Embracing Tension in the Classroom

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As instructors, we strive to generate thoughtful and engaging classroom discussion while maintaining a collegial and inclusive environment. In doing so, we may be tempted to avoid topics that can ultimately add to students' learning. Hot moments in the classroom refer to discussions that become contentious, acrimonious, or even disrespectful. None of us wants to promote a toxic classroom environment, and when such moments happen, we work diligently to diffuse them. However, when done strategically, creating what I call positive tension can help students better understand ideas central to a course while learning to engage in productive debate in the classroom and beyond.

Positive tension may sound like a milder degree of a hot moment. Although there are similarities, there are also important distinctions. Hot moments are often spontaneous and result from an incendiary statement (whether intentional or unintentional) made by either a student or the instructor. The classroom may become uncomfortably quiet as students feel the tension and hope for a quick resolution, or students might become argumentative as they compete to have their perspectives recognized. In a word, hot moments are deeply emotional, and learning related to classroom objectives can be difficult to achieve once they occur, according to L. Warren, who has written about hot moments (http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html).

In contrast, I use positive tension to accomplish some of the very goals that a hot moment may undermine. Like hot moments, positive tension typically results from focus on a controversial topic, often one where viewpoints may be rooted in personal beliefs and values. Unlike hot moments, instructor-directed positive tension is a guided exercise in which students address a controversial topic but do so following a set of "ground rules." Much like an athletic competition that may evolve in exciting and unpredictable ways, the instructor allows students to share original and unique responses, while ground rules structure the exercise so that individual perspectives are respected, learning is advanced, and debate is fair (i.e., avoiding ad hominem attacks).

Positive tension should always have a broader pedagogical objective. The objective is not the debate itself. Rather, debate should be viewed as a way to accomplish broader learning goals. This is important to keep in mind because, when executed effectively, positive tension can generate rich classroom discussion that can consume class time. Guiding students to make relevant connections with course learning goals during energetic classroom discussion is a key component to successfully using positive tension.

Second, it is important for instructors to consider the degree to which positive tension might lay the foundation for a hot moment. It might be helpful to discuss the exercise with a colleague or even a student advisee who is not taking the class. By thoughtfully considering the possible outcomes of the exercise, the instructor can be prepared to address

heated discussion, modify the exercise, or ultimately decide not to use that exercise. Finally, instructors should feel free to use exercises that extend beyond their particular field. Interdisciplinary strategies can be effective ways to create positive classroom tension, because students' preexisting views or arguments on an issue may not translate as effectively in another field. They must then reevaluate and reframe their position in ways that challenge their views on an issue.

A number of practical strategies can be used to create positive tension in the classroom. For example, if an instructor in a social science course wants students to discuss the gender pay gap, she might first have students read two short narrative accounts of pay inequality or poems about gender inequality that express competing viewpoints. Using this technique, a sociology or psychology student is now

In This Issue

Submissions to *The Teaching Professor* are welcome. When submitting, please keep these guidelines in mind:
- We are interested in a wide range of teaching-learning topics.
- We are interested in innovative strategies, techniques, and approaches that facilitate learning and in reflective analyses of educational issues of concern.
- Write with the understanding that your audience includes faculty in a wide variety of disciplines and in a number of different institutional settings; i.e., what you describe must be relevant to a significant proportion of our audience.
- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

We Begin Again . . .

I've been retired, as in not teaching undergraduates, for almost a decade now. I miss the students. I miss some of my colleagues. But what I miss most is the beginning of the school year. It's a new start—new students, sometimes new content, a few new colleagues, the usual spate of new administrators, maybe a new building, a new classroom or two, or some much-needed new furniture. Nearly everybody is happy to be back, especially those students who spent the summer behind the deli counter or the end of a weed eater in the hot sun.

The courses, even though you've taught them before, won't be the same. Oh, some of the same stuff will happen—students will show up with excuses (some just too good to be true), some won't be working as hard as they should be, others won't be working at all, the amount of grading will be overwhelming, and there'll be those disappointing exchanges as to what merits a point (or part of one). And there'll be faculty meetings where the discussion goes on way too long. But there will also be surprises—a question you've never been asked before, a paper so good it takes your breath away, an activity that soars to new heights, another that flops. Teaching is not a predictable profession.

At the beginning of the year, all things are possible. A good grade in the course is still an option for everyone. It can be the year of your best teaching—the best course a student has ever taken. It can be the course when a student falls in love with a field and discovers what he or she really wants to do.

The beginning of a course is a bit like a honeymoon, a time of happiness and great expectations. But the honeymoon is a small part of a larger and longer relationship. The life that follows isn't a honeymoon, and it's the same in courses. Before too long, somebody makes a mistake, which others follow with more missteps. But that brief honeymoon is a great way to begin, and what we imagine (and hope for) then could come to pass in the rest of the course—for some of the students, for some of the time. Some course is going to be the best one the teacher ever taught.

So begin again, realistic about the year ahead but still madly in love with all that every course can become. Honeymoons are meant to be enjoyed. 🌳

EMBRACING TENSION

evaluating a social issue through the lens of literature and debating how the work should be interpreted. In this example, the instructor has placed students' focus on a literary text while maintaining the core of the learning objective: gender inequality. As students debate the meaning of the text, the instructor helps them make broader connections by raising questions related to relevant course material.

Another strategy instructors may employ is the use of fictitious vignettes or narratives that contain the components of real-world controversy. Hot moments often occur because students have personal experience with the issue and have already formed strong views on it. Stripping an issue of its real-world status both limits the judgment students may feel from others and the judgment they may place on their classmates. It also allows students to ask questions of the scenario or identify the weaknesses of fictitious individuals, all while highlighting the complexity of the topic. The flexibility of such exercises allows tension to coexist with objectivity, something more difficult to achieve when the emotional stakes are high, as they are with real historical or current events. 🌳

Lecture Capture: A Study Supplement or Excuse to Skip Class?

Technology makes it easy to record and distribute lecture material presented in class. What concerns many faculty is whether having the recorded lectures available gives students the excuse they need to skip class. Moreover, recorded lectures don't give students the opportunity to ask questions. True, sometimes they don't ask questions in class when they are confused, but often the teacher can see or sense their confusion in a classroom setting and offer additional explanations; that's not the case when viewing a recorded lecture.

Students have been surveyed about the use of lecture capture: asked how often they view the recorded lectures, how long they look at the recordings, and what role they see recorded lectures playing in their efforts to learn the material in the course. The survey results collected in various research projects offer mixed results. Students consistently report a range of benefits from having lectures available outside of class. But data on how often students report using them differ, and certain questions remain. For instance, are student reports accurate, or are they describing how they think they should be using recorded lecture material? Moreover, so far there are very few analyses of how using recorded lectures impacts learning. Do students who report viewing recorded lectures after they've attended class perform better on exams?

A study done in Great Britain begins to answer some of these questions and concerns. It's a large, two-year analysis of more than 1,400 students enrolled in a first-year, undergraduate economics module (think 24-week course with three 50-minute lectures each week and a weekly discussion seminar). Each of the 70 lectures delivered in the course was recorded and made available to students. The lecture capture technology automatically recorded the number of individuals who watched each lecture, when the lectures were viewed, and how long viewers looked at the recordings.

> *Students consistently report a range of benefits from having lectures available outside of class.*

The results are rather encouraging. In the first year (2012–2013) 639 students, or 87.8 percent, accessed the recordings at least once, with 613, or 84.2 percent, watching at least two minutes of the recording. In the second year (2013–2014) 709 students, or 99.7 percent, accessed the recordings at least once, with 680, or 95.6 percent, watching at least two minutes. For students who watched a recording for more than two minutes, the mean viewing length was 28 minutes (SD 24.3) the first year and 27.8 minutes (SD 21.3) the second year. Not surprisingly, the number of views spiked during exam weeks and most of the viewings took place during the evening hours.

This research team also surveyed students about their use and perceptions of the recorded lectures. Primarily, students said they used the recorded material for review. "Students highlighted the benefits of using recorded lectures for revision [review] purposes, to support independent study and understanding material they found challenging, when introduced in lectures, and as of particular value for international students and students with special learning needs" (p. 164). According to the study authors, "Ultimately, recorded lectures seemed not to be perceived as an alternative to lecture attendance, but a very useful tool to assist follow-up study" (p. 163). Student attendance was not tracked in the study, but lecturers reported that class attendance did not drop significantly when lecture capture was being used.

And there was one additional positive outcome. "Generally, module evaluation scores were higher for the module after lecture capture was introduced, particularly in the 2012–2013 academic year—the first year the technology was trialed" (p. 161).

This research does verify use of recorded lectures in a more reliable way. The cohort is large, and although the course did not enroll students from across a wide range of disciplines, it did enroll students from several different fields. However, it's still data from a particular kind of course taught at a particular institution. And it still doesn't explain if or how viewing part of a lecture affects learning. Students report that it's a viable study strategy, but questions remain: for example, are students who include the recorded lectures in their study time getting better exam scores?

Reference: Elliott, C., and Neal, D. (2016). Evaluating the use of lecture capture using a revealed preference approach. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 17*(2), 153–167. 🌲

Have You Considered Using Open Textbooks?

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College textbooks are expensive, and prices continue to rise. The Bureau of Labor reported a 600-percent increase in textbook costs between 1980 and 2012[1]. The average 2015 American college student graduated with over $35,000 of student debt, a portion of which came from textbook costs[2]. In a recent survey of over 22,000 college students, 64 percent reported not purchasing a required textbook because it was too expensive, 49 percent stated that textbook costs caused them to take fewer courses, and 34 percent declared they had earned a poor grade in one or more courses because they could not afford to buy the textbook[3].

Students cope by purchasing older editions of textbooks, sharing textbooks with other students, or avoiding textbook purchases altogether. What can be done to alleviate this problem?

One promising solution is open textbooks, part of a larger Open Educational Resources (OER) initiative[4]. OER typically use Creative Commons licenses that provide professors and students with more permissions than traditional copyrights do, such as granting permission to edit or delete text[5]. OER have been used in hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada, including Harvard, University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), Ohio State, Purdue, Brigham Young, University of British Columbia, and the University of Calgary[6].

Advantages

Inexpensive One obvious advantage of open textbooks is that they are free. Digital copies can be accessed freely online; printed versions are available at cost. Whether choosing texts in print or digital format, students save money in courses that adopt an open textbook.

Adaptable A second advantage is that open textbooks easily support reuse and revision[7]. Customize them to match your course by adding, removing, or modifying content. You can even combine content from two or more open texts to create a new book. Additionally, some professors have observed that adopting an open textbook provided them with an opportunity to look at their courses anew, improving them.

Portable Electronic open textbooks can be accessed by students on essentially any computer, tablet, or smartphone platform. While not all students will want to read textbooks digitally, it has been our experience that a majority of students are happy to read textbooks on their devices—especially if those textbooks are free.

Timely Standard textbooks in many disciplines tend to lag behind the state-of-the-art because they are slow and expensive to produce. Open textbooks, on the other hand, can be updated quickly. If you find information that is out of date, you can update it and provide the corrected text to your students.

Concerns

Quality If the old adage "You get what you pay for" is true, then some might ask, "If open textbooks are free, how can they be any good?" A review of nine recent studies regarding the use of OER concluded that using OER does not appear to decrease student learning. Roughly half of the almost 5,000 students and teachers surveyed found OER to be comparable to traditional resources. Approximately 35 percent believed they were superior, and only 15 percent found them to be inferior[8].

Availability The question quickly arises: "Is there an existing open textbook appropriate for my course?" Hundreds of open textbooks exist. However, they are more likely to be available for introductory courses than for specialized and upper-division courses.

Convenience Like everything else associated with teaching, there are trade-offs involved with using open textbooks. Recognize that it will take time to identify suitable texts and adjust your syllabi, assignments, and assessments.

Getting Started

After you decide to consider switching to an open textbook, how can you find and survey your available options? One resource is the University of Minnesota's Open Textbook Library (http://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/), a repository of open textbooks that also includes faculty textbook reviews. Numerous other repositories are also available[9]. Using these, you can find, download, and evaluate potential open textbooks.

If a quality open textbook alternative is available, the decision to switch can provide immediate financial benefits to your students and result in a textbook you can tailor to your students' needs. You will never know what is available until you investigate. Based on our experience, we recommend that you give it a try!

Notes

1 Bureau of Labor Statistics. http://www.bls.gov/cpi/.
2 http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/05/08/congratulations-class-of-2015-youre-the-most-indebted-ever-for-now/.
3 Florida Virtual Campus (2012). Florida Student Textbook Survey. Tallahassee. http://www.openaccesstextbooks.org/pdf/2012_Florida_Student_Textbook_Survey.pdf.
4 For additional information on OER, see https://library.educause.edu/resources/2010/5/7-things-you-should-know-about-open-educational-resources.
5 For additional information on Creative Commons, see https://creativecommons.org/licenses/.
6 A list of colleges that have adopted

Making Radio: Using Audio for Student Assignments

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Elvis (the other one . . . Costello) was right: "Radio, it's a sound salvation. Radio, it's cleaning up the nation." Radio didn't die; it was just sleeping. Podcasting and ubiquitous audio tools have brought radio back to life and into the classroom in a new and powerful way.

For many years, I've been using radio (live broadcasting as well as podcasting) in undergraduate classes, not radio as an information resource, but radio (audio) creation as an assignment. Making radio instead of making essays or making presentations provides students with a unique set of challenges that foster critical thinking and creative construction.

When I am asked "Why radio?" the question usually means "Why not video?" The assumption is that video would be more powerful than the restricted nature of audio, and also more familiar to the students. Perhaps, but sometimes less is more. Kate Lacey of the University of Sussex contrasts video with writing, observing that "we are used to dealing with media forms that are not full of sensory plenitude" and suggests that the power of audio lies in its constraints. Additionally, Lacey highlights the difference between "hearing" and "listening," where the latter is a critical activity and decoding process similar to that of close reading. In other words, making radio encompasses the rigorous methods necessary to effectively engage students in thinking.

I teach in a First Year Seminar program where students come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. These are not media studies courses. The objective is not to make my students audio experts, but to introduce them to a new way of conceptualizing and communicating the ideas they are researching. Requiring a different tool for their assignment (i.e., not an essay or class presentation), makes the students more engaged and reflective about the research and creative process.

In one course about the history and nature of the book, student groups appeared on live radio to be interviewed about the book they were investigating. The interview was unscripted, so the students had to be prepared to respond, in real time, to the probing and questioning of the host and be able to explain themselves in clear, concise, and accessible ways.

In other cases, I've used podcasts as a means for students to explore ideas relevant to the course. In an extreme case (and one that was highly successful), students created one-minute podcasts about an aspect of book culture. The 60-second constraint reinforced the need for careful research, clear and creative scripting, effective storytelling, and strong production values. Like an "audio haiku," these podcasts were difficult challenges despite their apparent simplicity.

In most cases, the students create at least two podcasts during the semester. The first is typically not well done. Students write scripts that sound like academic papers and produce podcasts that are aurally flat. Those initial experiences allow us to talk in more depth about the components of good radio and good academic work. Their second attempts are always substantially improved.

While you need look no further than your smartphone for the necessary tools to make good radio (e.g., audio capture, editing, and even distribution), there is another, more traditional resource that is well worth getting to know: your local community radio station. These nonprofit broadcasters are likely conveniently located on your campus and staffed by eager folks ready to help you and your students. They can provide access to excellent studio facilities—my iPhone's audio capabilities may be good, but they pale in comparison to a real studio.

I was a neophyte when I first decided to use radio in my classes; I still think of myself as a beginner. As a result, the students and I are colearners in using radio. Having students see me as part of their learning experience added an important element to the courses. We learned, failed, reflected, and tried again together. We modeled a learning community where the roles of learner and teacher were fluid. Ultimately, this may have been the most profound outcome of the courses.

Making radio is a powerful learning approach that is easily adopted and adapted for diverse subjects and class environments. So as Elvis says: "You better do as you are told. You better listen to the radio." 🍂

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open textbooks published by Rice University is provided at https://openstax.org/adopters. Note that these textbooks are only a small fraction of the total number of open textbooks that are currently available.

7 Bissell, Ahrash N. Permission granted: Open licensing for educational resources. *Open Learning, 24* (1) (February 2009), 97–106.
8 Hilton III, J. Open educational resources and college textbook choices: A review of research on efficacy and perceptions. *Educational Technology Research and Development.* (Forthcoming.)
9 See also the California Open Online Library for Education (http://coolfored.org/) and the repository finder hosted by BC Campus in Vancouver, British Columbia. https://open.bccampus.ca/open-textbook-101/where-to-find-open-textbooks/. 🍂

Using Evaluation Results to Improve: What Does It Take?

Teachers don't always have the best attitudes about student rating results, and for understandable reasons. Institutions often don't evaluate teaching in the most constructive and useful ways. Yet, feedback from students is an essential part of any effort to grow and develop as a teacher. These research results shed light on ways teachers can approach rating results that make them a useful part of improvement efforts.

It starts and ends with having the right attitude, and these researchers offer an array of alternatives that describe what they mean by "attitude." They suggest the term "approach"—how you approach evaluation results. They also propose "perception," "perspective," "stance," "belief," or "conception" (p. 1). "The question we address is: what attitude or approach do teachers take to their student evaluations so that they can use them for formative or developmental purposes, to improve their teaching rather than to give a final assessment of performance?" (p. 2).

To answer the question, they gathered information from award-winning teachers during two-hour sessions. In a semistructured interview, they asked questions like: What overall attitudes do you need to use evaluation data to improve teaching? How do you interpret or analyze the evaluations? How do you decide what changes to make on the basis of the evaluations?" (p. 4).

What emerged out of these focus group discussions was what the researchers labeled an "improvement attitude . . . an overarching approach, perspective, orientation, or way of looking at evaluation data" (p. 5) which they organized into four "interrelated, overlapping, smaller categories for ease of discussion" (p. 5).

Reflective Approach

This part of the approach begins with a simple question: "How can I improve?" Often what drives this question is basic curiosity—the need to find out what's going on in one's courses or always being on the lookout for ways to improve student learning.

The drive for improvement is not predicated on notions of remediation or deficiency. Too often, evaluation results are perused in order to identify what needs to be fixed. Another author cited in this article calls this the "fire alarm" approach, the belief that rating results are relevant only when there's a fire in the course that needs to be put out. The alternative proposed by those interviewed in the study is the notion that there's always room for improvement—it doesn't matter how good you are, or if you aren't all that good. The reflective approach is also tied up in thinking about current practice and not being so vested in what you do that you can't possibly consider changing it.

Data Viewed as Formative Feedback

From this perspective, the feedback students provide is not a judgment of the teacher or the teaching. It's simply feedback. Two questions illustrate the different perspective here: "How can I develop and improve my teaching?" rather than "How good is my teaching?" (p. 7).

If the focus is on the second question, then there's often a need to explain away the results or to blame them on students, the course, or one's circumstances. A focus on the second question also makes it easier to simply ignore the results—the teaching is good enough, there's no need to improve. In contrast, participants with an improvement attitude "focused on how they could use the data to improve, rather than paying attention to how they could explain the data away" (p. 7). All student feedback should be taken seriously and given careful consideration. As one teacher put it bluntly, "I'm right and 1,300 students are wrong? I don't think so" (p. 7).

Avoiding excuses did not mean these teachers ignored reasons associated with the results. Rather, they could be used to explain some of the results. Required courses often generate student complaints. But that's not where these teachers focused their attention. They were trying to figure out what the results meant, what they could learn from them about their teaching and about student learning experiences in the course. "If students give less than perfect ratings or negative feedback, this indicates that something is not working for them and so there is room for improvement" (p. 8).

Belief in the Ability to Improve

"When teachers adopted the improvement attitude, they thought they could improve their teaching, they could make a difference for student learning, and they could improve their evaluations, rather than these all being unchangeable" (p. 8).

Participants in the study did agree that some of this confidence comes with experience. It's not as easy to take negative feedback and to believe in your ability to make things better when your teaching experience is limited.

Student-Centered Approach

Again, two questions differentiate the improvement attitude from an attitude that becomes a barrier to improvement: "How well have my students learned?" versus "How well have I taught?" (p. 9). According to the authors, "The teachers saw the evaluation data not just as shining a light on themselves and what they have done, but as shining a light on their students: what benefits and blocks their learning? How well are they enabled and supported to learn?" (p. 9). Fundamentally, these teachers' thinking is more about learning and less about teaching.

However, it's not as simple as teachers doing whatever students suggest. Sometimes what students want isn't

A Unique Peer Assessment Activity with Positive Results

Typically, when students review each other's work, it's a formative process. They offer feedback that ostensibly helps with production of the final product, which is then submitted and graded by the teacher. But that's not the only option.

A faculty member teaching sections of an introductory psychology course developed a five-step, double-blind peer assessment activity. It involved a practice quiz with two short essay questions, which students took in class. They identified their work with a number code and provided the number to the instructor on a class roster. The instructor shuffled and redistributed the quizzes to the class. The instructor then projected a grading rubric with correct answer information, which students used to grade. They were free to ask the instructor questions about the information on the rubric.

Once that was completed, students traded the graded quiz with someone nearby and proceeded to grade again, recording their grade alongside the first. There were no expectations that students would agree upon the grade. After the quiz had been graded twice, the two partners explained their rationale for the grades they'd given on both quizzes. The goal of the discussion was to inform, not to persuade. However, if after this discussion, one of the partners wished to change the grade he or she had assigned, that was permissible.

All quizzes were returned to the instructor, who used the numeric code to return each quiz to the student who wrote it. Students reviewed the peer feedback. If the two peer graders disagreed on the grade, that triggered an instructor evaluation; the binding grade would be determined by the instructor. If the peer graders agreed and the student agreed with their assessment, that stood as the final grade. If the peer graders agreed but the student was unwilling to accept their grade, that also triggered an instructor review, with the student invited to share his or her objections to the peer grade.

Of interest to the instructor was whether this peer review activity would affect performance on the course's three unit exams. To answer that, students in a control section completed the same peer review activity, but did so after the exam rather than before it.

In addition to these practice quizzes, students in both sections of the course took nine online mastery quizzes (counting for 13.5 percent of their grade). The instructor assumed that performance on the online quizzes and regular class attendance would impact exam performance, so he controlled for these variables. According to the author, "The present study provides evidence of a beneficial impact of participation in a peer assessment activity on students' performances on subsequent course exams, an effect that holds even after accounting for online mastery quiz performance and rate of attendance" (p. 183).

Given previous research on peer assessment, these results are not surprising. We have reported on previous studies that have explored how looking at the work of peers helps students be more objective about their own work. The value of this particular approach resides in the design features of the activity. This is not bogus grading that doesn't matter or count. If the conditions are met, these student assessments stand. That makes this an authentic activity students are likely to take seriously, which only serves to heighten the value of all peer assessment experiences.

It is encouraging to see more teachers making use of peer assessments. As this activity also illustrates, the benefits do not accrue automatically. Students need guidance—in this case, a rubric and correct answers. They need practice and feedback, both provided by this activity. They assess two different quizzes and then get to compare and discuss their assessments with a peer.

It's a unique and creative approach to peer assessment with design features that develop strong peer assessment skills and improve content learning, as measured by exam scores in this study.

Reference: Jhangiani, R. (2016). The impact of participating in a peer assessment activity on subsequent academic performance. *Teaching of Psychology, 43*(3), 180–186. ♣

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what they need. What they suggest won't improve their learning in the course. But what students want and what they think they need still merits consideration and response. If students are opposed to essay questions, but the teacher has good reasons to believe that's the best way to promote learning of course concepts, then it would be irresponsible to give students what they want. In such a case, the teacher must explain the rationale behind this choice and may want to help students prepare for essay questions.

This fine article clearly articulates an attitude that makes rating results useful. Attitudes are not immutable. They can be changed and developed, and if ever there were a place in higher education where attitudes could benefit from change, faculty response to course evaluations is it. This work shows a clear path to a more useful, positive, and constructive way of thinking about course evaluation feedback from students.

Reference: Golding, C., and Adam, L. (2016). Evaluate to improve: Useful approaches to student evaluation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 41*(1), 1–14. ♣

Teaching a Course Students Don't Want to Take

There's always a course students don't want to take. Most likely it's a required course, maybe a general education option, probably dealing with content students are convinced they don't like (even though their exposure to it may be minimal) and requiring skills they're certain they can't develop. These can be difficult courses to teach. How these courses get launched plays an important role in determining the direction they take for the rest of the semester. Here's a rundown of some of the challenges and some potential responses that are more effective at the outset than later on.

It's a big course with students coming from a range of disciplines. Most don't know many or any others in the course.
- On the first day of class, do some meet-and-greet activities. Have the students stand up and introduce themselves to those nearby. Circle around the room introducing yourself. Conclude by asking, or gently pressuring, randomly selected students to introduce someone they met during these exchanges.
- Early on, use some short activities to get students working with two or three others.
- Share some things about yourself, and when you talk with a student, take time for a bit of small talk.
- Students tend to sit in the same seats every class. Give them a couple of minutes at the beginning of class to chat with those around them. Give a bonus point to any student who can name four people sitting nearby.

Students are convinced the course content is of no interest to them.
- Show them they're wrong. Identify some aspect of the course content that is relevant to students. Provide examples of what knowing the content can do for them.
- Focus on the skills this content can be used to develop. "Learning this content will teach you how to ask better questions" or "You won't be analyzing evidence the same way after this course."
- Shamelessly show how much the content interests you, how hopelessly in love you are with it.

Students are anxious. Can they learn this material? Can they do well in this course? Will the course show them and everybody else how stupid they are?
- Design early encounters with the content that are challenging but doable. Give students a taste of success early in the course.
- Avoid messages about how easy the content is because if you do that and students struggle, they won't want to ask for help because it's supposed to be easy and they must be stupid because they can't figure it out.
- Avoid messages about how hard the content is, how much effort it will take to master, or how many students don't make it. That message sends anxiety levels through the roof and convinces some students there's really no point in trying.
- Identify study strategies and approaches other students found to have worked with this content.

Despite policies in the syllabus and your strongly worded statements about coming to class prepared, some students are going to come to class unprepared to see what happens. If nothing does, then prep before class isn't a prerequisite, is it?
- Quizzes work to ensure preparedness, perhaps used daily in the beginning of the course and then less often.
- Use the assigned readings or homework problems in class. Have students find things in their texts. Point out sections with descriptions so good you don't have to take time to repeat them. Include a homework problem on the quiz.

- Challenge students to come to class prepared to see if that makes understanding what's presented in class easier.
- Conduct class assuming those present are prepared. Don't offer summaries of the reading or do the homework problems. Answer questions that come up, but remember that students are the ones who should be doing the work necessary to solve the problems.

Many students tend to be passive in courses they don't want to take. They like to hunker down, hide out, and have the education done unto them.
- Be in the classroom space, both before class and during it. Talk directly to individual students, before class and during it.
- Use activities that engage students, ones that get them talking to each other and working on course content collaboratively.
- Play with questions, leaving some unanswered during class and between class sessions. "There was a question we didn't answer last question. I had you write it in your notes and asked you to think about it. Let's start with that."

You want to be realistic about these courses—about any course, really. Your job is teaching; students are responsible for learning and there's no way you can do their job for them. At some point, your responsibility ends and it's up to them. But you don't want to end before you've done your very best to make learning the outcome of the time spent in your course. 🌳