

# Nervousness, Teaching and Participatory Learning

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Session overview: Teaching and learning require experimentation, curiosity, and vulnerability. Yet teachers and students often experience the classroom as a place where they have to perform expertise and avoid the embarrassment of error. Instructors and TAs over-prepare and have trouble being present and spontaneous, while students hang back from discussion and try to hide what they don't know.

We'll discuss how you can work with your jitters around teaching and model comfort with not knowing. And we'll look at tools and approaches that can draw students into active, participatory learning.

## ***My trajectory as a teacher***

- Didactic to participatory
- (Uneasy) authority to co-learning
- Nervous to riding that energy
- Wanting to be liked to inhabiting complex authority

## ***The overall view: showing up as you, modeling curiosity and comfort with not-knowing, focusing on student learning experience over content***

- You'll probably experience your full emotional range in the classroom. Same for students.
  - Excitement
  - Nervousness
  - Despair
  - Terror
  - Embarrassment
  - Pride
  - Satisfaction
- Foundational challenge is to *notice* what the classroom experience is like in any given moment—to be present to our own embodied experience.
- This is closely connected to being present as calm observers of the whole scene of the classroom.
  - Wealth of information.
  - Incredibly complicated relational scene.
- Relationship to meditation practice, for me. But find what works for you.

- Moving from managing stress to deep curiosity.
- Relates to enlisting students as allies, co-learners.

### **What we may inadvertently model:**

- Especially for young teachers, we're scared, nervous
- We don't know how to work with this experience
  - To hold it with compassion, to let it provoke our curiosity, let us show up as more human in the classroom
- Instead, we reach for models of didactic teaching, of expertise, of holding our own in the face of hostile or skeptical students.
- But it's very hard to be good at this
  - You don't yet have the training of a prof, so trying to be an authority sets you up for brutal preparation, and for a constant negotiation of humiliation and avoidance in the classroom.
- But what does this model?
  - That learning is about having it together, knowing enough, avoiding humiliation. And that the rewards, such that they are, come from getting it right.
- Even if you could be masterful at this sort of authority-based teaching, where does it leave the student?
  - As an acolyte, an empty vessel to be filled. It doesn't treat them as agents, as already having something to offer. It doesn't invite their deep curiosity.

### **What I urge that we model:**

- Comfort with uncertainty.
  - A real curiosity not only about the material, but about the process of learning.
- This creates a community in the classroom
  - We're all trying to find our way into this material, connect it with our passions.
- Your role becomes a facilitator of their learning, not the authoritative source of information.

### **Caveat about subject positions**

- Gender, race, ethnicity, age, other axes of identity.
  - What does it mean to be vulnerable in the classroom, to hand over authority, to admit what you don't know, while managing risk?
- What I centrally want to urge is that you give up the fantasy of authoritative teaching as the **ideal**.
  - You may still want to use authority and knowingness in strategic ways.
  - But do it from a place that
    - values students' agency

- doesn't have you beating yourself up for what you don't know
- looks for ways to bring students into the project of learning.
- If you do this with sincerity, it is very powerful in the classroom.
  - It nudges students away from being grumpy consumers, toward a more genuine learning that they can begin to enjoy.
  - It invites them to connect with you as a person who's curious about them, rather than as someone for whom they don't matter.

## **Buzz**

- Groups of 2-3
  - Something that rings true to you in what I've said so far
  - Something that seems challenging or mistaken about the perspective I'm offering

## ***Eight practical tips (we'll see where we are with time after this, and can turn to questions, or more exposition by me)***

### **1. Focus first on designing a student experience, second on content.**

- Boundaries like time and configuration of room
- Your best sense of how to work with students' energy
- Learning goals, kept to just a few key things
- The prepare content—but be aware that overpreparation (or overambition in amount covered) cuts against your presence and their learning.

### **2. Make any period of class a trajectory of different kinds of learning**

- Vary pace, activities often
  - You speaking from front of room
  - Buzzing in pairs, write-pair-share
  - Work in groups, both quick and sustained
  - Reporting back to plenary
  - Working collaboratively in plenary
  - Using video, images, narrative
- Think about how the energy of the group will be; watch it while it's happening and learn; bring in students' feedback to learn how to calibrate things.

### **3. Foreground your own role as a learner, and your comfort with not-knowing**

- Around teaching and learning
- Around material

#### 4. Support your own experience of the classroom

E.g.

- Touching doorway
- Quick ways of touching in with embodied experience
  - Google “Kahane four part centering practice”
- Journal or debrief after each class—how it went, but also how it felt.
- Supporting your own awareness of body and mind—yoga, meditation, psychotherapy, etc.

#### 5. Make students agents in designing their own learning

- Get their input: mini-evals
  - Mini-evaluations are your **best friend**
    - 5 minutes at end of class
    - Do at least twice during term, as many as 5-6 times
  - Models:
    - One thing that’s going well, one thing that could be improved
    - Murkiest point
    - Asking particular questions about things you’re working with
  - Feed back results, have open, non-defensive discussions.
  - Make real changes
- Also value of leaving room, letting them deliberate and feed back.
- Payoffs
  - Solving unseen problems
  - Contextualizing student dissatisfaction
  - Giving a sense of agency, responsiveness, being in it together

#### 6. Don’t over-prepare

- Pitfalls of over-preparation, lecture mode, expert model
- Give it an amount of time, make it fit
- The good-enough teacher

#### 7. Own your classroom

- Get there early
- Move things and people around
- Move around the space
- Classroom discipline
  - Set the tone early in term

- Material in syllabus
  - Screen policy
  - Participation expectations and grading
- Always start on time, end on time
- Learn names

## 8. Start as you mean to go on

- Participation in first class
- Mini-evaluation in third class
- Put admin last, not first; avoid taking attendance out loud
- Put their voices and perspectives front and centre

**Show of hands: Over to Q&A/discussion, or more talking by me, on structures for active learning?**

### What is active learning?

- Not Q&A
  - “What’s In My Pocket” prompts and bored responses is not discussion: should be about something that you and they don’t know, and want to know.
- This is discussion based teaching/learning, broadly construed:
  - My voice takes up maybe 1/3 of space
  - A lot of time is spent with those in the room talking to and listening to each other
    - Digging into the meaning of texts
    - Linking concepts to their own experiences
    - Thinking about the application of concepts they’re learning to the world.
  - I only ask questions to which I really want to know the answers—things where their perspectives are of genuine interest to me
  - A profound shift in teaching, what constitutes worthy subject matter
  - My role at the front of the room is to:
    - Create a container for this discussion so that it’s directed, fruitful, well supported
    - Be attentive to, and foster discussion about, of how those in the room are experiencing this kind of learning.
    - Create clear structures and time frames around discussion, in a way well calibrated to the group
    - Wherever possible, I do the work with them (esp. writing); I can then speak from this participant’s perspective, and model that this isn’t remedial
    - When they’re working, I move around the room and experience it.

## **Why I believe in active learning**

- How little students typically take away from listening and note-taking
- Letting knowledge be applied.
- Letting students be agents, and discover a love of learning with others.

## **What do students make of active learning?**

- Resistance, sometimes
- Need to establish a culture; not just one-offs
- Needs to weave together with lectures and other elements of course
- Needs to be reflected in evaluation

## **Trade up the methods you use**

- Different talking activities, ways of setting this up:
  - Starting with writing
  - allocated speaking and listening roles
  - role plays vs. textual analysis vs. questions to answer vs. peer questions vs. freer flowing discussion
  - See if you can get students moving around the classroom space
  - Letting them vote for their feet on subjects they want to talk about

## **Trade up the size and membership of groups, where class size and configuration permit**

- Work in different-sized groups, with clearly communicated tasks.
- Pairs, small groups, writing elements, reporting back, over to whole class.

## **Be a skilled and observant facilitator**

- Distinguish between discussions between students that you are supporting, and discussions that keep you at the center.
- Watch the movement of speaking roles, reflect, shift these as needed.
- Don't always bounce things through you
  - But do parse, bring out core points, make student comments available to others
  - Also be aware of what people can hear; repeat as needed
- Move around

## **Establish norms of discussion, put them in syllabus, model them:**

- Need to build their belief that they have something to say, that they will not be mocked, that others will listen

- So the need to establish and model clear classroom norms, and to choose exercises that don't just reward keeners, but give everyone something they can contribute.
- Things to dwell on
  - Relevance of everyone's knowledge and perspective. This will be more or less real depending on the tasks you assign.
  - Sharing time well; value of listening as well as talking
  - Referring to and building on others' contributions
  - How to be critical while also respectful; making it a safe space for tentative thoughts, disagreement.

#### **Provide the info they need to do it well**

- Knowledge, so that the discussion (especially in small groups) doesn't waste their own or others' time.
- So it can be helpful to give a very succinct review of the most relevant material, or a handout or relevant terms, or other kinds of skeletons for the activity.
- Preparedness grade

#### **Provide a crisp frame around the work**

- Clearly articulate purpose
- Reminder re norms of discussion
- Clear, step-wise tasks, clear questions, clear awareness of how reporting back will work
- Clear roles in group
- Timing, time check ins
- Worksheets are great
- Value of pre-assigning group work (sometimes) to allow preparation
- Value of pre-writing.

#### **It shouldn't be a sideshow: link it to substance of rest of class and course**

- Letting things flow from discussions into lectures into discussions; being willing to adjust flow within or between classes
- Letting things flow into other spaces, e.g. online discussion, discussion sections, written work.

#### **Connect it to evaluation, and evaluate it persuasively.**

- Self-evaluations, feedback on quality of participation.

## **Find out what's working**

- I also a lot of elicitation of feedback to see what best supports student learning.

## ***What a discussion-based session typically looks like.***

Say 50 minutes overall:

- Clearly established norm of starting on time, ending on time. And for that matter, clearly establishing all the key norms, from day one.
- Never, never, never go over time. Always start on time.
- You know everyone's name, they learn each others': ways to do this.
- Getting there early, interacting with class in a way that suits your style, being there for questions.
- Very quick admin
- Don't take attendance; sign in sheets
- Don't make it boring; get through stuff quickly. Use email, the web, the board, handouts.
- 7-10 minutes of focused review, what's needed to set up an exercise.
- Work in groups for 15-25 minutes.
- Consolidate. Not being authority, but helping them to see what's on target and what's off.
- Recap, review, wrap up.

## ***What should I know about lecturing?***

- Why lecture?
  - Broad outline of material
  - Explain key, difficult concepts
  - Bring in alternative perspectives, model intellectual engagement from many sides
  - Set up active learning
- PowerPoint?
  - How to use it skillfully
  - Note taking organizers; putting online
- What your lecture notes should look like
  - Big font
  - Bullet points that keep you to flow, but don't keep eyes glued to page
- Not being stuck behind lectern
- Making lectures participatory: buzzing in pairs; writing down questions
- Being crisp with timing

How hard it is to be a good didactic teacher.

- Especially as a relative novice in the field.
- Not your role anyhow: your role is to enable discussion.