Engagement strategies for enhancing college teaching

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ABSTRACT

The look of the American college classroom today has changed dramatically along with vast alterations in technology. However, even with the increasing number of online and web-based classes, the face-to-face model of instruction still exists. As such, college professors are faced with the daunting task of providing adult learners with engaging class meetings while competing with ever-present technology of cell phones, Instant Messaging, and Tweeting. Research has demonstrated that in order to engage adult learners, the instructor must address adult learning characteristics, facilitate mindful, content interactions between the instructor and student, and recognize the agenda behind adult students entering learning situations. This article provides a variety of strategies that can be used effectively when working with adult learners and which take into consideration the myriad of factors that influence the cognitive and experiential connections between the adult learner and the college professor.

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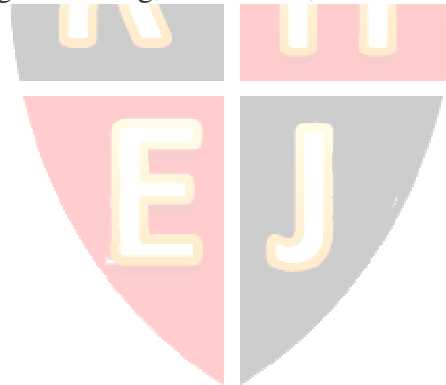
INTRODUCTION

American college classrooms are changing with the vast technology available. However, despite the numerous online classes, the face-to-face (described by many students as the in-person) model of instruction remains. Keeping up with adult students who routinely Tweet, Tumble, Instant Message, Facebook, and spend hours with technology can be a challenge for anyone, especially the college professor with content knowledge to share. Brophy and Good (1986) in their text, <u>Handbook on Research on Teaching</u>, share that active teachers elicit higher achievement gains than their colleagues by implementing instruction in a mindful, content-centered interaction between teacher and student.

Malcom Knowles (1970) was a pioneer researcher in understanding how adults learn. He identified six characteristics of the adult learner: 1) Autonomous and self-directed; 2) Holds a foundation of experiences and knowledge; 3) Goal oriented; 4) Relevancy oriented; 5) Practical; and 6) Needing respect. He purports that adults learn best when an understanding of trust is formed and potential for success between the student and the teacher are clearly defined.

The Adult Learning Centre (2005) asserts that most adults enter into a new learning experience in order to create change in their lives. Their research identified that the major differences between school-age children and adult learners was in the degree of motivation, the amount of previous experience, the level of engagement in the learning process, and how the learning is applied. Adults bring a wealth of background experience, knowledge, and information to the learning setting that influence each of these factors. Assessing this information and utilizing it in educational planning for adult learners is imperative if a successful learning experience is to occur.

The college teacher and student relationship of the past needs a substantial over hall to facilitate learning that is effective and long lasting (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Good teaching is hard work. The decisions college teachers make regarding their lectures, discussions, student groupings and grading are highly influential of student success. The use of research based effective teaching strategies will allow the college teacher to program all students for academic success and will further content knowledge (Feger, Woleck & Hickman, 2004).

The strategies described below have been used in highly effective college classrooms across the United States to encourage interaction and active participation. These strategies offer an effective means for designing classroom collaboration and discussion as well as an avenue for respecting experience and background knowledge of adult learners. At the same time, use of the strategies provides interesting and alluring ways to ensure content coverage.

Ticket to Exit. Spending an hour or more in a class session focused on one topic can be challenging for any student. Recalling the key details and organizing the critical information can be especially difficult. Equally challenging for the instructor is determining if the students actually grasped the important concepts. To ease this challenge, the Ticket to Exit is suggested. At the close of the class period, the instructor gives the students a prompt, for example, "Today I learned…..". The students write a response to the prompt and hand it to the instructor as a "ticket" to leave the room, thus the term ticket to exit. The tickets are not graded but merely used to gage the knowledge obtained by the students. Fisher, Brozo, Frey and Ivey (2007) purport that this process of writing at the close of a class period provides an opportunity for the students to reflect on what they have learned.

Wait Time. Research has validated the importance of allowing students time to think and process content as knowledge is obtained (Stahl, 1994). Many professors allow only one second for the student to respond; this encourages short one or two word answers and does not allow for higher order thinking. One way to enhance student reflection is Wait Time. The concept was first introduced in 1972, when research was conducted to determine strategies for increasing the quality of student responses (Rowe, 1986). It was concluded that instructors who waited three to seven seconds before accepting and then evaluating student responses produced higher quality of student responses, more unsolicited responses, and the length of the responses were longer.

Class discussions are critical in college courses and the discussions can greatly enhance the quality of instruction when all students are involved. Larson (1999) asserts that the finest discussions are those that provide enrichment and understanding of the disciplinary content area through the exchange of multiple viewpoints and enlist contributions of nearly every student. The Fishbowl, IFAT, Audience Plants, Carousel, and Give One-Get One discussion strategies all allow for class discussions that encourage the participation of all students and provide opportunities for sharing a variety of perspectives.

Fishbowl. The Fishbowl discussion (Green, 2000) opens the door for many to participate in a controversial topic. The instructor asks five to eight students to sit in a circle in chairs facing each other. There is one open chair. Initially, the rest of the class stands behind the circle to observe and listen to the peer discussion. The instructor sits in the open chair and begins the discussion by asking a high-level inquiry question then steps behind the open chair. The students sitting in the circle begin talking about the topic. At any time, a student standing behind the circle of chairs can sit in the open chair to speak. As s/he sits down, the person speaking from the circle must finish his/her statement, leave his/her chair, and move behind the circle to join the observers. This opens a chair for the next observer who wants to speak. This discussion continues until all have had the opportunity to sit and join the discussion.

IFAT. Epstein, Lazarus, Calvano, Matthews, Hendel Epstein (2002) write of one highly effective technique for creating a rigorous learning experience with the focus on real-time learning. The Immediate Feedback Assessment Test (IFAT) (Dihoff, Brosvic, Epstein & Cook, 2003; Epstein et al., 2002) provides an excellent framework for real-time learning by requiring that students work collaboratively to develop a consensus regarding correct multiple choice answers. To use the IFAT system, students are initially given a traditional paper/pencil multiple-choice test that focuses on the content under study. Once the tests are completed, students are placed into groups of three or four. Each group is given an IFAT answer form that is similar to a Scantron sheet typically used with many multiple-choice assessments. However, the IFAT answer form contains an opaque coating over each potential answer for each question.The students are directed to compare answers with their group members to determine if they are all in agreement as to the correct answers. For those answers where the group has consensus, the students scratch off the corresponding opaque covering on the IFAT answer sheet. If the answer is correct, a star will be uncovered and the group will earn full credit. Reinforcement is immediate. However, if a star does not appear and the answer box is blank,the group must discuss the question, review the material, and develop a new answer. Once a new answer choice reveals a star, partial credit is earned. The students are reinforced in two ways; first, they are given partial credit for their proximate answer and second, they are privy to the correct answer. If the second choice is incorrect, the discussion/scratch-off process continues.

The IFAT system has several pedagogical implications. First, with traditional multiple tests students complete a test and leave the class, uncertain of the correct answers. Even when the tests are graded and returned, many students do not take the time to review the material to determine the correct answers to the missed questions. The IFAT system guarantees that the final answer is always the correct one, ensuring that each student leaves the testing location knowing accurate information. Second, because students have a way to earn partial credit, they are more likely to maintain engagement in a discussion focused on choosing the correct answer, even when the first choice was incorrect. Frequently, the discussions become more focused, strategic, and in-depth as students attempt to convince their peers of the correct response. Finally, students report that they enjoy the IFAT method and believe that they learn more by using it than when given traditional multiple-choice assessments (DeBattista, Mitterer & Gosse,2004).

Audience Plants. The Audience Plant ensures that a coordinated discussion can occur even if the topic is unknown to the majority of the students. At the end of an instruction period, the instructor tells one or two students that during the next meeting they will be asked to answer questions on the topic covered in class. The students are given the questions and possible responses. At the next class meeting, the instructor begins by asking the "audience plants" the questions. The students will have prepared responses that will begin the discussion and allow other students time to think and prepare their own comments. Alternatively, prior to the lesson, the instructor can quietly share a few answers with several students and tell them they will be asked the questions during the ensuing class period. Their assignment is to begin the discussion by repeating the answers prompted to them (Silberman, 1966).

Carousel is a strategy designed to have students respond to topics or prompts by physically moving in a circular fashion around the room (Guillaume, Yopp & Yopp, 2007). First introduced by Osborn (1953) the concept is to post charts around the classroom with various topics. The instructor divides students into small groups and each group is stationed at a chart. One member of each small group is assigned as the recorder with a specific color of magic marker. Each group is given three to five minutes to brainstorm anything related to the subtopic on their chart. Once the time period is over, the groups move clockwise around the room. Each group reads what the previous group wrote and then adds to the list using their designated magic marker. Groups circulate until they reach their original chart; at that time, they read all their classmates' ideas and make any final comments. At the end of the activity the charts contain information in different colors, each color representing a group voice. Magic marker colors allow groups to identify with their responses and can respond to queries from classmates in other groups. This is a fabulous strategy to use the meeting prior to an exam.

Give One - Get One. This strategy provides a great review and encourages peer interaction and collaboration. It allows everyone to contribute ideas while at the same time providing an avenue for those with expertise on the content to feel valued. First, the instructor assigns students to partners. Then students are told to gather all of their notes and that they will make a list of facts or ideas they have learned. Each student begins by asking his/her partner to share one fact or idea regarding the topic (Karge, 2015). In return, the partner also shares one fact or idea. If neither has a new or different idea, they should brainstorm the topic to create something they had not thought of or remembered. Then the partners move to each person in the class, collecting information, until they have generated many ideas on the subject (Guillaume, Yopp & Yopp, 2007). At the conclusion of the activity, the instructor compiles a group list of ideas surrounding the content.

Although many adult learners approach the educational setting from different perspectives, adults learn best when instructors take the time and effort to utilize a variety of strategy approaches that reflect their understanding of adult learning needs. It is paramount that adults partake in pertinent practices and use feasible classroom applications (Karge, Phillips, Jessee, McCabe, 2011).

Critical thinking and inquiry can open the door to depth and knowledge and be the cornerstone for effective adult learning. Today's university faculty members are presented with a variety of challenges in addressing the needs of adult learners. Utilizing strategies that value the characteristics of the adult learner result in longer-term recall, synthesis, problem-solving skills, and educational satisfaction than verbal instruction alone.

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