

What You May Teach Without Knowing It

Consider the things you learn without being fully aware that you are actually learning them. For instance, what can you learn from simply walking into a new building for the first time? With everyone and everything you observe, your mind is giving you feedback based on a multitude of judgments: what people are wearing, their body language, and their responses to your gestures. Each of these observations teaches us something in a relatively short timeframe. These judgments may seem like second nature to some, yet in these observations and judgments is, essentially, teaching and learning without calling it either. I have found this to be a fruitful concept from a pedagogical standpoint: “What am I teaching students and what are they learning, even if I don’t realize teaching and learning are occurring?”

Whether you are an educator in a secondary or postsecondary school, research has shown that actively engaging students in the classroom results in increased understanding, retention of content, and comprehensive learning. How educators promote interaction with and among their students varies, such as class discussions or group projects. Regardless of the methodologies facilitated by an instructor, the challenge is in addressing how much time educators allocate for allowing students to practice such beneficial interaction in the classroom.

It may be helpful to review the correlation of two aspects found in our classes on a daily basis: our expectations of student engagement and our time spent lecturing. First, how efficient do we expect our students to be in collaborating, actively listening, and making their own inferences? Second, what amount of time do we spend lecturing? Perhaps an instructor lectures for a majority of the semester, only periodically allowing students to actively engage in the class, aside from a typical question-and-answer session. If this is the case, the instructor may find his/her expectations exceeding students’ collaborative skills, since students in those circumstances don’t have much opportunity to interact with one another or the instructor.

However, the trend toward student-centered learning continues to progress. According to a 2014 report from UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, lecturing has continued to decrease on a large scale since 1989. However, 2013-2014 research cites that 50.6 percent of faculty surveyed nationwide still rely on lecturing to a significant degree for at least part of each semester. The data show improvement in learning taking place, but not

necessarily as quickly as one might assume. Of course, there is a place for lectures, and class size will limit some courses to such, which is arguably why we continue to see a high percentage of faculty using lectures. However, most educators would argue that lecturing is never as effective as facilitation, where the instructor directs the conversation and infuses the knowledge necessary to spur dialogue among students. While being aware that we are teaching content through lecture, we may be unaware that we are also teaching students to forego skills, such as being constructively critical, speaking, and arriving at conclusions.¹

Many educators, myself included, feel as though they cannot cover enough content without integrating lecture at least proportionately with class discussions or similar activities. This is a valid concern. That being said, if research proves pedagogical and andragogical are effective strategies that call for student interaction among peers, do we forego quality for quantity? Our goal as educators should be to achieve content coverage and active student engagement. Through adapting curriculum, as well as assessments, it is truly an attainable goal.

I have found that in postsecondary history courses, the relevance of the material to my students’ lives is, in most cases, sufficient to generate student discussion throughout the semester. Therefore, adequately covering the necessary content does not create an obstacle. There is no doubt every discipline has advantages and disadvantages in terms of how a class must be structured for success; however, for educators of all disciplines, teaching philosophies are more than theories. They are experiments where pragmatic planning is indispensable. Potential activities that focus not only on collaboration, but also critical thinking include:

- Informal, student-led discussions about specific content covered in the course.
- A formal research paper/presentation requiring unique, student-developed arguments, teaching the utility in creating genuine inferences and corroborated research.
- Student-generated questions posed to their peers for responses in an informal context.
- Student-led critiques and analyses of research provided by the instructor.
- A discussion about the contemporary relevancy to the material being studied.
- Student debates involving the ethical implications, the progressive or regressive effects, or the

effectiveness of using current practices within specific industries. This activity is useful across many disciplines, including the sciences, communications, business, education, history, and more.

Nevertheless, if someone walked into a classroom as an instructor was assigning students a project that required collaboration, and the students reacted with confusion or lack of confidence, that person might question the underlying reason. Yet, the answer is clear: we all do well at what we practice. As educators, we should challenge ourselves to break down into percentages the degree of emphasis and the time that we allocate in our courses to help students develop the skills with which we expect them to become proficient. Are we teaching our students how to be active learners when we have classes with limited collaboration or student input?

Perhaps we are teaching students to be inheritors; students inherit information, rules, culture, and so on, instead of contributing or adding new ideas. Looking back on our own experience as students, how often did our instructors ask for our opinions? Or, instead, did they offer their own opinions, in which case we were not taught how and when to be pragmatic, nor how and when to challenge the status quo.

If we forego opportunities for student-centered learning, then perhaps we are unwittingly proliferating confusion and diminished confidence when our students are asked to practice critical thinking in a context outside of the classroom. Aside from content, let us take note of what we are teaching our students, even when we may not realize we are indeed teaching them.

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ⁱ Eagan, M.K., Stolzenburg, E.B., Berdan Lozaon, J., Aragon, M.C., Surchard, M.R., and Hurtado, S. (2014). *Undergraduate Teaching Faculty, 2013-2014 HERI Faculty Survey*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.