

Dear Larry,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to observe your class last week. I am always glad to meet a fellow teacher and I thoroughly enjoyed participating in a section that was, frankly, way out of my field. When we spoke before the section, you mentioned that you were particularly interested in student engagement and whether your classroom strategies were effective in creating an inclusive learning environment. So, I would like to share a few observations that I made in these areas and offer some suggestions for the future.

One of the aspects of your class that struck me immediately was how familiar and collegial the atmosphere was. Students used each others names readily, and spoke and laughed together often. What was serendipitous about this particular day was that we found the room locked when we arrived. This odd turn of events allowed me to see how your class quickly banded together and found a new learning environment (outdoors!). All of the students seemed to take this in stride, as though you were all colleagues merely selecting a new location for a meeting. One of the best ways to increase student learning, as you know, is to create an inclusive learning environment and I got the sense from this exchange that the students felt comfortable not only with you, but with each other. Everyone seemed genuinely glad to be in class together. Kudos!

You took a risk in this class, but I'm the only one who noticed. After introducing the topic of the day and briefly fielding questions about the course, you left. I mean, you literally took a walk in order to give your students 10 minutes to talk together without you in the room. I thought it was wild, but your students didn't seem to find anything strange about it. Because you wanted feedback on this particular gambit that you've been trying, I took special care to chart who spoke to whom, and whether their contribution was a question, a response, or an observation. By the end of the 10 minutes, my book was a spider's web of lines overlapping and intersecting. Every student spoke at least once, and the conversation moved naturally from one point to the next. Many of the comments began with, "I didn't quite understand..." or "Why is...". This simple ability to voice confusion over a topic is too often missing in college classrooms. Your goal of inspiring better participation by removing yourself as an authoritarian barrier to honest communication worked well.

I also observed that when you returned to the class and led discussion, that these exchanges decreased significantly. Mapping student contributions, I noted that only a few students responded to your questions about evolution in dinosaurs. I also noticed that there was very little time (perhaps 3 seconds) between the questions you posed, and student answers, or your explanations. One way of increasing student participation would be to wait longer after posing your questions before allowing students to answer. This would give less-confident students an opportunity to think through the problem before you or their comrades provided the solution. I have found that counting silently to ten works well. Sometimes I do not even allow students to raise their hands until this time period has elapsed.

In our pre-observation meeting you said that you were looking for ways to foster conversation that does not involve you directly. I think your strategy of leaving was a huge success in this area. Another way that you facilitated the students responding to each other was the physical layout of the room. Having the students sit in a circle rather than facing forward made you one of the participants, rather than the expert at the front.

One idea that you may consider is simply becoming comfortable with silence. After posing a conceptual or difficult question and hearing an answer, try sitting silently without indicating as to whether you agree or not. Take a drink of water and wait until another student pipes up. If the students always see you as the filter through which conversation must go, then they may be more reluctant to address each other.

All of this is merely food for thought. It was obvious to me that you had spent the semester developing a learning community where each student felt valued and included. Thank you again for allowing me to be part of your thinking process.

All the best,

Daniel Jones
McDougal Teaching Fellow
Yale University