

# **Understanding Classroom Dynamics: A Critical Factor in Teaching Freshmen**

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As university faculty, our expertise is in an academic discipline, and we teach our classes from this framework. Thus, we prepare lesson plans by focusing on content, and we usually assess how well we teach by how well we organize and present material. We become puzzled when our students do poorly on tests or assignments, tell us that they don't understand ideas that we've covered several times in class, or regularly come into our classes late or not at all. When confronted by these behaviors, some of us blame our students, citing their immaturity, their inadequate academic preparation, or their lack of commitment to the rigors of college classes. But other faculty begin to ask a critical question: Is there something more to teaching than covering subject matter? And if so, what is this "something more," and how can we deal with it?

In contrast to the framework on teaching used by university faculty, our colleagues in K-12 classrooms approach lesson plans differently. They prepare around content, but they also focus on methods of presenting material and develop strategies to address student behaviors in their classrooms. As part of their professional training as teachers, they learn that teaching definitely consists of "something more" than academic content. However, perhaps far too often, this "something more" is conceptualized as "classroom management" and all the unfortunate images and practices associated with that concept, such as disciplinary action against students.

While drawing from the expertise of our K-12 colleagues, I feel it's better to conceptualize the "something more" involved in teaching as "classroom dynamics." If we are to become better college teachers, we need to understand classroom dynamics as well as we understand our academic subject matter. What's meant by classroom dynamics? A simple answer is that it's everything beyond our expertise in our academic discipline. It includes student behaviors, emotions, and imagination; teachers' behaviors, emotions, and imagination; teachers' ways of presenting academic materials; students' interactions with teachers; and students' interactions with other students. In our university classes, we tend to relegate these matters to the margins of academia, focusing on the primacy of subject matter. Yet, when we give a test and more than half of our students fail that test, could "something more" be going on than students failing to master subject matter? Would our students learn more if we took the time to better understand classroom dynamics and our own role as teachers in creating these dynamics?

In my own work as a teacher of "special-admit" freshmen at CSUN, I define classroom dynamics as the building of a classroom community and the creation of a positive classroom culture. I believe that helping students develop skills in working together and creating an atmosphere in the classroom where students feel safe enough to take risks in

grappling with new and difficult ideas are essential factors for good learning outcomes. With each new class, I focus on classroom dynamics from the very first session, and I continue to emphasize classroom culture and community building in each succeeding session and each assignment. When I'm successful, I have no attendance problems in my classes, and student academic achievement rises. Thus, from my perspective, the focus on classroom dynamics is integral to the learning and teaching process. These are not original ideas, of course, but they have helped me prepare lesson plans in a different way than before, integrating classroom dynamics with academic subject matter.

Here at CSUN, many of my colleagues are doing exciting and path-breaking work to help demystify the process of teaching in the university. For example, Dr. Cynthia Desrochers, Director of CELT (Center for the Excellence in Learning and Teaching), has helped numerous faculty, including me, develop innovative approaches to promote good classroom dynamics, especially in freshmen classes. She emphasizes the need for faculty to engage students in their own learning. Student involvement in learning, she states, is the key to academic performance.

Many years ago, John Dewey stressed the need to see education as a single process involving teaching and learning. There is really no separation between the two, and only in our minds can we make this separation. Recent research in the field of brain-based learning affirms Dewey's insight, which, by the way, is also found in the educational approaches of indigenous cultures and many non-western civilizations. Thus, rather than ignoring or marginalizing classroom dynamics or developing separate lesson plans to deal with it, we need to make these dynamics integral to teaching any academic subject.

(Dewey further stated that the goal of education in the U.S. is to train people in the practice of democracy. He distinguished between simply studying about democracy and practicing democracy and conceptualized classrooms as arenas for developing students' skills to function effectively in a democratic society. Thus, he emphasized experiential learning (e.g., service-learning), small group work, and teamwork. Far from being simply classroom activities, these teaching strategies engaged students in the practice of democracy.)

Integrating an understanding of classroom dynamics with academic subject matter in our teaching is our ideal, but it is also difficult because our existing paradigm as university faculty is built around not seeing a connection. Where then to begin on making classroom dynamics an integral part of our lesson plans? Since it is difficult to shift entirely to a new paradigm, it's best to start with the old paradigm and to build a new approach within the "shell of the old." The approach I've taken is to think about my lesson plans in terms of 50% academic content and 50% classroom dynamics. Over time, this artificial separation will disappear, but by preparing lesson plans in this way, I give equal importance to classroom dynamics and academic subject matter. Like Cynthia Desrochers, I try to develop teaching activities that engage students in their own learning. Like John Dewey, I emphasize small group work, teamwork, and, whenever possible, experiential learning. And drawing from my background as Coordinator of the Faculty

Mentor Program, I include teaching strategies that promote student interactions with me and student interactions with peers.

### ***Sample Lesson Plan for Integrating Classroom Dynamics into Academic Subject Matter***

I teach for the EOP Bridge Program, and the freshmen I teach are “special admit,” first-generation, low-income college students. Most of the students in my classes are Asian American, Latino American, and African American. As part of the six-week Bridge summer residential program, they take two linked and integrated classes from me — University 100 and Developmental Reading — and then continue with me as a “learning community” for an additional class in fall semester and spring semester. As a Bridge faculty member, my responsibilities are not only to help students master basic academic skills to succeed at the university but to also help them learn how to work together in a multicultural environment. Many come from high schools marked by ethnic and racial conflict, and others from neighborhoods where there was minimal interethnic interaction.

On the next page is an activity that I have students do on the first day of my Bridge summer class after initial exercises designed to help students remember names of classmates. This assignment on “multicultural foods” serves multiple purposes. It helps me find out what students already know about various cultures in America, so that I can design future lesson plans around existing knowledge; a goal here is to have each student become a “cultural expert” to help educate others in the class. The assignment also helps me to discover stereotypes that students have about other cultures and to create lesson plans to overcome stereotypes as needed. The assignment also serves as the basis for a future library research assignment, helping students to learn about the process involved in doing research and using the library. Moreover, I use this assignment to begin to teach students the importance of working together and the processes involved in group work. Finally, this assignment gets all students in the class talking and laughing. (I should add that I have as much fun with this exercise as my students.)

I first have students do the assignment individually. I ask each to identify as many of the foods as they can. I then ask how many each student is able to identify. Usually, working individually, students identify at most four or five items. Next, I put students in small groups of three to four students and have them combine knowledge. When I ask how many food items the small groups are able to identify, the answer is usually double to triple what students were able to do individually. At this time, I have students from each group explain food items they know. Finally, I have the class as a whole combine knowledge to identify as many food items as possible. Usually, at this point students have identified most of the food items, and we are able to have a discussion about the importance of learning about other cultures and using our classroom as an opportunity for all students to expand their knowledge of themselves and others.

## Multicultural Food List

What is a samosa?

What is a papusa?

What is pho?

What is chicken molé?

What is pan dulce?

What are haw flakes?

What are grits?

What color is banana sauce?

What is durian?

What is pancit?

What is boba drink?

What is nan?

What is XO sauce?

What is balut?

What is jerk chicken?

What is masala?

What is jambalaya?

What is baklava?

What is tandoori chicken?

What is spam musubi?

What is halo-halo?

How do you make a hard-boiled egg?