

Student-to-Student Interaction: Starting Week One?

Unlike many careers, university faculty can start fresh each semester. If something didn't work well last semester, we can try a new teaching and learning experiment this semester.

The time to try something new is now, because changing practices at week #4 confuses us all. Remember when you moved the dishes from the cupboard over the stove to the cupboard over the sink? Just where did you look for dishes for the next six months? Habits form quickly, but old habits die hard.

Student-to-student interaction is the "single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic and personal development" (Alexander Astin, UCLA). Knowing this, what classroom practices can we engineer in order for peer-to-peer interactions to begin immediately and continue outside the classroom and into the community?

Below are practices to consider. Perhaps you'll adapt, extend, and improve upon them; perhaps you'll share your efforts with others in departmental meetings and in hallways throughout this spring semester.

Discover what students know about your discipline by asking them to think about 4-6 key course concepts, write what they think they mean, discuss with another student or small group (N=4), and share back with the total class as appropriate.

Discover students' course expectations by asking them to meet in pairs or small groups to discuss some of the following, then share back with the whole class: (a) what they believe the course will be about, (b) their prior experience with the course concepts, (c) what they predict the course learning outcomes will be, and (d) what they predict you'd like them to remember about the course 2-5 years from now.

Discover students' learning styles and motivations by asking pairs or small groups to discuss (a) how they learn best and (b) why they are here learning at CSUN.

Help students get acquainted by asking them to pair up for two minutes in order to discover all the things they have in common. Then for another minute or two, they will share this information with another dyad. Commonalities build strong bonds, and many are invisible to the naked eye!

Help students to make contact outside of class by drawing a box on the front page of your syllabus, and devoting class time for them to write the names, e-mails, and perhaps cell phone numbers of two other students in the class.

How do you find the time? Meet class for the full period on day #1, sending the message that class is important. Highlight only a few points on the course syllabus (e.g., texts and learning outcomes) and assign the syllabus as homework study; announce that there will be a syllabus quiz and discussion on class #2.

And before class is dismissed, teach something short and exciting about your discipline, relating it to their lives!

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