

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at 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 once per month and provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education. It is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/CETL/>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you have an area that you would like us to explore in this newsletter, do not hesitate to contact us at the CETL.

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How do you deal with students when they do not understand the lesson?

You have taught the lesson that you thought was pretty easy to understand. Throughout the lesson, the students remained silent and seemed to be listening attentively. Then a question is posed to determine their comfort level with the lesson you have just taught. Specifically, you want to know if your students understand the content. To your shock and bewilderment, there is deafening silence when the question is asked. After what seems like eternity, a student responds, she is one of the academically more able scholars in your class and she says she is totally confused. She states that she does not understand anything in the lesson just taught. Further, you now ask the class again if they understand the content you have just explained and they all shake their heads, indicating that they do not understand. What do you do?

Go over the explanations

One approach might be to go over the explanations. Do it slowly and methodologically. You will want to ask intermittently, if they are understanding. Watch the facial expressions, sometimes the facial expressions communicate in a “pre-language” way what is happening to your students intellectually. A somatic message is communicated.

Connecting to prior learning

Try as much as possible to see if you can connect the concept being taught to a previously learnt concept. This

might be difficult in the moment so, ensure that you always determine as you prepare your lesson, how you can connect a concept to concepts that are known already. You really need a hook, an entry point into their thinking processes to help them make the connection and then use that connection to forge forward. Understanding is easier when you connect the known to the unknown. So, have a repertoire of examples and if you are a fairly new teacher, you will have to build a collection of these. If something works for this group, note it and record it for further use. Sometimes, it’s an example that a student might have suggested that elicited responses indicating that they understand the concept being taught. In these circumstances, a metaphor might be extremely useful or even an analogy.

Intellectual engagement with the concept

It is important to get the students talking about the concept to each other. There are various strategies that might help in this regard, for instance, verbally engaging in the muddiest point, think, pair and share or point for clarification/resolution discussion. However, one useful approach is simply to ask them to talk about the issue to each other. Ask your students to help each other understand the issue and in doing this, you might also want to provide a question that provides some parameters for the discussion.

Use of questions

The questioning technique is always useful in the classroom and this is one opportunity for you to get your students posing questions that seek clarifications on the matter at hand. Therefore, let the students know you would welcome their questions, specifically those dealing with the issue that they need further clarifications on.

Encourage explanations from students who might have a better understanding of the topic/concept

Ask students who might have a better understanding of the topic to explain it to their peers. This might be done for the whole class or in a small group framework depending on the number of students who have developed a better understanding of the topic/concept. Peer teaching is always a good resource in the classroom. In fact, at times, students might be better able to explain some concepts to their peers than even the class teacher. They sometimes choose words/phrases or examples that are generally meaningful to students at their level of intellectual development that might enable the concept to come alive for the learner.

Another approach in getting the students involved might be to ask them to tell you what they think would contribute to their understanding of the topic/concept under discussion. In this way, other students are able to contribute to the discussion or you might be able to offer the clarifications that will enable the concept to come alive for the learner.

Sharing how it was figured out

Invite participation from other students by asking them to think about when they first heard about the content under discussion and then how they came to figure it out. In this way, you are seeking their process of gaining understanding. Once the student offers clear explanations, this might be helpful to many students in the class. In other scenarios, once the classmate shares his or her process of gaining understanding/clarification, you might be able to use aspects of it to bolster your approach to explicating the issue.

Refer students to the available resources

Refer students to the available resources that might help them to gain additional insights or clarifications. These might include the course text book, specific websites or other online sources that you would have consulted and can refer in confidence to your students.

Avoid making suggestions that positions the learner as incompetent or “hard to understand”. In this regard,

please avoid making comments about how easy this concept is to understand. It is easy to compare this group to another group and make comments in your own frustration that students might internalise in very negative ways. For instance, a student might say to himself or herself, “if I can’t understand it and my teacher is saying that it is very easy to understand, then what does that make me?”

Exercise patience

Try as best as possible to take charge of the situation and show the students that you are making a valiant effort to help them understand the concept. Do not allow your frustration to be demonstrated. Remember our students oftentimes are like new residents in a neighbourhood. In this neighbourhood, all the existing residents will come out to welcome them to the community and this can be overwhelming. Similarly, in learning a new idea, concept or theory, students can be overwhelmed even when we might think that we are simply introducing them to one or two ideas in this content area. They are new to it and of course, as the teacher, you are well versed and competent in that area of the content. So, please exercise patience.

You will want also to encourage them along as they make baby steps toward developing their understanding of the content. Don’t overact to the confusion that some might be displaying. Encourage them to keep at it, keep seeking to get a deeper understanding of the content.

Pause, reflect and revisit

Sometimes, you will have to ask them to take a break and move on. It might be useful to advise students to stop, reflect and revisit the content later on. At other times, you might commend additional reflection to refocus their thinking on aspects of the content. It’s always useful to provide focus questions, even a quiz (for formative purposes), points of clarifications or additional resources that might assist them in reflecting on the content and gain additional clarifications.

Reference

Weimer, M. (February, 2018). What to Do When They Don’t Understand. *The Teaching Professor*, p. 7.

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