

Got a Minute for My Worldview?

“By setting aside time for students to get to know each other in the early weeks of the course, professors underscore the importance of the initial student-to-student interchanges, acknowledge the value of the student viewpoints and the contributions of each member of the class, and open the way for students to begin to value other students as resources – all qualities of a working community” (Duffy and Jones 1995, p.129).

In this week’s teaching message, I offer two suggestions for helping students become more aware of their own positionalities and growth within the context of your course. In the classroom, it is a fool’s errand to begin the semester without clearly defining what it is we want our students to learn. Once we articulate our learning objectives and define what our students should be able to know and do by the end of the term, we can develop a comprehensive assessment plan that tests their attainment of these objectives at specific points during the semester. But to focus solely on students’ content mastery would be to deny a significant part of their development as complete beings. A meta-goal of our work in higher education might be to help students move along their own paths of intellectual development to an end point neither of us can yet see. If this is the case, an additional set of affective assessments can make this growth apparent to students.

Consider beginning the semester with a short activity that helps students take stock of how their personal and social identities might influence their perspectives on course topics. Brookfield and Preskill (2005, p. 158 – 159) describe an activity that they call “Standpoint Statements,” which can be used effectively as a more advanced ice-breaker that helps students take stock of where they stand on various issues vis-à-vis their peers in the class. To complete this activity, students begin by writing down a few demographic facts about themselves (e.g. race/ethnicity, religious identity, socioeconomic background, etc.). Students then brainstorm about how these features of their identity shape the way they view the world. You might encourage them to think even more specifically about how it will shape their perceptions of the course content. For example, a student in an anthropology course might say that his resistance to studying evolution is linked to his upbringing as a Christian.

While Brookfield and Preskill include a third written component in this exercise, at this point I recommend having students move into a small-group discussion of what they have written. In addition to helping students get to know one another, this activity has the additional benefit of creating a classroom climate in which sharing personal perspectives is valued. Permitting personal experience to be discussed in concert with more theoretical perspectives “allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak” (hooks, 1994, p. 148). This particularly important for students who may feel alienated from the norms of traditional academic culture (i.e. students of color, first-generation students, etc.).

The end of the semester is the time when we typically evaluate how far our students have progressed in terms of mastering the course content. However, this can also be a time for students to self-assess their personal development. Consider using a closing assignment that encourages students to articulate how they have been changed by their experiences in your course. This could be done as a Minute Paper (Angelo & Cross, 1993) or as a letter to themselves that you will collect and mail to them in a specified

number of weeks or months. If you used the Standpoint Statement activity at the beginning of the semester, you might encourage students to think specifically about how their identities influenced their reception of course material. You might also ask whether or not their perspectives on the world we transformed as a result of having taken this course and, if so, how (see Mezirow 1981 for more on perspective transformation).

However you ultimately choose to approach this, bookending your course with reflective activities that prompt students to think about who they are and their relationship to your course will turn a mere class into a meaningful learning experience. These tasks help the student to see how his or her identities shape the ways in which he or she perceives the content of your course at the beginning of the semester and, in turn, how his or her perception of the world has been further refined by the course content at the semester's end.

Works Cited

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