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Insights on Student Engagement

INSIGHTS ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement is important to faculty members and students alike. One of the recurring themes in discussions among faculty members, among student consultants, and between these two groups is how to engage students effectively. Faculty and students offer the following suggestions:

Forge Relationships and Foster Dialogue

As a result of [working with my student consultant], I am now looking for opportunities to form collegial relationships with students in the class. I'm working on how to frame questions in class that yes, have pedagogical intent, but at the same time, open up the discussion in a way that perhaps there is no one leading the discussion. (Faculty Member)

What really matters is the dialogue we have about how we are feeling. We are a small enough school that we have time to listen to each person's voice – to actually listen to how each individual in the classroom is feeling about the class without just trying to analyze people's feelings as data. Teaching is not about the professor against the students. It really should be the professor with the students, and I think it is very important for every professor to try to have conversations about pedagogy with his/her students. (Student)

Something I noticed especially in high school is that teachers take up a lot of space. Their presence is just a lot to handle. So, if in a classroom I see that a professor is also a student as well and actively engaged with me, because that professor is trying to learn with me as well, that is very affirming for me as a student. And it's also affirming for the relationship that we have. (Student)

I've been thinking about allowing more space for students to construct dialogue in the course. I often approach teaching with an agenda, one that is somewhat rigid and constrained by my ideas of what is important and what is most salient to their work. But this ignores students' own work as individuals, struggling with difficult concepts and ideas. I would like to show students my own perspective, but allow more room for their struggles with ideas and meanings. This week in my own class, I spoke very little, and the dialogue between students took precedence. This felt good, and I think they are still getting what they need. (Faculty Member)

Be Flexible and Take Some Risks

In a discussion in one of my classes a few weeks ago, once I realized that the professor was going to keep a firm grip on the discussion, not allowing it to go anywhere he didn't want it to, I checked out. He made it clear in the way he was responding to students and the questions he was asking that we weren't going to get to the portion of the reading that I really wanted to talk about, so I disengaged. We were essentially reviewing the reading – it was helpful in solidifying the information, but it ignored big moral questions that the text raised. I was left disappointed by a missed opportunity to talk about important racial issues. The professor lost some credibility with me, and I certainly did not engage in that discussion. (Student)

I have come to think that learning takes place in some kind of interaction – with teachers, other classmates, or themselves. I suppose this is why active participation and dialogue in the classroom are critical for leaning. Based on this realization, I tried a somewhat different strategy in my class last Monday. I had originally planned to give a power point presentation, but decided (at the last minute!) to use the board instead in order to interact more with the students. For each question I asked, they responded superbly. Some offered personal opinions, and some raised questions related to personal experience. Overall, I thought the class went well, because I managed to get them to participate, while still maintaining a structure and organization. This time, moreover, I covered everything I wanted and finished on time with clear conclusions (yes!). (Faculty Member)

[Because of] our discussions about structure and freedom and how to maintain the right kind of balance among all of those things, I suddenly in early October decided to change my practice and instead of relying on the lecture notes from last time and instead of thinking about my introductory class as a combination of lecture and discussion, I decided to make it more like my upper level classes and my seminars. That is, to assume that even at the intro level of my classes of 30-45 students, I could go in with just a couple of ideas, maybe a couple bullet points or roman numerals and put them on the board and then elicit students' questions about those topics. And I just found that that relatively minor change […] created a much more open, engaging, free-flowing discussion in the classroom. (Faculty Member)

Create Spaces for Students to Take Responsibility

Earlier this semester, I was especially concerned about finding new ways to engage students, individually and collectively, with the texts and lab work. In the past two weeks, I am pleased to report that the innovation of having already formed midterm tutorial groups take responsibility for selected chapters of a challenging text has ignited creative excitement and engagement. There was a role reversal in this process… I turned over the presiding leadership to the student group and I was the back up coach sitting amongst the students. The students groups obviously met outside the class and arrived to lead the discussion with engaged excitement. Their classmates were alive and fully attentive while their classmates lead the discussion and took primary responsibility. They felt more protected taking the lead at the front of the class as a group, rather than individually. This really worked. (Faculty Member)

I'm finding that I'm able to rely on student postings on Blackboard, as well as their observations about the material to create a much more vibrant, dynamic classroom discussion, rather than my presenting to them "here are the important issues", rather than saying "this what so and so said, and this is what I say about the structure of the text and how it works". The students that we get at these two colleges are such good readers of texts that even at the 100 level they are able to bring in good insights. (Faculty Member)

Provide Structures for Students to Talk to One Another

Within a given discussion, I try to avoid asking factual questions. Discussions should not be reduced to verifying completion or comprehension. Yet, I think even when I do not have a particular response in mind, many students often assume that I must. This may be why often I find discussions in my classes are of the Socratic or "hub and spoke" variety, with me posing a question, and a student or students responding. Ideally, I would like the discussion to take the form of a more multi-sided discussion, in which students are engaging each others opinions, while I occasionally question or redirect discussion. To encourage this form of discussion, I have been trying to formulate questions that pose a controversy, one that requires not analysis but debate. (Faculty Member)

I really thrive on students bouncing ideas off of each other and the professor serving as more of a stand-aside mediator in the conversation. I think it's definitely helpful for professors to open up these sorts of discussions with some context. For example, in my favorite English classes, professors have started the class by giving the context (historical, theoretical, biographical, etc) for the texts we read, and then pose one question to jump-start the class. This makes me feel actively engaged, because I know that the class won't progress and time won't pass unless students are willing to participate in the conversation. I feel like that motivates more students to talk, and I think the huge prospect for debate really spurs students to put forth their own ideas. (Student)

Students gave feedback to each other and students would say back lines that stood out to each other, or just sort of general feedback. It felt like you [the professor] had just given them all of the power to define what the expectations were of each other, and what the expectations were of the assignment, and you weren't saying "this is what a good paper would be". You were giving students agency to engage in that conversation, to define it for themselves. I thought this was a really cool step in creating classroom culture. (Student)