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OVERCOMING PASSIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM: AN INTERVENTION

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One of the major problems confronted by those of us who teach is student passivity. There is little need to document the shortcomings of the lecture as a pedagogical strategy and yet as we "traverse the halls of academe" on any given day, it is clear that the lecture has remained impervious to all the critiques and demands for innovation. Recognizing that this teaching mode will probably prevail for some time to come, what interventions can we offer that are flexible enough to be integrated into the traditional format, yet effective in reducing the strong tendency toward boredom that results from passive classrooms?

There is a vast literature to support the proposition that it would be a major error to explain any given dynamic by limiting ourselves to variations in faculty or student attributes (Boocock, 1972; Jackson, 1968; Waller, 1932; Holt, 1972; Schmuck, 1977; Karp and Yoels, 1976; Rice, Jacobs and Karp, 1979). To recognize the complexity of a situation is not, however, to be overwhelmed by it; I am inclined to follow the advice of Whitehead to "seek complexity and order it" (Geertz, quoted in Spain, 1975:21). It is with this dictum in mind that I offer the following intervention.¹

THE RATIONALE

Central to this strategy is the proposition that critical thinking is best stimulated by adopting a questioning, integrative and synthesizing attitude toward the subject matter. A second proposition guiding the work draws on the concept of *transformation*. This refers to the act of rewording, reworking or otherwise innovating on an author's work such that it becomes a personalized production; a product of self. To the extent that a student is challenged to formulate a core question related to diverse facts, concepts, or paradigms, the opportunities for passivity are reduced. Since this transformation is by definition a creative act, it should be inherently rewarding and stimulating; hence a potentially powerful teaching/learning intervention.

THE MODEL

This model is outlined in seven parts for clarity and ease of application. Individual instructors may feel the need to alter or eliminate some of the steps; I am reporting here what has worked best in my classes.

The steps are presented to the student as follows:

I. OBJECTIVE

Participation is a strong emphasis of this course and I accept the responsibility for providing ample opportunity for students to contribute. To the extent that *your* ideas and questions are central, the course will be a collective rather than a singular effect. The purpose then of this project is to provide an opportunity for maximum student input to the shape of the course.

II. PROBLEM

This involves a weekly contribution of at least two questions which you have generated from your readings on the topic. The questions should not be simply factual (e.g., what is the population of India?) or ones with obvious answers. They should: (1) be relatively comprehensive; (2) provide the basis for group discussion; (3) be open to a variety of interpretations; (4) be answerable within the framework of social science; (5) be central to the shared reading material. Other criteria may emerge during the semester, but these should serve as guidelines for now.

III. TYPE

This is basically a project in "critical analysis". By raising questions you are well on the way to answering them and we will learn how to write questions which provide a useful structure for responding. For example, when we read about the origins of our species, the following question would meet our criteria: Why is it

that *homo sapiens* developed a large brain and upright posture and other *hominoids* did not? This question is good because: (a) it raises the question: why?, (b) we have evidence that the situation exists, and (c) it is comparative in form: e.g., Why this, not that?; why here, not there?; why now, not then?

Other examples: Why is it that some cities have high rates of prostitution and others do not? Why is it that some societies have high rates of suicides, others not?

Again, the question "why" is raised. The statement is documented and it is comparative in form.

IV. SOURCES OF QUESTIONS

As you study for the designated topic, orient yourself with a questioning (why?) attitude. Each time something does not make sense, make a note of it. Many of these will clear up as you go through the reading. However, some will only become more complex. After you finish your reading, consider your list of questions and select the two you see as the most important to you and the most useful to your learning.

V. PROCEDURE

After you have selected your two questions, ask yourself: do they meet the criteria set forth in Part II, *The Problem*? If so, then shape the question into the format I've outlined in Section III. Why is it that x, not y?; why did it happen in x, not in y?; why was it happening then, not now?

VI. FORMAT FOR PRESENTATION

Your questions should follow the following format when you turn them in each Monday. Use a 3 x 5 notecard and give the following information on *one* side of the card: full name, date, course number and section number. On the *other* side of the card list the topic (e.g., socialization and enculturation) and your two questions (e.g., (1) Why is it that females have a higher rate of

mental illness than men?, (2) Why is it that some societies have high rates of warfare, others not?).

This card should be either *typed* or *printed in dark ink*.

VII. ANALYSIS/ANSWERS

You will be responsible for answering your own questions in the (e.g., Wednesday and Thursday) sessions following (e.g., Monday's) entries. Since it is reasonable to wonder about the kinds of answers you might tender, the following guidelines should help.

- A. What sociocultural theory might help to answer your question? What factors (variables) might be operating that are clearly sociocultural in nature? How might such factors relate to each other? For example, if you find that some societies are warlike and others peaceful, does it have anything to do with the availability of food or other scarce resources? The MAIN point here is that we want an EXPLANATION, and some are better than others. How do we know?
- B. We seek EVIDENCE which has been gathered using a scientific attitude. Draw on as much evidence as possible from your readings. DOCUMENT anything you expect us to accept as evidence (e.g., Who did the study? When?, etc.)
- C. Draw CONCLUSIONS from your studies. Can you make a sound generalization from your analysis — one that will hold in other places at other times? For example, if you find that American teenagers tend to “fall in love” about once a month, does this hold for Eskimo teenagers or among the Trobriand Islanders? Why or why not? This raises the question of the conditions under which people are likely to experience “falling in love.”
- D. APPLY your knowledge such that it has practical value in the social world. For example, if we find that young American males destroy property in environments that are sexually segregated and relatively anonymous, the solution to the problem is obvious. Likewise, if we find that passive students (i.e., sitting in classrooms without any interaction) learn very little and get bored, the obvious application is to... create active classrooms.

In summary, any answer that offers a theoretical explanation, supports it with empirical evidence, draws conclusions, ventures a few generalizations and seeks to apply the knowledge to real-life situations will be seen as first-rate. Anything less than this will be seen as less so and rewarded accordingly.

This may sound complicated now —and it is, as is anything intellectually worthwhile— but it will be much clearer after you've had some practice. We're here to educate and learn, so don't be deterred by the challenge. Just don't underestimate it!

APPLICATION PROCEDURE

Several methods may be employed —alone or in combination— in the processing of the analysis/answers to the questions. Since time does not usually permit a discussion of each question in the larger forums, three procedures seem to offer the most promise, depending on individual preference or situation.

- (1) The instructor analyzes the question cards before preparing the lecture. From this analysis a dialogue may be structured based on a shared hypothesis or concern, with the participants being selected to provoke the greatest controversy. Others are invited into the discussion after the main contributors have had their inputs.
- (2) A second approach is to analyze the cards and group them according to questions of common foci. Set up discussion or "buzz groups" with one question posed as central. The student who raised the question can be designated as the discussion leader. After discussion, group reports could be solicited in a "plenary" session.
- (3) A third approach is to assign the analysis as a written preparation to be used as the basis of a discussion.

VARIATIONS

This model should be employed creatively rather than as a received and finished tool to be applied in the same way to all teaching situations. Several

variations are possible; in fact the number is limited only by the instructor's imagination. For example, some instructors may wish to shift the emphasis from the explanatory to the descriptive mode if the latter is of greater concern. Other modes (e.g., application of concepts, humanistic implications) may be substituted, depending on the subject matter or sophistication of the students.

Another variation is to have the students generate one question and answer it according to this model; the second question would be generated with the instructor accepting the challenge of being on the "firing line" once a week without prior notice of the content. This has the effect of reducing the authoritarianism of the one-way demand; it is also an excellent opportunity to role-model the excitement of intellectual work since few students have had first-hand experience with fresh, on-the-spot analysis in response to their questions.

CONDITIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Keeping in mind that no intervention is going to work equally well in all situations, it may be useful to report my own experiences with the conditions under which this model has been successful. It has worked well in:

- (1) Relatively large introductory classes where the students do not intend to major in the discipline and hence may have limited interest in the course.
- (2) Classes where a large amount of information from divergent sources is being read and there is no ready mechanism to get feedback on student interests and concerns.
- (3) Intermediate level courses which register non-majors who would not have former training in the perspective of the discipline.

CONCLUSION

The intervention outlined here is flexible enough to be used across a wide range of teaching/learning situations. If it is applied creatively and tailored to the situational needs of the instructor, there is good reason to consider its adoption.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor Michael Weinstein for the inspiration of this idea during a private conversation.

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