



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ROLL CALL FOR LEARNING

One student lamented that he had attended a class for an entire semester and uttered only one word: *here*. Taking attendance is a requirement for federal student aid. Funds start when a student begins to attend class and may have to be repaid if and when a student stops. Accurate attendance records must be kept and precious class time devoted to keeping them. Although taking attendance is a routine administrative chore, it is not related to teaching and learning. Right? Wrong! Turn roll call into a tool that plants the class topic in students' minds, sets the tone for the class, and encourages the development of community.

In my public speaking class, I use a different attendance prompt every day. On days when readings have been assigned, students are asked to respond to the roll call with a term or concept from the reading assignment (instead of responding with *here* or *present*). The prompt and responses remind students about the topics, encourage them to do the reading, and give me the opportunity to comment briefly on their responses. I note topics of importance or ask for examples to check understanding. I also credit their responses during class activities or lecture as the various concepts they have cited arise. One side effect has been a reduction in tardy arrivals; students know they will be asked to respond to a prompt immediately upon arrival. Asking for terms or concepts from the assigned reading material sets a business-like tone.

On days when students are giving oral presentations or participating in some other stressful activity, I ask them to respond to attendance prompts that might help them relax. Examples include: *state a fact about our class*, *tell us where you were born*, *name something that makes you grouchy*, *describe the perfect breakfast*, *give the class a word of advice*, or *tell us a favorite pet's name*. These prompts let students share appropriate amounts of self-disclosure, build classroom community, evoke relaxation-inducing laughter, and allow others to learn about them. They promote a flow of messages between and among instructor and students. For instance, at Halloween, my attendance prompt was *suggest Halloween costumes*

for my five-year-old triplet grandsons. The warm student response sent a clear message that the lines of communication were open.

Although advance announcement of attendance prompts is not necessary, prompts must be used consistently to be effective—from the first or second day of class. Prompts always need to be accompanied by patience. At first, some students may ask you to skip them and come back later when they have thought of something, or they may say that they do not have a response. Do not accept this behavior! Doing so allows students to disengage from class activities and permits them to send a message of indifference.

Wait as long as it takes for the student to respond appropriately. I sometimes suggest that a nearby student give the student a response, which further contributes to in a supportive classroom community. Do not allow another student to respond *for* the student. I can outwait any student, others will step in to help avoid possible embarrassment, and the next time the student will be prepared to respond. Prompts should be easy, asking students to reflect on or extend previously covered material. Finally, foster listening skills by not allowing students to duplicate others' responses.

Making roll call a learning activity converts an administrative chore into useful instructional time and sets the stage for more in-depth learning to follow. Create a repertoire of attendance prompts, and check off each as you use it over the course of the semester. Occasionally ask students for their ideas for useful prompts, as well.

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ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING: SOME SIMPLE CLASSROOM METHODS

Test anxiety can limit student performance, and objective testing sometimes rewards test-taking abilities rather than identifying knowledge. Unless testing is done frequently, teachers do not receive regular feedback or identify learning difficulties for individual students.

Reaction papers—i.e., having students write informal responses to questions or classroom situations—are one of my teaching staples. Reaction papers can be used at the end of each class session, with the basic question “What did you learn in class today?” I implement this policy at the beginning of the semester, and students are told that the reaction papers are required but not graded (in order to remove any association with tests). Students are encouraged to be as honest as possible with their answers and told that the information will be used to improve the class.

I was surprised that students seemed to like writing reaction papers. On several occasions, I had lost track of time and did not provide the allotted time for the papers before the end of class. Even on those occasions, some students still turned in their papers. The papers may give students some confirmation that they have a voice in class. I also was surprised at the frequency with which self-reported student learning differed from what I thought I had been teaching. I know teachers’ long exposure to subject matter can create difficulties in remembering what it was like to encounter the material for the first time. Even though I try to simplify and clarify information, the reaction papers sometimes provided dramatic evidence that I needed to redouble my efforts. Immediate and continuous feedback provided by reaction papers sometimes was disconcerting, but readily turned into valuable tools.

A primary decision is whether to return the papers to the students. In larger classes that meet frequently, the additional burden of making comments on and returning papers can be considerable. I initially tell students that the papers will not be returned but that they will be read and utilized. I make frequent reference to the papers in class and sometimes start a class by relating information gained by reading the papers. As long as students know that the papers are important and that they are influencing class work, my not returning them seems to be a minor issue. An additional tactic which reinforces the importance of the papers is to relate particularly cogent comments or observations on the papers to the entire class, after asking permission from the students involved. Also, students who have difficulty entering

into class discussions can be rewarded and encouraged by hearing information that had been included in their papers.

While the beginning of the semester may be a preferable time to start requiring reaction papers, the papers can be implemented at any time with a minimum of preparation. In addition, the questions to which students respond can be varied. Anticipated problem areas can be singled out for responses in the reaction papers. By ensuring confidentiality to the students, the papers can be used to identify interpersonal problems or irritants in the classroom environment and can be used for informal class evaluations. Although the evaluations are not anonymous, the results differ little from the results of formal faculty evaluations.

Using reaction papers does not preclude using conventional testing methods, but students may be more enthusiastic about these papers if they know that they will not have to take conventional tests. Since many academic systems are geared to midterm and final exams, and since these exams serve the useful function of consolidating and reviewing material presented throughout the class, I have tried to develop testing methods that use reaction papers. One testing process that has worked well is asking students to provide test questions. In some instances, I provide questions of my own. We then process the questions as a class, with individual students or groups of students providing answers. Because the testing situation is relaxed, students seem to enjoy the tests, and the questions often generate good class discussions.

Any of these methods could be adapted readily to the virtual classroom and others. The only limitation is the user’s imagination.

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