

Teaching Tips/Notes



Crumpled Rounds: A Technique for Anonymous Participation in Class Discussions

Introduction

When it comes to participation in class discussions there are usually three types of students; those who never participate unless asked directly, those who participate occasionally when they feel confident they know the answer, and those who always want to speak and monopolize a discussion. To encourage more inclusive, and interesting, discussions in my class the challenge was to find a method that would engage the non-participants and at the same time gently limit the enthusiastic talkers so that everyone could participate. One way to overcome possible reasons for non-participation, such as fear of being wrong, or fear of talking in public, is to allow students to participate and have their “voice” heard while remaining anonymous.

Procedure

To encourage participation, I start many lectures by asking students to answer a particular question, write a comment about the lecture topic, such as what they hope to learn, or write a list of three to five things they know about the topic on a half sheet of paper. For example, I might tell them, “Write three characteristics of a low-water use landscape”. The students write their answer but no names are written on the paper to keep the answers anonymous. The students then crumple the paper into a small ball and on my cue they toss their ball around the room to other students. The balls are tossed several times to ensure they are scattered about the room and no one knows whose “crumpled round” they end up with (also because students seem to enjoy throwing things at each other). Everyone is instructed to open the ball they catch and smooth out the paper so they can read the text. We then go around the room randomly or have volunteers read the answers on the paper. Students find it easy to read comments or answers that another student has written because there is no risk of personally being wrong and they can simply read off the paper without having to think. The original author can identify themselves and claim their answer if they wish or if they want to add a comment or explain their answer. With this method everyone has the opportunity to “speak” and the over-talkers are more limited by the text on the paper.

Assessment

Several interesting things happen with this technique; 1) if the instructor makes a positive comment about the answer or comment, such as “good point!” or “brilliant idea!”, several students are eager to claim authorship, 2) students find that they know just as much, and sometimes more than their peers and they generally think alike, with many writing similar answers or comments, and 3) additional discussion and/or questions are more likely to follow this method than a more traditional approach of asking a question and hoping for, or directly asking, someone to reply. Another advantage is the instructor has a much better idea about what all the students know or understand rather than just a few of the “talkers.” With a little creativity several variations of this method can be used, such as drawing the scraps of paper from a box or flying paper airplanes with answers written inside.

Submitted by:

Gail Hansen
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL
ghansen@ufl.edu