the critical milieu of academe, they assess their own teaching as well as consider the ideas

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The Story Told by a Used Textbook

By Gretchen Aggertt Weber, Horry-
Georgetown Technical College, SC
Gretchen.Weber@hgtc.edu

Textbooks become diaries in which students write not only matters of academic significance but also heartfelt stories of vulnerability, pain, and trust. Sometimes educators miss these stories or become inured to them. For example, let's take the used textbook my 50-something husband purchased for an introductory health course he recently took as part of his degree program. A look at the preface reveals that the book not only aims to inculcate healthful habits, such as eating properly and exercising, but also charts the path to self-actualization and invites students to take this journey.

We tried to visualize the former owner of this book. The spine of her brand new textbook crackles slightly as she opens it for the first time. She selects her best pen to write her name neatly on the inside cover. As she reads, she highlights not what is most important academically but that which feels most personal to her. Soon she is referred to the appendix to perform a self-assessment by completing a questionnaire. The appendix reveals that she complied. As she embarks on this journey to self-actualization, the self-assessment would locate her personal point of origin. Answer honestly, it warns. She conscientiously fills each blank with precise, delicately rounded script. The first few questions are easy—height, weight, and so forth. She records

that she is five feet six inches tall and weighs 175 pounds. It seems there must first come suffering before her journey can begin, for the next question asks, "What do you like least about yourself?"

Her answer is forthright: "My weight."

But the questionnaire presses for more. "What would you change about yourself if you could?"

"I think about my weight all the time," she writes.

The depth of this painful disclosure disturbs us. But the message in the text is clear: she can change herself in fundamental ways in a semester. Between August and December, she can eliminate the negative

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Teaching Philosophy Statements Prepared by Faculty Candidates

Typically, teaching philosophy statements are prepared as part of promotion and tenure dossiers or for teaching awards. However, increasingly they are being requested by those interviewing for open faculty positions. The article referenced below documents the extent to which that is happening in one discipline.

What should faculty reviewers look for in a teaching philosophy statement of a candidate? What should those applying for academic positions put in a teaching philosophy statement? The author of this article suggests models of teaching and learning. Of learning, he writes, "Candidates should demonstrate knowledge of models of how students learn, how best to encourage learning, and how to assess whether learning has occurred." (p. 336) It is equally important that candidates be able to discuss how they would apply their written philosophy in different teaching situations. The importance of the philosophy statement and of teaching itself is reinforced when candidates are asked to discuss them with those conducting the interview.

As for what a new faculty member

should put in the teaching philosophy statement being used as part of an application packet, the author makes a number of recommendations. Along with ideas about how students learn, those activities that the candidate believes promote learning, some recognition of variations in approaches to learning, and a discussion of factors related to learning should be included. Also important is the kind of feedback that will be provided to students, and how their learning will be assessed. Content that relates to teaching, including expectations for students, preferred learning environments, favored instructional methods, and the nature of relationships with students that foster learning, should be discussed.

The author recommends that teaching philosophy statements include references so that the candidate can demonstrate a knowledge of literature relevant to college-level teaching and learning. The philosophy statement should show that the candidate is interested in teaching and expects to grow and develop further as a teacher.

Teaching continues to be an important part of virtually all academic positions. As

the author points out, search committees often are more comfortable assessing the research history and potential of candidates than they are evaluating what kind of teacher the candidate will be. Careful analysis of a teaching philosophy statement, coupled with follow-up questions on its content, can provide much revealing information about a candidate's potential. To ensure that all candidates start from the same place, it is appropriate to provide a list of areas that review committees would like the teaching philosophy statement to address. This article proposes a structure and a series of questions that can be used as a starting place. It also contains a link to a sample philosophy statement that follows the proposed structure. If an institution wants to show a candidate that it takes teaching seriously, one of the best times to convey that message is during the interview process.

Reference: Eierman, R.J. (2008). The teaching philosophy statement: Purposes and organizational structure. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 85 (3), 336-339.

Learning Goals: Faculty and Students Don't Agree

The findings of a recent study documenting differences between the priorities that faculty and students give to various learning goals will not come as a surprise to many. Those differences are an undercurrent that flow through most classes.

The goals reviewed in this particular study were a version of goals offered in Angelo and Cross' well-known *Classroom Assessment Techniques* handbook: critical thinking, basic academic skills, career preparation, scientific reasoning, personal development, mastery of discipline content, citizenship and values, and art and cultural appreciation. Both students and faculty were asked about the importance and priority placed on each of these eight goals.

How would you prioritize that list of goals? If your list includes critical thinking, basic academic skills, and mastery of discipline content, then your priorities are the same as those most common to faculty surveyed in this research. Would you do as well identifying what students consider the most important goals for a course? Those surveyed for this study also gave high priority to basic skills acquisition, but just as high on those student lists were personal development and career development.

"These results suggest that faculty and students differ both statistically and practically on the values they place on six of the eight learning goals under study." (p. 56) More statistical analysis revealed an uncharacteristically large difference

between the value that faculty and students placed on the development of critical thinking, with faculty giving it a much higher priority than students did. Bottom line, according to this research: "[F]aculty and students not only have a different set of learning goals that each prioritizes but ... they also disagree more than they agree on the value of eight common learning goals." (p. 56)

Is such an extent of disagreement a problem? Yes! It means that faculty and students aren't always on the same page. Faculty craft assignments to develop critical thinking skills, and students devote little time and energy to their completion,

Bonuses of a Bonus Assignment!

By Tena Long Golding, Southeastern Louisiana University
tgolding@selu.edu

My students are always asking for opportunities to earn bonus points. I offer a variety of assignments during the semester, but they still want bonus points, which they seem to think are easier to obtain than the required points. Generally, I'm opposed to bonus options because I feel that if students are struggling with the current assignments, they do not need an "extra" assignment for extra credit. In addition, the word "bonus" seems to suggest something for nothing. I want my students to realize that grades are earned, not given. However, I recently tried a bonus activity that benefited my students and also met my expectations for a substantive learning experience.

The end of the spring semester correlates with increased absences and assignment apathy. The weather is beautiful, my classes are in the afternoon, and student attendance drops. In addition, students in my classes are preservice teachers who must do a minimum number of field observations in area schools before the end of the semester. Those who have procrastinated start feeling the crunch and begin to miss class in order to complete the required number of hours. Those attending class often arrive unprepared. Clearly, this is not

the easiest time of the year for teaching.

In a mathematics class for prospective elementary teachers, we had been working on a particular section for several class sessions, so students had more time than usual to complete the homework assignment. On the day this homework was to be discussed, the weather was beautiful, campus was celebrating Spring Fest, and spirits were high—so I decided to offer a bonus activity. I created a sheet with 11 problems that applied many of the concepts we had covered in previous class sessions. Students could earn one point for each problem solved correctly. The problems had to be worked out during the allotted class time, and students could not begin working until a trade had occurred—the bonus sheet in exchange for completed homework. This trade made the students accountable for previously assigned work and removed my fear of giving them something for nothing. Students who had not completed the assignment had less time for the bonus opportunity because they had homework to finish up first.

An interesting classroom dynamic occurred after I explained how this bonus opportunity worked. Many of the students with their homework done began helping students who had not been able to work through all the homework problems. Students who had not even started the

homework began to work diligently in order to have even a little bonus time. As I walked around the room, I heard not only the buzz of mathematics but also comments like "I told Julie she shouldn't miss class" and "I knew I should've done my homework!"

I want students to be successful in and out of the classroom. This means learning the mathematics we're covering in the course. But I also want students to realize they are ultimately responsible for their own learning and accountable for their actions. The bonus problems reviewed concepts that the students needed to know and understand. By design, the activity reinforced the responsibility of students to complete assigned homework. Since the only students who received few or no points were the students who missed class or had not completed the homework assignment, the lack of bonus points earned was not the fault of the teacher (e.g., test too hard, too long) but rather the consequence of a personal decision.

The bonus activity was a success and is a practice I'll repeat. My students were delighted with the opportunity, and I was guilt-free. The activity let students know that I am sensitive to their needs and ideas, but it also showed how a missed class is a missed opportunity—and that doing your homework pays off! 🍀

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because what faculty have asked them to do doesn't seem relevant to preparing for anticipated careers.

These goals are not discrete, independently operating premises. An assignment that seeks to develop the ability to think critically can be very relevant to career preparation. But those connections may not be clear to students. A discussion of how learning to think critically relates to career preparation may be what's needed to motivate students.

The more interesting and less easily answered question concerns the extent to

which students' goals and priorities ought to be considered in development of curricula. That question can be asked about the collection of courses that make a major as well as about an individual instructor's objectives for a particular assignment. Should faculty be giving more weight to the personal development of interest to students? Obviously, the answer depends to some degree on the course content, but that consideration aside, do learners have a role setting the educational agenda?

The quick response of most faculty is "no." After all, we are the ones with the knowledge and expertise. But the author of the study pushes the issue by identifying

several educational ideas that "strongly suggest" (p. 53) incorporation of student perceptions, goals, and expectations if the goal is to create educational experiences that foster growth and learning. Might it be possible to give students a role while at the same time allowing faculty to retain the responsibilities that come with content knowledge?

Reference: Myers, C.B. (2008). Divergence in learning goal priorities between college students and their faculty: Implications for teaching and learning. *College Teaching*, 56 (1), 53-58. 🍀

Finding the Best Method

“All too often in education, pundits, and some researchers for that matter, seem to believe that they have found the method which all teachers should use.” So writes Noel Entwistle, a noted scholar with a career of research on teaching and learning in higher education to his credit. He (and others) are concerned about the pressure that educational researchers feel to discover “what works.” He notes that 50 years of educational research has failed to find that definitive set of best practices.

Searching for the best way to teach assumes a kind of simplicity about teaching and learning that just plain does not exist. Start with the fact that teaching is used to accomplish a variety of different educational aims. It is used to help learners acquire knowledge of a vast panoply of subject matters and is aimed at students from all sorts of backgrounds, with varying degrees of cognitive ability and at different levels intellectual maturity. Those who do the teaching share a wide diversity of backgrounds and have experiences that cross the continuum from novice to expert. The host of factors that influence teaching makes clear the preposterousness of imagining that there could be one or even several best methods, approaches, styles, or practices.

However, a tentative approach to pedagogical methods feels counterintuitive. Once a teacher finds something that works with her content, her students, and her style of teaching, it is natural for her to want to recommend that way to others.

And making those recommendations is not inappropriate so long as they are presented as something a colleague may want to try—not as the answer that will fill the colleague’s instructional needs. Becoming an advocate for a particular method is difficult to resist when research offers evidence of that method’s positive impact. Research may verify that a method works under a certain set of conditions; if it’s good research, its findings may apply to other teachers—but never to all others. So, one can advocate for certain methods just as long as that advocacy does not definitively exclude other methods. A particular method may gain “best practice” status as more and more faculty jump on the bandwagon after having used the approach and found it successful. As more and more faculty adopt a method, it can become faddish. Across the years, the popularity of various instructional methods has waxed and waned.

But does this mean that all educational practices are equal, that there are no general principles that might guide individual faculty or those working together on a curriculum who want to pursue what promotes more and better learning for their students? Entwistle’s answer is intriguing: “In the end, ‘best practice’ is whatever helps students to engage more deeply with the subject and to become more actively responsible for their own learning.”

So, all educational methods are not equal. No method is ruled out so long as it engages students and makes them respon-

sible for learning. But some methods accomplish those goals less frequently than others. Take lectures, for example. They can be highly successful at involving and engaging students. Most faculty can attest to that power firsthand. However, in practice, most lectures do not engage students or motivate them to take responsibility for what and how they learn. Lectures tend to encourage passivity and make students dependent on the teacher. As a result, faculty are rightly encouraged to rely less on lectures and to explore other methods. But that advice results from the way lectures are used, not from their inherent inability to promote significant learning.

It would be lovely if a box of best practices could be handed out to new faculty members as their careers commence. Even mid-career faculty might queue up for the box. If only teaching and learning were that straightforward; but they are not. On the other hand, their complexity and variability provide enough intellectual challenge to keep even the brightest faculty member engaged. It can take a career just to figure how the learning of a particular kind of content is promoted, given a particular blend of students.

Note: The Entwistle quotes come from a paper prepared for an international symposium called “Teaching and Learning Research in Higher Education,” held April 25–26, 2008, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

USED TEXTBOOK

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thought patterns that hold her back, adopt healthful ways of living, lose excess weight, and in general achieve self-actualization. She must understand, the book warns, that these lofty goals are her responsibility, as the preface makes clear. The process it describes must be conscientiously followed if success is to result. (Of course, if she fails, it will have been her own fault.)

Publishers refer to completing surveys as “interacting” with the text, but for her it is an act of trust. We feel compassion for her. By chapter eight it is November. Her highlighting has petered out, and she no longer completes the check-your-progress boxes as in earlier chapters. In a few weeks, she will sell her book back to the bookstore, where my husband will purchase it.

We wonder what happened to her. Did she adopt healthful eating habits, or is there a box of Twinkies in her room from which

she grabbed this morning’s breakfast? Did she pass the course? Most importantly, does she still believe in higher education, or has calculated cynicism replaced innocent trust? The story this textbook tells is testament to the fragile trust that is placed in educators. This student is not unique; there are many more like her. As educators we too often become indurated by the relentless parade of hundreds. She is, after all, but

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Participation: Revisiting the Basics

Student participation in college courses is an instructor expectation in most classes. That doesn't always mean lots of students contribute or that what they say takes class discussions to new heights, but as a strategy that seeks to engage students, the use of participation is widespread. Moreover, recent years have seen a rise in more detailed and explicit criteria being proposed for the assessment of participation. Discussions of the pros and cons of "cold-calling" (soliciting participation from a student who has not volunteered to answer) have appeared in the literature, as well as a variety of strategies and techniques proposing ways to increase the number and quality of student contributions.

In a thoughtful article, Raymond Jones challenges teachers to revisit what they hope to accomplish with participation and then assess whether the way participation is being used accomplishes those goals. He suggests faculty use participation to advance four goals. First, there's **accountability**. "If we fear that students are not doing the assigned reading and that they are therefore 'unprepared' for class, we might impose a class participation requirement to hold them accountable." (p. 59) However, he doesn't think it's always clear to students what they should be prepared to do in class after having done the reading. He asks the question this way: "Does

the assigned reading enable or empower them to accomplish something meaningful in class?" (p. 60)

Sometimes professors use participation as a means to **involve more students**. They want to solicit contributions from more than the four or five (or two or three) who regularly participate. One way to accomplish that goal involves asking more questions. Of course, simple, straightforward questions take less time. But if the questions are not necessarily very thought provoking, then student answers mirror the questions. If a simple understanding suffices, then students can be less diligent about their reading or homework. "It behooves us to consider whether there is a trade-off between getting more students talking and the importance of what we have them talking about." (p. 60)

Another intent of participation is to help students **recall information**. An example might be participation that occurs at the beginning of the period, when teachers try to make connections between the topic for today and content covered previously. Jones doesn't think these question-and-answer exchanges get most students focused on content. How many students actually speak? "In practice this type of discussion involves one student with one idea at a time. What are the majority of students doing and thinking about?"

Finally, some professors use participation intending that students will **grapple with ideas**. In this case the professor poses a challenging or provocative question and invites students to weigh in on the topic. On good days an exciting exchange may be the result. Students start connecting ideas, arguing with passion, or moving to consider other viewpoints. "But which students actually participated in this heady exchange?" "What evidence do you have about what most students were doing, or how most students were thinking, during this otherwise delightful give-and-take?" (p. 60)

Jones proceeds to revisit a variety of different types of participation, raising the same sort of challenging issues. It's not that he's against participation. He simply wants teachers to analyze whether participation goals are actually being accomplished in practice—to look for what might be contradictions between intentions, means, and results. "We might say we want greater involvement with students, but if it is serial and singular in nature rather than concurrent and integrated, we are limiting rather than expanding involvement and reasoning." (p. 61)

Reference: Jones, R. C. (2008). The "why" of class participation: A question worth asking. *College Teaching*, 56 (1), 59-62. 🍀

SAVING ACADEMIC LIVES

FROM PAGE 3

of other pedagogical scholars, they share their findings at conferences and in print, and they continue to develop as teachers. Teachers (like physicians) can always do better, and Gawande's list points the way.

Gawande also writes about fighting for a patient's life: "The seemingly easiest and most sensible rule for a doctor is: Always fight. Always look for what more you could do." (161) Yet he argues that sometimes the physician must consider not doing more. Some of our students are not ready for the

rigors of college or cannot continue, given unexpected circumstances. Accepting that not all students can be helped allows a busy faculty member to spend precious time on students who genuinely need our guidance and influence to keep fighting. Yet how can we tell when we have spent enough time with a student? Helping a student decide whether to stay in school requires inordinate insight and patience, and listening for much longer than 18 seconds.

Groopman and Gawande impress me as caring doctors (with writing skills that any academician would covet), and they point the way for caring teachers. In the medical

profession, the struggle is epic—between life and death. But educational "life and death"—the tipping point between a student finishing a college degree or becoming a dropout—is also compelling. Thinking about how we want our doctors to treat us might help us take better care of our students. A few more minutes devoted to a student is rarely time poorly spent. Only by truly knowing our students can we make those diagnoses that give them the best chance at healthy and rewarding academic lives. 🍀

Academic ‘Speed Dating’

By Karen Eifler, University of Portland
eifler@up.edu

I don’t get nearly enough sessions with my students. What with time for exams and holidays, I get maybe 24 periods to teach them everything necessary for mastering complex content, to attend to their “puzzlements,” and to build human relationships with and among them. I need strategies that make every moment count, starting with the norms that encourage interaction. Over the past couple of years, I have borrowed an idea from the outside world—speed dating—and adapted it to help me achieve my important instructional objectives. In my classroom, “academic speed dating” moves students at a brisk clip through several face-to-face conversations with their peers, with each interaction anchored by a prompt that I provide. Let me walk you through how this works on the first day of class.

After my welcome and introductory comments about the course, I ask students to stow their backpacks and to take out a pen or pencil. I tell them that they will not be returning to their possessions for the next half hour or so. Next, I pass out the syllabus and ask them to skim selected pages and note anything they need or would like to know about in more detail. Then, they swivel their chairs or their bodies so that they are facing another student, close enough so that they can use no louder than an “18-inch voice.”

I set a timer for two or three minutes, during which they introduce themselves to each other and answer a question I have posted on a PowerPoint slide or announced in my big voice. I craft these prompts ahead of time and alternate questions related specifically to the course and syllabus with lighthearted personal inquiries. For example, “When and where does Professor Eifler hold office hours?” “What is the purpose of the assignment described on page 8 of the syllabus?” “Describe the most unusual or least fun job you have held.” and “What is the longest single period of time you have ever spent

on Facebook?” Recently, I included in the syllabus a copy of the provocative poem, “Did I Miss Anything?” by Tom Wayman, and I asked pairs to explain in one or two sentences what they think it reveals about my orientation toward their coming to class each day.

When the timer buzzes, I ask a random handful of pairs to share their responses aloud. I think of this as “room-temperature calling” rather than “cold calling,” since they have already had an opportunity to try their ideas out on one other person. If a syllabus clarification was made, I ask students to make a note immediately in the margin. They can also ask follow-up questions if necessary. Then I ask one row of students to move down one seat, so that now everyone is talking to a different person; the timer is set for another two to three minutes, introductions are exchanged, and a new question posed, with another round of responses elicited at the buzzer.

With smaller classes, I have set up two concentric circles of chairs ahead of time, but I have also done this activity successfully in large arena classrooms; in that case, it takes a bit more effort in terms of traffic control, but students are familiar with speed dating and know that things move along at a steady clip. Obviously, students with mobility limitations need to be accommodated in the activity. Doing so presents opportunities to demonstrate how fluid configurations of learning environments need to be.

“Academic speed dating” ensures that all students read the syllabus and hear it discussed. I love that it is nearly impossible for students to opt out of contributing at least modestly to this activity and that raising questions early on avoids subsequent misunderstandings about course expectations and specific assignments. The practice has virtually eliminated end-of-term claims that “no one ever told me about so-and-so.” Equally important, students experience from the beginning the premium I place on active learning and on their par-

ticipation. I start by establishing this norm from the get-go.

As an indication that something about this works, students themselves now voluntarily suggest prompts for the next iteration. In addition, several have used the format to conduct a thorough and fast-paced review for a recent final exam. They not only posed questions for their peers to answer (and for which they had to search their texts and notes for substantiation), but also created opportunities for students to pose muddy concepts and questions to one another for clarification, in a manner that was both low-threat and engaging. This is an idea I plan to borrow myself in future courses! ♥

USED TEXTBOOK

FROM PAGE 6

one among the many marching through our classrooms and waiting in lines at our offices. The impact we have may not be immediately evident, but it can be profound.

This is what can be learned from the story her textbook told. Although not all students are equally vulnerable, some in our classes are, whether we recognize them or not. We must look for ways to know our students’ stories, wherever they are written, and we must remember to treat all our students with empathy and compassion.

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