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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Six Keys to More Effective Class Discussions

STUDENTS FIND discussions disillusioning just about as often as faculty do. In the analysis referenced below, students objected when a few fellow classmates dominated the discussion; when the discussion wandered off topic, making it difficult to ascertain main points; and when students participated just for the sake of participating.

Problems such as these can be prevented or significantly reduced when discussions are structured—at least that was one of the conclusions reached in the study being highlighted here. A set of guidelines used in this analysis offers a concrete way to provide structure.

1. Use a modular approach to topical coverage to force integration of topical ideas and concepts. The point here is simply that discussions should have designated themes or topics. The focus should be more specific than the generic "Let's talk about the readings" or "It's time to discuss the material presented in class yesterday."
2. Develop a very limited set of discussion questions that do not have "known answers." Three or four questions (possibly distributed prior to the discussion or introduced at its beginning) can do much to focus and direct a discussion. If the questions are regularly returned to throughout the discussion, they effectively keep the discussion from drifting too far off topic.
3. Allow sufficient time for discussion to develop. This is an inherent advantage of online discussion. Students have time to review, think about, and prepare contributions. No face-to-face discussion can allow that much time, but in-class discussions can be slowed down. Students can be challenged to think about what others have said. They can be asked to summarize or indicate where they think the discussion is leading.
4. Set student expectations for instructor guidance and feedback. "It is essential that students take the lead role in the evolution of a discussion; the instructor must limit his or her involvement in the discussion to a role as facilitator and provocateur and should do so only after other students decline the opportunity." (p. 124)
5. Establish a reward system that encourages interaction and peer critique. Students are motivated to participate if contributions to a discussion "count." Instructors need to devise manageable grading systems and ones that make quality stipulations.
6. Provide additional participation incentive through assessment. In this case, the instructor followed in-class discussion exercises with a take-home essay exam that used themes and "lessons" from the discussion. Knowing that they will be using discussion content in an exam provides a powerful incentive for students to get involved in the exchange of ideas.

This analysis also includes a helpful comparison and contrast of online and face-to-face discussions. The author concludes, "The choice between online and face-to-face discussion exercises rests more on the instructor's goals with regards to communication skills and rapport in the learning community." (p. 128)

Online exchanges do a better job of developing critical thinking skills. They teach students how to make and support points in writing. For the instructor, the permanence of the record expedites the grading process. Rather than trying to keep track of who said what and at the same time facilitate the discussion, an instructor can review the record and more thoughtfully assess individual contributions. But in-class discussions are better at building instructor-student rapport, and they develop essential oral communication skills such as being able to "think on one's feet." No doubt in most professional contexts, students will be having discussions in both kinds of formats.

Reference: Sautter, P. (2007). Designing discussion activities to achieve desired learning outcomes: Choices using mode of delivery and structure. Journal of Marketing Education, 29 (2), 122–131. Reprinted from Discussions with Structure, January 2008, The Teaching Professor

Maryellen Weimer in Effective Teaching Strategies, April 6, 2010, [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/six-keys-to-more-effective-class-discussions/], April 7, 2010.

Stump the Professor

I have been playing with the idea of playing games with students in online courses, mostly influenced by recently seeing an episode of "Are you smarter than a 5th grader?" online. When I think about those types of games -- Jeopardy, Millionaire, and so on -- I think that it is the questions that make the games interesting. And, that the folks who have the most fun and learn the most are those who construct the questions. It is hard to write a good question. If you can write a good question...that's everything. So, I've been having students -- as individuals or in teams -- compete to develop a great question that can stump me and the rest of the class. Then we have a race to see who can answer it first -- me or them (usually in teams). They usually win, and that's very cool.

Joni Dunlap, Stump the Professor, Thoughts on Teaching, June 28, 2008, [http://thoughtsonteaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/search/label/Fun], April 7, 2010.

Summer 1 Classes begin: May 17, 2010

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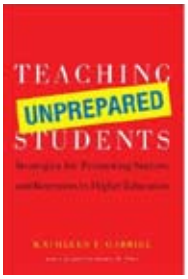
(Cheating) Prevention Techniques for Tests

The posting gives three good ideas on how to reduce cheating during tests. I is from Chapter 8, Techniques for Promoting Academic Integrity and Discourage Cheating, in the book, Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education, by Kathleen F. Gabriel, California State University, Chico, Chico, California. Stylus Publishing, LLC., 22883 Quicksilver Drive, Sterling,, Virginia 20166-2102. http://www.styluspub.com/Books/Features.aspx, ©copyright 2008 by Stylus Publishing, LLC, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.



WHEN ADMINISTERING tests, there are several steps that we must take to reduce the chances of academic dishonesty and to create an atmosphere of fairness to all. When students think that other students are getting away with cheating or that a teacher will not take measures to make sure that students do not cheat, many will feel that they have to cheat to level the playing field (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). By implementing the following three steps, which are included in McCabe and Pavela's (2003) Principles of Academic Integrity, we can communicate to all our students that we will not tolerate academic dishonesty:

1. Affirm the importance of academic integrity;
2. Reduce opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty;
3. Develop fair and relevant tests (and/or forms of assessment). (p. 1)

To implement the first step, professors must affirm, with our students, the importance of academic integrity and honesty. To do this, we should have a statement on our syllabi along with a reference to the college's academic integrity policy (or at least list the Web site where the policy can be found). In addition, we need to talk to our students about academic integrity and what it means. We need to give examples of what we consider to be cheating and what types of collaboration will be allowed (or not allowed) on different assignments. It is also helpful to give students suggestions on how to study for exams and to post information on tutoring on campus.

We can also go over our university procedures and due process steps for anyone accused of cheating. Students should know that the procedures are in place to protect students from false or unfair accusations. McCabe and Pavela (2003) suggest that we remind our students that "institutions of higher education are dedicated to the pursuit of truth. Faculty members need to affirm that the pursuit of truth is grounded in certain core values, including diligence, civility, and honesty" (p 1).

A second step in preventing cheating is to reduce opportunities for students to engage in academic dishonesty by establishing ground rules for taking tests. Inform students what they can bring to class (calculator, pen, or pencil) and what they cannot bring to class (backpack, earphones, or cell phone). Consider implementing the following suggestions when administering exams:

1. Know your students' names and faces; if that is not possible (i.e., large class) require students to show their identification cards (Davis, 1993, p. 307; Wankat, 2002, p. 129).
2. Do not allow students to wear baseball hats or hats that hide wandering eyes.
3. Have students spread out; if the classroom is too small for this, try to reserve a larger classroom for test day. If that is not possible use random seat assignments so that friends cannot sit together (Davis, 1993, p. 307; McKeachie, 1994, p. 99).
4. Have at least two versions of the exam for larger classes (Davis, 1993, p. 306; McKeachie, 1994, p. 99).
5. Be present on test day (Davis, 1993, p. 306; Wankat, 2002, p. 239).
6. Warn students ahead of time if you will not permit bathroom privileges so they can be prepared.
7. Ensure that classroom management is in place so that the room is quiet (McKeachie, 1994, p. 84).
8. Explain or remind students of all the testing procedures and rules (Wankat, 2002, p. 86).

By implementing the above testing procedures, the opportunities to engage in academic dishonesty are dramatically reduced.

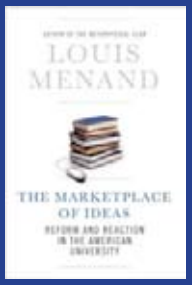
A third step we can take to prevent cheating is to develop fair and relevant tests. In classes where exams are part of the grade, we should write new tests every semester. Wankat (2002) suggests that we keep an "idea" file for test questions (p. 84) and after writing a test, solve it (even the essay questions) before finalizing it. "By solving the test first, you will find questions that are ambiguous, cannot be solved, are too long or too hard, or are trivial" (p. 84). Wankat also reminds us to time ourselves when we take the test:

The time it take you to solve the test can be used to estimate the time it will take students to solve the test. As a rule of thumb, try multiplying your solution time by five for first year students, four for juniors, and three for graduate students. Adjust these factors until you obtain good predictions (p. 84)

Following these guidelines will help us develop fair tests for our students. "Professors who develop good rapport with students and give tests that the students think are fair will have only a small amount of cheating in their classes" (Wankat, 2002, p. 87).

Rick Reis, Prevention for Tests, Tomorrow's Professor Blog, April 1, 2010, [http://tomprofblog.mit.edu/2010/04/01/1011-cheating-prevention-techniques-for-tests/], April 7, 2010.

BOOK ...



The Marketplace of Ideas

Reform and Reaction in the American University
- By Louis Menand