



This Teaching Tip is one of a five-part series from a Faculty Learning Community at Pennsylvania State University.

Using Check-ins to Cultivate Rich Learning Experiences (or, The Subtle Art of Giving a... Rip!)

This teaching tip highlights the importance of a check-in at the start of class where students share what is going on with them. This 10 minutes at the start has drastically changed the trajectory of our classroom, creating a space where students feel more comfortable to share and engage with each other and the course material.

Why is this important?

Claire Major, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Alabama recently tweeted:

“I study teaching and learning in higher education. From all the research (and practice) I've done, I think what it comes down to is this: the most important thing for teaching is actually caring about the students and their learning.”

This tweet highlights a significant reality: it doesn't take an extensive amount of effort to go through a PowerPoint slide deck and hope that students learned something at the end. But if you're reading this article, that clearly is not how you approach your teaching. Instead we may look for new ways to incorporate innovative and creative teaching and wonder what does and doesn't work. While we may try new efforts that may fail, there seems to be something powerful in communicating to students that through this process we genuinely care about them and their learning.

How does it work?

One of the most powerful educational experiences I have had in my classes has come in an unexpected place: the daily check-in. In my International Agriculture senior seminar, I take the first 10 minutes or so of each 75-minute class by having students respond to one of three questions:

- 1) What are you excited about?
- 2) What's bothering you?
- 3) What have you been thinking about since the last class?

I will be the first to recognize that this idea is not original to me. In fact, Parks (2017) has a great outline of this and other “warm up” activities. For context, my senior seminar typically has 10 – 20 students, however, I’ve also used this in a class of 45 students, and the same activity could be scaled to a much larger class within small groups.

The Outcomes

It has been a privilege to hear students share about stresses over academics, being offered (or not offered) jobs, facing challenges with roommates, and the news of a grandparent passing away. While I have (and sometimes still) wrestled with these conversations taking away from the “real learning” planned, I have found that this brief introduction to the class changes the dynamic of the rest of the class period. Students become more engaged and cultivate empathy for others in the classroom. All of a sudden, a conversation about the cultural and environmental controversies surrounding the use of genetically modified crops in Sub-Saharan Africa takes on a much more thoughtful tone, when a student knows what’s happening in the life of a student that holds an opinion very different to their own.

I have had students consistently express “I’ve been thinking about my check-in all day” or share disappointment when we don’t do the check-in due to a crammed class schedule. Without fail, when asked at mid-year and end of the year evaluations, “what should we keep doing in class?” the most consistent feedback I have received is “the check-ins.” I have also had students approach me outside of class on topics that I wouldn’t have imagined, in part, I believe, because of the respect for others that is shown through the check-in.

This simple activity takes 10 minutes at the start of class and has cultivated a setting for learning within the classroom far beyond what I could have anticipated.

References

Parks, M. (2017), Simple Strategies to Develop Rapport with Students and Build a Positive Classroom Climate. *The National Teaching & Learning Forum*, 26: 4-6. doi:10.1002/ntlf.30122

Submitted by:

Noel B. Habashy
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA