

Teaching Tips

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

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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://myspot.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.

Planning the course work

Planning course work is important since we must create learning activities that will help students to learn. There are two significant mistakes to avoid. The first is designing classes so that students will pass them without thinking deeply about the content of the course. The second is designing classes so that you must work harder than the students. Let us consider both of these ideas in turn.

In a class that consists mainly of lectures with periodic quizzes and examinations, students can often get a passing grade by cramming the night before the quizzes and tests. This is particularly true if the test items are mainly taken from content requiring basic recall and those written using the lower intellectual levels of the Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. Students are able to cram for these kinds of test/examination questions and still do very well. In fact, many students have developed cramming skills to the point that they misleadingly create the appearance of understanding a body of content (when they don't). The problem is that most cramming feeds only the short-term memory. Students adept at it will say things like, "I got an A in Statistics last semester, but don't ask me any questions about it. I've forgotten most of what I learned."

If students are to become disciplined thinkers, they need to do a good deal of active thinking to take ownership of the content they are learning. Teachers often make the mistake of thinking that students learn well only when instructors spend hours "preparing" for class, (e.g., learning information they then tell to students). But learning to think well requires many opportunities for practice in thinking through problems and issues, and in applying concepts in ones thinking to real life experiences. Students can do this only when we design classroom teaching and learning activities so that they are working to understand and apply the fundamentals of the subject. Spoon feeding passive students is a useless activity.

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 7).

Simple Learning Activities

There are various introductory activities that we might use to make our classes come alive. A leaf from life and some kind of hook to make the content seem more meaningful to the lives of our students are always good. It is also good to have a focusing activity early in the class. Think carefully about the first five minutes of the class and plan to use these moments in ways that will enhance the overall outcome of your class. This might be achieved by using learning activities that matter. Let us remember that the activity that matters most in learning is always deliberate practice. The best thing about practising is this: practice what you cannot do, so you learn to do it and engage with it. Practice is usually driven by the desire to find out and to develop expertise. When students are involved in the discovery process, they are usually immersed in some learning activity, trying to find out how something works. They might be trying to solve a problem or figure out something. Sometimes, there is a coach by the side that offers some assistance as the process goes along but it is their willingness to engage that makes learning occur.

A simple learning activity is one that is called a focusing activity. It is usually designed to immediately focus students' attention as they enter the classroom and it has the potential to minimize distractions. These activities will also maintain momentum between pre-class and in-class activities and maximize the amount of class time you have to engage students in learning. Focusing activities are usually pretty easy to get through. They can take less than five minutes. They might include collaborative activities to connect students, generate discussion and compare ideas. They might include individual activities where students work on their own by reading, reflecting, writing, taking a brief quiz or engaging in some type of assessment activity. Focusing activities might also be used to set the stage for what is to come during the class. They might be introduced with the use of 21st century technologies, low tech approaches or with no technology at all.

There are many ways that we can integrate a focusing activity in our classes. Some require an enormous investment of time to plan, prepare and implement the activity. Others require very little time or advanced work. Here are two focusing activities:

1. Ordering Activity

This will not take a long time to prepare. Think about a class you will do that have a list of processes that must be completed. Place this list on the whiteboard or the device on which you project information. Of course, the list will not be in the required order you need. As students come into class, ask them to put the list in the accurate sequence based on some established criteria. You might want to think about criteria such as short to long, weak to strong, high to low and old to new and so on.

2. Drawing Exercise

Another focusing activity is a drawing exercise. This will take very little preparation time. Ask students to do a drawing or draw a process, create a diagram, or illustrate a major point from the material they were asked to prepare for the class. This drawing could be the creation of a mind map of the main points of the course reading assigned for the class, a graph of a set of data points collected from a survey or their interpretation of what's happening in the story or what a character might be experiencing. Let them share with the class or in smaller groups.

Reference

Arthur W. Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice. *AAHE Bulletin*, 39, 3-7.

The Engaged Lecture

There are times when we will use the lecture in our classes. In those situations when we determine that the lecture is absolutely necessary, we recommend use of what we call an engaged lecture format. During this lecture, routinely stop and ask students to state in their own words their understanding of what you have said. This can be done through a "random card" format wherein you flip a set of 3x5 cards, each containing one student's name, calling on students randomly as their card happens to come up. You should keep shuffling the cards to ensure that each new draw is completely random. Then, call on students in class to state, elaborate, exemplify and illustrate (in their own words) the most important points in the lecture or in a chapter in the textbook. This strategy involves every student in the class (since anyone of them may be called upon at any moment)

and ensures that they are actively listening during the discussion.

In addition, randomly call on students to state in their own words comments made by other students. Begin by selecting one student to state her understanding of a concept or principle you introduced. Then, randomly select another student to summarize what the first student said. Then, ask the first person if the second person accurately represented what she stated.

Engagement using 21st century technologies

The use of 21st century technologies, for example question-response software, has helped us to recognise the value of integrating interactive components in the lecture. This has the potential of making the lecture a really engaged activity and certainly will move us away from seeing it and engaging in it as a didactic act. The use of such apps as Socrative and padlet are also helpful in making the lecture more active and engaging. However, the focus here is on question and response apps. These can be used as a means of determining student performance. It is well known that assessment can be used as a teaching and learning tool. In learning-centred classrooms assessment is integrated into the entire learning process in both formal and informal ways. These assessment tasks are easily administered, generally brief, and they are not collected and graded by the teacher. In fact, in many instances they are anonymous. These assessment tasks can be used at any time throughout the class. So, at the beginning they can be used as pre-assessment tasks, during the class they can be used to determine the level of learning or understanding that is taking place and they might also be used at the end of the teaching and learning period to find out what really happened, in terms of learning outcomes.

An easy to use informal assessment activity is PollEverywhere. This is a web-based survey and real-time feedback provider enabling students in your class to interact through a smartphone app, text message, or a website. A question is posed and the student uses his smartphone to respond, much like the clicker.

You can also facilitate the further engagement in post lecture seminar groups and now this is possible by using the learning management system (LMS). It is possible to create groups in the LMS and create opportunities for ongoing discussion of some of the major points raised in the lecture.

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