

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Centre for Excellence in
Teaching and Learning, The
UWI Mona



Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and a summer edition. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online (<http://mona.uwi.edu/cetl>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices please contact us.

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What The Best College Teachers Do?

Ken Bain, award-winning author of the books, *What the best college teachers do* and *What the best college students do* has developed a reputation for being a good teacher, speaker, writer and workshop facilitator. The book, *What the best college teachers do* continues to be a source of inspiration many years after its publication in 2004. In this book, Bain seeks to answer some important questions in teaching and learning in higher education:

1. What makes great teachers great?
2. Who are the university teachers/college teachers student remember long after graduation?

Dr. Bain has shared several insights from his work on good college/university teaching over the years with faculty from many countries. Drawing from his research and experience, he has proposed a set of conditions that enable students to learn effectively. These pedagogical conditions are as follows:

- Those that provide an opportunity for the students to solve problems (intellectual, physical, artistic, practical, abstract, etc.) or create something new that they consider important, intriguing and/or beautiful;
- Those that have been designed to be challenging for learners and yet, having the necessary supporting environment, enabling them to feel as if they are in control of their learning;
- Those that call on students to work collaboratively with other learners to investigate problems from multiple perspectives;
- Those that cause students to think that their efforts in doing assignments will be assessed fairly and honestly;
- Those that allow students to engage in academic tasks, receive feedback from expert learners in advance of, and separate from the summative judgement of their efforts.

For Bain, these conditions create a “natural critical learning environment,” one that enables deep learning to occur. Let’s create these conditions for our students.

Getting Students to Reflect Critically on Their Learning

Getting students to reflect in critical ways on their learning is no easy feat to accomplish. Wirth and Perkins (2007) provide a clear description of reflective learners. They write, “[S]tudents with deep approaches to learning have an intention to understand. They generally engage in vigorous interaction with content, relate new ideas to old ones, relate concepts to everyday experience, relate evidence to conclusions, and examine the logic of arguments. While doing this, they ‘construct’ their own knowledge” (p. 12).

Our students need to become more intentional and reflective about their learning. In taking a pragmatic approach to getting students to become more reflective and critical thinkers, they must be introduced to metacognitive practices so that they can always be thinking about their learning. Further, they might be asked to assume responsibility for providing 1) artefacts from their courses and cocurricular activities as evidence of their achievements 2) reflective statements explaining how these items and other activities were chosen to demonstrate that they are making improvements and that they are developing as reflective and critical thinkers.

The Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) (Brookfield, 1995) is one tool available to faculty that we can use to facilitate students becoming more intentional about their learning and certainly, becoming the kind of reflective and critical thinkers we are interested in developing. This tool is one that encourages critical reflection and deep learning. According to Brookfield (1995): The CIQ, appropriately used, provides feedback to the teacher on what is really going on in the classroom. It helps university teachers evaluate their teaching when accurate information about students’ learning is provided.

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This information is provided by means of solicitation. In fact, the information ought to be regularly solicited and anonymously given. The tool enables the university teacher to get quick and easy feedback, revealing the impact of the various pedagogical engagements introduced in the course. It allows the teacher to find out the emotional highs and lows of student learning also. Using the CIQ gives the teacher a running commentary on the emotional tenor of each class (Brookfield, 1995).

When it is used appropriately, the CIQ is administered in the last 5-10 minutes of the class, preferably the last class for the week. It is comprised of the following five questions:

1. At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in class this week were you most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurred).

Brookfield (1995) suggests that the comments of students should be reviewed before the next class and the main themes that emerge should be noted. The next class should begin with a brief report of the information that the CIQs yielded. This will offer the students the opportunity to model a process of critical reflection, using students' feedback as the content on which they are reflecting. Brookfield (2012) has analysed more than 1500 CIQs completed by students over more than 30 years and he has identified five recurring themes regarding how students learn critical thinking. These are:

1. Critical thinking is best developed in small groups where peers help each other shed light on assumptions and introduce new perspectives.
2. Critical thinking is encouraged when teachers model the process and are explicit about drawing students' attention to how critical thinking is happening.
3. Students find it helpful when critical thinking is grounded in concrete experiences through simulations, case studies, critical incidents, and scenarios.

4. Students are most primed for critical thinking When some kind of unexpected event or "disorienting dilemma" jolts them out of their comfort zone.
5. There is a developmental trajectory for learning critical thinking, such that students benefit from experiencing multiple opportunities to practice in settings that are relatively non-threatening, before gradually applying this process to their own experiences.

What has been your experience in teaching students to think critically? How do these themes advanced by Brookfield (2012) relate to your experiences as a university teacher seeking to develop in your students critical thinking skills? Do you think the CIQ might be of help in your pedagogical tasks of developing critical thinkers? Consider using this tool and report your findings to your colleagues in a future CETL Lunch and Learn Seminar?

References

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- Wirth and Perkins (2007). Learning to learn. Retrieved from <http://www.macalester.edu/academics/geology/wirth/learning.pdf>,

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