

Teaching Tips: Where No One Has Gone Before -- Non-Traditional Ways to Engage Students

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Imagine for a moment that you are the instructor of a large (or medium or even small) section course on adult development and aging. All of your students have perfect attendance throughout the term, and are enraptured with every class meeting. They heap accolade upon accolade on you, name you as the most influential instructor in their academic career, and tell all of their friends that they simply must take your course.

Sound farfetched? Actually, it's not as unattainable as you might think. All of us have heard or read about ways to make courses more interesting; guest lecturers, films, supplemental readings, literature, music, class activities, and service-learning are but some of the suggestions made at symposia presented under the auspices of Division 20 and the Gerontological Society in the past few years (see the special section on adult development and aging in *Teaching of Psychology* [Vol. 26(1), 1999], and the special issues of *Gerontology and Geriatrics Education* [Vol. 19(3), 1999] and *Educational Gerontology* [Vol. 27(1), 2001] for several different ideas). All of these ideas are potentially great, but there is no guarantee that any one of them will make you an award winner. It's all in *how* they are incorporated.

Consider the following example. Euthanasia is a difficult topic for instructors to cover in a lecture, so many opt for some sort of alternative. A common approach is to have students read an article about Jack Kevorkian, or a series of court cases about ending life support, and then hold a class discussion. That's okay, and it can work quite well. But imagine covering the same ground but with the following panel: an

advocate of "natural death," someone who had to make the decision to "pull the plug" with a loved one, a terminal cancer patient, and an advocate of physician assisted suicide. The same concepts are covered in both examples, but the latter provides a much more powerful impact that makes the issues come alive (and reveals their true complexity).

The secret to becoming a great instructor is actually both quite simple and quite difficult—make the topic *real*. When covering material on work-family role conflict, for example, have students role play a person trying to deal with a real schedule, along with people role playing the partner and the children (try yours, if it works, or their own, if relevant) and see how well they can balance all the expectations placed on a real person. Have students try to create a way to remember a complicated medication regimen involving a dozen or so drugs, some of which are contingent on a person's daily weight (which is a good analogy for people with chronic congestive heart failure). Have students perform *King Lear* and then engage them in a discussion about family dynamics and the squabbling among siblings that sometimes occurs regarding inheritances.

You may have noticed that in all of the examples students have the opportunity to become *engaged* in the topic, by reacting to and debating a panel, by role playing, and so forth. Getting students to engage in active learning is, I believe, the most important ingredient to success in the classroom. Done well and creatively, such an approach will result in far fewer class periods spent in a traditional lecture format. Well designed interactive class periods require students to read the required material differently and more deeply than is often the case, as they are forced to apply what they have read.

Taken to another level, a course that

includes innovative interactive sessions could become a problem-based learning course in which the entire course consists of one or a series of problems or cases that students must complete with little or no formal lecturing by the instructor. Guidebooks for designing problem-based learning courses [e.g., Duch, B. J., Groh, S. E., & Allen, D. E. (Eds.) (2001), *The power of problem-based learning*, Sterling, VA: Stylus] provide specific instructions on everything from creating the syllabus to assigning grades. Research with this approach in science courses shows that students in problem-based learning acquire concepts better and perform better in subsequent courses compared with students in traditional lecture courses.

Students hunger for courses in which they can become immersed in the content. These techniques will result in wonderful class discussions (even in sections of 200 students or more, in my experience) because students will care about what they are learning and will see and feel the point of it all. Sure, you will be "out there" in the thin air, pushing the envelope, but what you will find is that both you and the students will be willing to take the risk.

In sum, the more that students have the opportunity to engage actively in learning, the more they are likely to be engaged in the course. The possibilities for such engagement are limited only by the instructor's imagination. A great way to begin is to consult the papers by your colleagues who have written about their own approaches, check the teaching portion of the Division 20 Website for additional ideas and sample syllabi, and to attend the annual teaching symposia sponsored by Division 20 during the APA annual meeting. Then put it all together your way, and go where no one has gone before. You and your students will be in for the course of a lifetime.