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AdJUNCT  
*COADUNATIO\**  
*\*gathering together [Latin]*

NEWSLETTER FOR LEWIS & CLARK LAW SCHOOL ADJUNCTS

**Greetings! The Fall 2017 term is underway...you are getting to know your students and they are becoming immersed in your subject matter. But how to maintain that start of term engagement? This newsletter features three articles to help with that. Enjoy!**

- *How Do Students Learn from Participation in Class Discussion?* by Elise J. Dallimore
- *Class Discussion: From Blank Stares to True Engagement* by Jay Howard
- *The Rhythms of the Semester: Implications for Practice, Persona* by Linda Shadiow

**HOW DO STUDENTS LEARN FROM PARTICIPATION IN CLASS DISCUSSIONS?**

by Elise J. Dallimore

Despite numerous arguments favoring active learning, especially class discussion, instructors sometimes worry that discussion is an inefficient or ineffective way for students to learn. What happens when students make non-value added, irrelevant, or inaccurate contributions? What about comments from non-experts that may obfuscate rather than clarify understanding? What about students who speak only to earn participation credit rather than contribute substantively to the discussion?

In our recent study, 246 students shared their understanding of how participation in class discussions affected their learning. More than 70% of students perceived a positive relationship between their own participation and learning but additionally discussed the value of other students' comments for their learning. Finally, a number of students verbalized that when participation is required, they prepare more, and this preparation actually increases their learning.

The students further articulated five ways that participation enhances learning. To summarize, participation:

- increases engagement;
- helps students retain and remember information;
- confirms what they have already learned;
- provides clarification of prior learning; and
- deepens their understanding especially through hands-on and application-based learning opportunities.

## Implications for Teaching

Here is a brief summary of how we have translated these student-generated categories into concrete pedagogical strategies to facilitate learning from class discussion. Instructors should plan discussions to provide opportunities such as those suggested to reinforce each of these five paths to learning.

1. **Increasing engagement.** Make discussion participation required and ensure all students participate. For example, have each student take a stand on a key issue by requiring them to vote at the start of class. Alternatively, ask students to provide examples from the media that illustrate course concepts. Additionally, ask students to discuss links between course concepts and their experiential learning (e.g., volunteer activities, internships, study abroad, work experiences).
2. **Remembering and retaining information.** Ask students to summarize key take-away points at the end of individual class sessions. They could also be asked to identify contributions made by peers during a given discussion that helped them learn a specific concept.
3. **Confirming learning.** Provide verbal and nonverbal affirmation in response to student comments. Select media illustrating applications of course concepts, then have students identify the concepts evident in the media. In more advanced courses give students responsibility for selecting these real-world examples of course concepts. After new concepts are introduced, hand out problems requiring student application of these concepts. Problems may be solved individually or in small groups, after which the solution is discussed by the class. Alternatively, ask students to read articles—or again locate relevant articles themselves—where application of newer material is integrated with more foundational material.
4. **Clarifying through verbalization.** Students noted two methods that improved their understanding: the verbalization of feedback by instructors and their use of questions to clarify student learning. We insist, however, that learning is enhanced when both instructors and students reciprocally: (a) ask and answer questions, and (b) give and receive feedback about both course content and the process by which it is explored.
  1. **Receiving feedback.** Provide feedback in both written and oral form to students. Further ask students to evaluate their peers' work, including integrating a peer-review process into written work.
  2. **Asking questions.** Encourage students to ask questions, especially those at higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. There is value in discussing explicitly not only the pedagogical choices made but why these specific strategies are selected. For example, consider explicitly introducing the taxonomy at the beginning of each semester and then encouraging students to identify moments in the course where they see the instructor effectively utilizing it. Additionally, signal that questions are valued by including and rewarding them in the grading criteria for participation.
5. **Enhancing/deepening understanding.** Consider asking students higher-level questions (e.g., "What is really going on here?" "What might be the reason for \_\_\_?" "What can you conclude from these data?" "How did you come to that conclusion?" "What are the pros and cons?"). Begin the class with an overarching "question of the day"—which students

are expected to answer at the end of class—to create an atmosphere of questioning for students. In the wrap-up, ask students to link broader course objectives or previous discussions to a given course concept. Further, consider utilizing a questioning strategy at the end of each class (e.g., “What is your take-away?” “What was the significance of what we did today for our question of the day—or to the overarching course objectives?”).

Even though some students commented that their participation doesn’t enhance their learning, the sizable number who indicated the role others’ comments play in their learning validates the importance of encouraging participation from a broader range of students than might normally volunteer. Further, students who assert they learn better by listening can be encouraged to participate at least a moderate amount to contribute to the learning of others, just as they benefit from others’ contributions. Although not comprehensive, these recommendations illustrate the breadth of strategies instructors can use to increase learning through discussion.

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## **CLASS DISCUSSION: FROM BLANK STARES TO TRUE ENGAGEMENT**

by Jay Howard

Thirty years of research in the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education have demonstrated that when students are engaged in the classroom, they learn more (Pascarella and Terezini 1991, 2005). Classroom discussion is likely the most commonly used strategy for actively engaging students. Whether it is a seminar course centered on discussion or a lecture punctuated by moments of interaction with students, discussion is likely second only to lecture as the most frequently used pedagogical strategy.

Yet the idea of attempting to engage students in discussion is also rather frightening. There's always the possibility that our invitation for students to engage with the material and their classmates will be met with silence.

Sociologists have long contended that our behavior is guided by norms—largely taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate behavior when we are in the presence of other people. The college classroom is no exception. You have likely noticed whichever seat a student sits in on the first day of class is where the student will sit for the entire semester. It is a normative expectation that students have about the classroom.

Why can students get away with only paying civil attention? The answer is that we as faculty let them.

Professors believe that one classroom norm is that students are expected to pay attention. But sociologists David Karp and William Yoels (1976) pointed out that in most college classrooms students are not required to pay attention. The real norm is paying civil attention—or creating the appearance of paying attention. Students do this in a variety of ways. They write in their notebooks, nod their heads, make fleeting eye contact (fleeting because prolonged eye contact invites interaction), and chuckle when the professor attempts to be funny. While students may not be paying attention, they create the appearance of doing so.

Why can students get away with only paying civil attention? The answer is that we as faculty let them. Unlike high school teachers, the majority of college professors are reluctant to call on a student who is not somehow signaling his or her willingness to contribute. You likely had high school teachers who sought to coerce students into completing reading assignments by calling on them randomly, publicly embarrassing the unprepared and frightening them into completing future reading assignments.

Yet in college, our students are adults. They are not required by law to attend class. They are in class because they want to be. They attend in order to fulfill a longer-term goal: completing a degree and having a comfortable, secure lifestyle. Because our students are adults, we wish to treat them as such. We believe they should be self-motivated to complete assignments and prepare for class. Therefore, we don't embarrass students into preparing for and participating in discussion.

The result is that students can safely slide by, paying only civil attention in most college classrooms. Of course, there are some exceptions—math courses where students all take turns working problems on the board and foreign language courses where students may take turns conjugating verbs aloud. But in most disciplines, most professors don't directly question students in order to stimulate discussion.

We also defend this practice out of concern for our introverted, shy students. We don't want to subject them to situations that would make them very uncomfortable, which is not an entirely unreasonable concern.

Yet if engaging students through discussion is a key strategy for facilitating student learning, how do we get students to move beyond civil attention to true engagement in the classroom? There are numerous strategies to do so. Perhaps the most effective is allowing students, especially introverted students, the opportunity to formulate their thoughts prior to being called on to verbally participate. The think-pair-share classroom assessment technique is one example: Ask students to take one minute and write in response to a question. Then ask students to share their thoughts with a classmate. Finally, have pairs of students share with the class as a whole.

Another strategy is to provide discussion questions to accompany the reading assignment, which then are used as the basis for class discussion. The questions both guide students' reading of the material, helping them identify key concepts and issues, and allow them to formulate their thoughts prior to being expected to articulate them in class.

Faculty can also structure their courses in a manner that requires students to come to class having read the assignment and prepared a response. One way this can be accomplished is through short response papers wherein students write a paragraph to a page, reacting to a question or an issue raised in the reading assignment or through online just-in-time quizzes (see Novak, Patterson, Gavrin & Christian, 1999).

In these ways, faculty can create new classroom norms, replacing the norm of civil attention with the expectation that all students come prepared to participate in classroom discussion. This shift increases the likelihood that students will learn more and that faculty won't encounter awkward silence when initiating a discussion.

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## **THE RHYTHMS OF THE SEMESTER: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, PERSONA** by Linda Shadiow

We recognize that in the march of the semester we begin on a different note than we end on. The early weeks hold promise and high hopes, both often curtailed when the first assignments are graded. The final weeks find us somewhere between being reluctant or relieved to see a class move on. There is an inexplicable but evident interaction between our teaching persona and the persona a class develops throughout a semester. Some structural factors influence both: among them—the type and level of a course, the discipline, the time of day, and whether the students are a cohort or a unique collection of individuals.

**Calling attention to the structure of the semester:** In research that tugs on the edges of something that we take for granted, Mann and colleagues (1970) describe how a structural arc in a semester influences the persona of a class and its faculty. Duffy & Jones (1995) built on Mann’s work by addressing the predictable swings of attitudes and emotions during three phases of a semester. There are no discrete boundaries nor fixed lengths of time in the three phases, and their generalizations have differing degrees of influence depending on the personas of the teacher and class. However, once each phase is understood, planning for them can occur.

**Developing a community during the opening weeks:** Most faculty and students approach the opening weeks of a semester with beliefs about fresh beginnings; students will do better and teachers will be better. These views influence how the community for learning evolves and can be used in building that community.

- *Implications for practice:* Pursuing questions like the following generates mutual respect and trust during the period when the persona of a class is developing: What does it mean to be a learner in this course? What will it take to be a teacher in this course? What is the starting place? What experiences with and views of the content are students bringing with them? How do they want to be learners in the class? What expectations do they have of themselves? Of the teacher? What expectations does the teacher have of them? Of himself or herself?

The strength of the learning community built in the opening weeks can influence the inevitable impact of the midsemester doldrums.

**Revitalizing a class during the midsemester doldrums:** As the semester marches on, teachers and students realize that the optimism and expectations felt during the opening weeks will not all be realized. We have all experienced this period of the “doldrums” (Duffy & Jones) that challenges whatever sense of community was developed earlier. With both students and faculty feeling overworked and even a degree of “deflation and defensiveness,” Duffy and Jones acknowledge “students and faculty...rely on each other for the stimulation to move the course forward” (p. 162). This down period can impede learning. What can be done to mitigate its effects?

- *Implications for practice:* Some faculty have found directly acknowledging the “rhythms of the semester” with a class conversation helps confront its challenges. Others revitalize

the learning environment by interjecting an unexpected approach: inviting a guest speaker, using an unusual resource, giving an unexpected assignment—doing something that disrupts the routine. One physics colleague presents a “Gee Whiz” lecture that provides illustrations of unusual applications of theories within the field. A sociology colleague has students visit a local bookstore and survey books in the parenting section that present different views of “childhood” in titles and tables of contents.

**Achieving closure during the concluding weeks:** The final phase of a course features a general recommitment to course goals and, as end-of-semester deadlines approach, a slowly building tension. Stress levels increase for faculty and students as time diminishes for teaching and learning content and for completing and grading assignments. On both sides of the desk procrastinators face a brick wall and perfectionists face inevitable disappointment.

- *Implications for practice:* Acknowledging these challenges provides an opportunity to address them. Doing so enables conversations either online or in class about productive ways to study. A syllabus revisit can direct a conversation about key content points students now identify with each segment. Providing opportunities for students to recognize not just what they learned but how they learned it gets everyone focused on what was accomplished rather than what was left undone. Acknowledgment, joint pursuit of concrete evidence of progress, and identification of the best avenues for concluding the semester can help achieve positive closure.

**The personas of the teacher and the class are conduits for learning:** The arc of the semester often catches students off guard, and they’re surprised that faculty not only notice the arc, but we experience it too. Using our understanding of the effects and predictability of the arc, we can help students effectively navigate through the highs and lows of a course.

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