

Engaging Students With Off-Topic Discussions

“Participation” and “engagement” are academic buzzwords associated with making learners active participants in the learning process. Classroom discussion has the potential to engage learners in classrooms and make students active participants in the learning process. However, the inability to generate student participation in classroom discussion has been a frustrating issue for many instructors (McKee 2015). Lack of preparation for discussing assigned course materials, shyness to open up in front of others, and anxiety over making public, erroneous statements are some of the obstacles facing student participation in classroom discussion. In my experience, purposefully introducing off-topic discussions in the classroom can shift the classroom environment and eliminate some of these barriers, ultimately increasing the number of students participating in classroom discussion.

Off-Topic Discussions Can Be Useful

Many years ago, while talking about disaster risks in class, the issue of wars as a type of disaster veered away to a heated debate on the Iraq war. Though the discussion could have been a very rich debate in a history or political science class, it was off-topic and beyond the scope of my disaster risk management class. I wanted to cut the discussion off, but also wanted to value the heightened participation in a positive way. I had vague memory of a quote on known unknowns and unknown unknowns—one of the ways to categorize risks and pertinent to the topic of disaster risks too—by Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense during the Iraq war. I closed the discussion of the Iraq war, but continued my lesson on risk categorization by doing a Google search for the quote from Rumsfeld. That experience was a revelation of how discussions veering into off-topic issues can wake a class from the slumber brought on by information fatigue and how those discussions, if properly managed, can make information interesting and approachable to students. After that experience, I have successfully implemented the use of my own, controlled off-topic discussions on many occasions.

Guiding Principles for Introducing Off-Topic Discussions

The purpose of introducing controlled off-topic discussions is to enliven the classroom setting and keep students engaged in their learning. In order to harness the

benefits of introducing off-topic, but correlative, topics and discussions into the classroom, educators must pay heed to a few important guiding principles. First, instructors should always connect any introduced off-topic subject matter to the course concepts or learning objectives of the course. Second, it is advisable to avoid introducing subjects that can easily become charged, such as religious beliefs, cultural practices, social taboos, and local politics. Some topics I find that students respond well to are (cool) gadgets, sports news, movie and music reviews, TV commercials, and the latest scientific discoveries. However, sometimes potentially polarizing topics are unavoidable given a course’s subject matter, so establishing a set of ground rules for participating in class discussion that preclude students from making inappropriate comments, attacking persons rather than the views, and/or using foul language is both necessary and helpful. Finally, keep in mind that only sporadic and well-managed off-topic discussions have a positive impact in a classroom.

Conclusion

Like all other tools and techniques for effective engagement and classroom management, applying off-topic discussions as a calculated learning strategy is very much dependent on the content of the course, nature of the classroom, and persona of the instructor. Educators should always assess the context and concepts of a course and devise a strategy to implement off-topic discussions such that they make the classroom lively and the course content more approachable to learners.

Jishnu Subedi, *Instructor, School of Construction*

For more information, contact the author at Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, 1301 16 Avenue NW, Calgary, AB T2M 0L4, Canada. Email: jishnu.subedi@sait.ca

References

McKee, R. J. (2015). Encouraging classroom discussion. *JSSE-Journal of Social Science Education*, 66-73.