Teaching Tips

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

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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

Student Engagement in the Classroom

Oftentimes, we think about active learning and student engagement in the university classroom in the same way. Student engagement in the classroom encompasses active learning. It is the process of implementing learning activities that will involve all learners. Engagement is about focusing on the content, doing something with the content, the student's peers and the facilitator of learning that will enable the student to develop deeper understandings of the course material by working with, and reflecting on the content. With active learning, students become engaged learners and not mere recipients of content/information.

It is generally well accepted in higher education that finding ways to engage our students in our classrooms can significantly advance student learning. In fact, the benefits of engaging learners are well known and these can easily be found in the literature on teaching and learning in higher education. John Bransford (2000) and colleagues in *How People Learn* and Susan Ambrose (2010) and colleagues in *How Learning Works* (2010) have helped us to understand the importance of engagement for learning. Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson (1987) encouraged university teachers to reflect on what they were doing in the classroom. Further, they encouraged lesson planning and activities to engage learners in the classroom. Their recommendations to university teachers came in the form of the paper "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" and these principles continue to be meaningful 27 years after they were first recommended.

Here are some strategies for classroom engagement:

Snowballing

The class commences with the instructor posing a question to the class for discussion. Next, the class is asked to reflect and come up with a response or answer to the question. Then the student will join with another student and the answer is shared. After this phase, the 2 students will join with 2 other students and they will share their answers. This group of four can join with another group to have a group of eight.

In-Class Teams

Get your students to form teams of 2-4 and choose team recorders. Give teams up to 3 minutes to:

- Recall prior material
- Answer or generate a question
- Start a problem solution or analysis
- Work out the next step
- Think of an example or application
- Explain a concept
- Figure out why a predicted outcome turned out to be wrong
- Brainstorm a list (goal is quantity, not quality)
- Summarize a lecture
- Collect some or all answers by randomly calling on several individuals first before taking responses from volunteers.

This activity works for all class levels and sizes.

Something I Have Learned and Something I Can Use

Implement this teaching-learning strategy at the end of class as a culminating activity. Instruct your students to find a partner to have a discussion. Once the students have settled on their partners, they will then decide on who will be number 1 and who will be number 2 in the discussion pairs. Student number 1 will discuss with his or her partner, student number 2 for approximately 30 seconds, something that he or she has learned in the class and something they can use. Then, student number 2 discusses the same question for another 30 seconds. Afterwards, there is an open discussion for one minute. Finally, the instructor will ask for volunteers to share with the class what they have learned and how they can use it.

Guided Reciprocal Peer Questioning

For this teaching and learning activity, students will work in groups of three or four. They are provided with a set of generic question stems:
How does … relate to what I've learned before? What if…?
What conclusions can I draw about …? Explain why …?
What are the strengths and weaknesses of …? How are … and … similar?
What is the main idea of …? Why is … important?
What is a new example of …? How would I use … to …?
What is the best … and why? How does … affect …?
Each student individually prepares two or three thought-provoking questions on the content presented in the lecture or reading. The generic question stems are designed to encourage higher level thinking skills. Questions are discussed in small groups at the beginning of class, and the whole class then discusses questions that were especially interesting or controversial in the group discussions.

NB. From: King, A. (1993). From sage on the stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching, 41* 1, 30-35.

Value Line

A Value Line ascertains students' opinions in a quick and visual way by asking them to line up according to how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement or proposition. In a philosophy class, for example, instructors may ask students to respond to the following statements:

- The killing of innocents is never justified.
- The United States made the correct decision in dropping the bomb on Nagasaki.
- The United States should not have intervened in Grenada.
- The ongoing trade embargo against Cuba by the USA should be lifted.

Clear instructions reinforced by visual aids are particularly important for implementation of a "Value Line" because many students are unaccustomed to active learning that involves active movement.

To initiate the structure, teachers should show the students a five point scale on an projected slide (PowerPoint or otherwise). Then ask students, after a moment of "think time", to choose the number that best describes their position on the issue. To avoid indecisiveness, it is a good idea to have the students jot down their number before the next step. Instructors next ask students who have chosen "one" to stand at a designated point along the wall of the room. The students who have chosen "two" follow them, and so forth until all students are lined up. It is important to stretch the line sufficiently so that students are not bunched together in large clumps. Rather than opinions, faculty members can have students select numbers based on their proficiency or comfort level with given topics. After the students have formed a continuous line based on their own opinions, instructors must identify the midpoint. The easiest way to do this is to ask students to ignore the original number they selected as the basis for their location in the line and instead to number themselves sequentially in a count-off and then find the mid-point.

The next steps are critically important. The teacher can then form the first group of four students by taking one from each extreme of the line and two from its midpoint. To insure the rapid and accurate identification of these four students, it is helpful to use a projected slide allowing the instructor to draw lines through the numbers associated with students who have been assigned to teams. A simple numerical grid works well. In a class of 40, for example, she or he would call the numbers 1, 40, 15, and 14, striking over them on the grid. For the next team, the teacher would call 2, 39, 13, and 16, again striking over the numbers on the grid. If the class is large, instructors can ask a student from the first group formed to record on the whiteboard or a flip chart the four numbers as they are called out for each team. Instructors continue to form teams with this procedure until all students have been assigned to a team and have found their designated seats.