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Engagement in the Media and Society Course

Abstract

Traditional avenues of thinking about and measuring student engagement may privilege traditional students. This article describes attempts to better include and prepare all students for engagement by creating a welcoming environment for diversity, altering methods of grading engagement, and broadening opportunities for grading engagement in a foundation course. Reflections on the experiments suggest some anecdotal success, areas of student resistance, and areas in need of continued revision.

Keywords

Mellon Grant, diversity, inclusion

Our Mellon grant training has emphasized that, as teachers, we need to actively and intentionally work to avoid routine, habitual, or unquestioned thinking in our teaching and course design. While our past students may have been more homogenous in their backgrounds, we are embracing a more heterogeneous audience now. This is to our, and our students', benefit. As a result, we need to pay attention to how to ensure all students are included in the learning process and are offered opportunities for success. It does not make us responsible for solving everything, but we may be responsible for doing our share to ensure that inclusivity means everyone.

Media and Society, a foundation course for the Communication major, is, at its core, a media literacy course. Students learn to recognize and move beyond routine, habitual, and unquestioned thinking in how they interact with the world around them, the people around them, their relationships, and themselves. They also come to understand how their

thinking is shaped, in part, by their relationship to media. Students work to recognize the processes involved, characteristics of the media, and their own practices, to move beyond their habitual, or automatic, thinking. The class focus is on critical thinking, embracing diverse perspectives on topics, and looking more deeply at what, why, and how to think about the texts and media with which they interact.

While I have continually strived to utilize effective, engaging teaching strategies, my work with the Humanities cohort of the Mellon grant on diversity and inclusivity has shown me how my own background and privilege may lead me to revert to automatic thinking in the way I might privilege certain types of engagement. It has helped me to think and plan for engagement differently and to focus intentionally on student engagement throughout my course design.

Not all students require or benefit from the same opportunities. Research on first generation and traditionally under-represented students has shown that one area of concern for their retention and ability to succeed is their level of engagement. “When students are not as engaged in college, their overall experiences can be isolating and disconnecting” (Soriaa & Stebleton, 2012, p. 675). Studies on the relationship between engagement and grades are somewhat mixed, but there is evidence that the rate of retention for first generation students is concerning (Soriaa & Stebleton). In looking at reasons, Soriaa and Stebleton found “first-generation students reporting lower mean scores on contributing to a class discussion, asking an insightful question in class, bringing up ideas or concepts from different courses during class discussions, and interacting with faculty during lecture class sessions” (p. 679). They also found that “students’ sense of belonging on campus is consistently and positively predictive of academic engagement” levels (p. 680).

Further, traditionally under-represented students have the additional burden of facing racism and racial tension on campus (Allen, 1992; Hurtado, 1992; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). The result often is a more socially isolated

and fatigued individual. Both outcomes are less likely to encourage the same students to feel comfortable or to have the energy to engage in the learning process, much less in-class activities where they may have to overcome fears of additional social isolation or racism. Yet, research has shown that when the same students did talk with peers about course material, they felt a greater sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

I, like many teachers, have expected my students to participate in class. They received a grade for their participation and (apparent) preparation. After all, research seems to demonstrate that the more someone participates in the classroom, the greater sense of belonging they have, and my philosophy has been that their participation means they are more likely to learn the material and help others learn the material. Moreover, it seems a visible way to gauge signs of understanding and demonstrate engagement in the learning process.

However, participation is not engagement. Yee (2016) calls for teachers to reframe their understandings of engagement in order to avoid perpetuating and “privileging of middle class interactive strategies of engagement” (p. 854). In an ethnographic study, Yee examined how first-generation students, often from lower income homes, and middle class students see engagement with academic coursework differently than their peers. Both first generation and traditional, middle class students involved in the study took notes, attended classes, studied, and completed assignments. However, the middle class students employed a greater range of engagement strategies that improved their chances of academic success. They were more likely to interact with others, including classmates and teachers, to clarify questions or problems, get advice and feedback, request accommodations, or develop friendly relationships (p. 839). In contrast, first-generation students were more likely to feel the responsibility for their success was entirely upon themselves.

It is difficult to separate engagement from other inclusive practices in discussing the changes I made to my class. I will summarize below some of the

changes I made to prepare for and foster different types of engagement, rather than traditional ways of grading participation (e.g. talking in class, emphasis on discussion, comfort level with terminology), and grade engagement. None of the ideas is my own invention, and most are strategies I have known to be effective teaching approaches from other sources, including our campus Learning Enhancement Services sessions. I describe them briefly below to show how I tried to apply my learning from Mellon workshops and speakers.

Preparing Students to Engage

The Mellon workshops reinforced aspects of course design that would help enhance engagement and comfort with engagement. These included emphasizing the value of diverse perspectives and creating safe spaces for sharing. Further, one Mellon speaker, Dr. David Concepción, emphasized that traditionally under-represented students usually are relational learners and will be more motivated if they have a relationship with faculty and peers. With these ideas in mind, I examined my course materials and daily lesson plans for ways to ensure I was preparing students to engage.

From the start, I revised my syllabus to set a tone for creating an environment that was respectful of diversity in the classroom. To that end, I added a Diversity Statement near the top of the syllabus as a way to affirm that everyone's engagement and belonging in the class is welcome and safe. To reinforce further the importance of a welcoming climate for diversity, I employed a variety of recommended approaches. One of the changes endorsed during a workshop was the creation of 'home groups.' These groups, which met regularly, but not exclusively, during in-class activities, were designed to offer a space where students could develop a comfort level with one another over time so that diverse perspectives would be welcomed and encouraged. About four weeks into the class, I solicited group feedback on success of discussions to date and used the input to improve discussions going forward.

In order to foster diverse, respectful discussions, students were again prepared to engage within the groups. The value of critical thinking and divergent perspectives to growth of thinking and understanding were underscored by soliciting student input about what they valued in class discussions and activities. Unprompted, students consistently pointed out that they wanted conversations that stimulated them and that provided alternative perspectives. I reminded them of these values periodically throughout the semester and the advantages of that kind of discussion. We also examined methods of approaching media critically and worked with these throughout the semester in assignments, activities, and discussions.

Other preparation strategies I employed included:

- Regularly scheduled time to allow students to write their thoughts before sharing in large or small group or, if they preferred it, to work with a neighbor to think through an idea.
- Encouraged students to know each other personally, using nametags the first two weeks, using students' names in class, reminding them each time to introduce themselves in each new group within which they worked.
- Offered examples and authors from different cultural backgrounds to normalize diversity in all areas and to reduce isolation through representation. Media's lack of diversity provided a perfect opportunity for students to see how people from various backgrounds are represented and under-represented.

Broadening Opportunities for Engagement

In order to broaden ways of thinking of engagement, I reviewed the ways in which I have built engagement opportunities into the curriculum. In trying to broaden the possibilities for engagement, I used strategies learned or reviewed in the Mellon workshops. I intentionally continued and expanded

varied learning and teaching styles in the classroom, such as free writes, individually and in pairs, case studies, drawing, skits, projects, a jigsaw group project, creating videos or other social media, viewing videos, analysis of media texts, discussions, and problem solving in small groups.

I also created new graded assignments that encouraged other ways of demonstrating engagement than in-class speaking. Two of the more significant assignments were reading/video questions and online discussion prompts. The former focused on visible ways of demonstrating engagement they already would have been expected to complete. Students were required to complete 10 of their choice, with about twice that many opportunities offered. Each was due the day the reading or video was due for class.

The online discussion prompts focused on alternative opportunities to demonstrating engagement beyond in-class discussion. I created 10 online discussion prompts, with deadlines, for students to choose to complete. These extended course learning. Students were required to complete five for a grade, but could complete more as evidence of engagement if they were less inclined to speak out in class. They could choose which to complete as their schedules permitted. They could, but were not required to, respond to others' posts. I offered minimal extra credit for those who met the criteria for a quality response to another's post.

Grading Engagement

In my lower-level classes, students have always recorded their own level of preparation and participation each day, grading themselves, according to a rubric, in collaboration with me. Much of the change made to that assignment involves minor word changes to the grade sheet, but the key difference is how I approached, and how students were allowed to approach, engagement as a broader concept than participation and preparation. In the past, I encouraged students to participate by contributing in small and large group discussions and activities. They justified their participation and level of preparation for class. However, as noted in research discussed earlier, this

failed to account for all the ways someone may be engaging in the learning process, and it unintentionally privileged certain students. By expanding the methods of counting engagement, I was also able to move beyond my own automatic thinking to recognize other types of engagement more readily, and so were students.

After creating a justification for their daily grade, students turn in their engagement sheet at the end of each class, and I return it to them at the beginning of the next class after reviewing their grade and justification. I may modify it with rationale tied to the rubric, their justification, and my observations.

I like this approach for a number of reasons that link to the Mellon workshops and that also are tied to helping all students feel more comfort and with engaging in learning. I can:

- Connect with quieter students before class
- I can give corrective feedback and supportive affirmations in writing on their engagement sheet when I see anything that can be useful. Examples: Nice input, nice insights, loved hearing your ideas in class today, please close the computer lid when involved in activities so it helps you stay focused and engaged.
- Often students will use that opportunity to ask me questions. I also feel it allows them to feel more comfortable with me more quickly and to encourage others nearby who may overhear the conversation to feel more comfortable asking their own questions.
- Get frequent feedback from students about how things are going and how they are feeling. Sometimes students include feedback on the grade sheet for me regarding what they are confused about or what they liked about a class period, in addition to their grade justification. I encourage them in this when it does arise, as this

allows me to quickly address any issues in class or individually. Students also often will tell me when they are feeling low energy, ill, stressed, or just unprepared as part of their justification. This allows me to connect with them in person when needed or to address it at least in a written response to express concern for them and offer to meet out of class as needed.

Student Responses

To determine the value of some of the changes I had made to broaden engagement, I solicited anonymous, written feedback from students focused on their perceptions of the value of the reading/video questions and online discussion prompts at the end of the semester, as well as their feelings about diversity in the classroom. I asked them several questions, with responses including rating on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being very much, as well as open-ended comments. I did not request that students identify themselves in any way as being traditionally-represented or traditionally under-represented college students. I have not statistically analyzed the items yet; however, I can report general numbers from the feedback.

Students consistently reported 4s and 5s when reacting to whether completing reading/video questions helped them come to class more prepared, better learn and better demonstrate their understanding for the long-term, and helped them be more prepared for in-class work. Several students reported 2s and 3s on the preparation item, but also noted that they would have read the assigned readings even without the assignments. Several students commented that they felt they were more prepared for in-class activities because they had felt more prepared than they typically were for classes due to this requirement.

Students were neutral (reporting 3s) about whether they enjoyed doing the online discussions. Yet they generally felt that online discussion prompts were a better way for them to share their thinking than doing so only in class or on exams. Most rated this item 4 or 5.

As a way to determine whether all students felt the course was inclusive and welcoming to diverse ideas, in the same feedback form, I gathered data on students' perceptions regarding how much they felt I, they, and other students in the course valued diverse perspectives. The scale was the same as for prior questions. I also asked them to rate how much they felt their *understanding* of diverse perspectives and their own critical thinking improved during the course. In all but the questions about classmates, the students ranked 4s and 5s for their and my valuing of diverse perspectives and for improvement in their own understanding of diverse perspectives and critical thinking. In regard to their classmates, most students recorded 3s (neutral) for their peers' valuing of diverse perspectives.

Overall Reflection

While some experiments were more successful than were others, I felt the extra efforts to create a broader way of grading engagement and thinking about engagement made for a better class overall. The differences were not necessarily in improved grades and consistently engaged students every single meeting of our class. Making changes to only one course in a student's course load and in the students' overall college experience may not bring about significant changes immediately for students who may feel disadvantaged elsewhere; however, other aspects of the class did seem to improve. Moreover, I felt better about the efforts I was making to engage students, be inclusive, and about the little ways I felt the students experienced the class differently. Those differences are primarily impressionistic and anecdotal in nature.

Early in the semester, students were very enthusiastically engaged in class, and the differences I saw in the quality of conversations students had in class and the engagement of all students in class activities and discussion were remarkable. However, unsurprisingly, by mid-semester, students were tired and overwhelmed by school in general, and perhaps, by the class. As advised by Dr. David Concepción, I took that opportunity to provide affirmations to students by acknowledging their energy level and encouraging them to engage as they could and in ways that worked for them.

Previously discussed research indicated that first-generation students were less likely to interact with faculty and peers in and out of class. While I do not know how many students in my class were first-generation students, I felt particularly encouraged that every single student who presented as, or specifically identified as, traditionally under-represented spoke out in class multiple times with contrasting perspectives and talked with me out of class and in class about course-related and personal topics.

Even among students who appeared to be, or identified as, traditionally represented students, demonstrably stepped out of automatic thinking about others around them. About a dozen of the 30 students, far more than typical, created a project at the end of the class that focused on the way their relationship with the media had reinforced their lack of understanding of people who may differ from them, of different perspectives, and how they had cooperated with and resisted this influence. Previously, they may have focused more often on consumer effects or effects on their perceptions of themselves.

Two potential down sides to the experiments is that the broadened engagement practices seemed, on the surface, to work best for those who already were doing well academically. Reading/video questions and online discussion prompts were most often completed, and completed well, by students who also did well in other assignments and in traditionally privileged forms of achievement.

However, a deeper look shows possible positive, though anecdotal, impacts. The quality of critical thinking and consideration of multiple, contrasting perspectives in analysis assignments was stronger than previously in most assignments and for most students. I also saw students providing more thoughtful, critical thinking about topics in their online responses, after they had an opportunity to think about what they had learned in class. Additionally, some quieter students did more freely share ideas that may be more controversial online than they did in class.

In some cases, the changes also brought out resistance by those who preferred not to stretch their comfort zones. This was evident in the home groups, in particular. While home groups that included more than one multicultural student typically wrote in their engagement sheets that they loved their groups, a very few traditional students resisted the idea of home groups via verbal requests to me and in their engagement sheet comments. While I do not know who made the comments in course surveys, I also saw a small number reflecting the same sentiment in the surveys. These students wanted to meet up with the people they already knew, whom they sat near, or to be able to choose for themselves, even though they had multiple opportunities to do that throughout the semester. They also often wanted to have more large group discussions instead of small group discussions.

This, combined with response from the feedback form that reported students felt their classmates were less open to diverse perspectives than they themselves were, is an area I will work to more strategically develop in course activities in a structured way. I will consider other methods of affirmation for when students do encourage and provide diverse perspectives to their peers. This will be particularly important from mid-semester onward when students are feeling less energy to do more than the minimum effort. I spent quite a bit of time supporting it in the beginning of the semester and will review my efforts from mid-semester onward.

Students who did not complete all of the reading questions or online discussion assignments resisted the optional aspect of the written assignments, which allowed students to choose the due dates for reading questions and online discussion prompts when it fit their schedules and energy levels. I reminded students each class period about completing reading/video questions and online prompts, and they received a Canvas email whenever I posted an online prompt. Yet feedback from students in course surveys indicated that a number of students did not pay attention to the reminders and some requested all options be required so they would remember to complete them. Anecdotally, emails from those students near the end of the semester, all from those presenting as traditionally-represented

students, demonstrated this resistance, requesting additional prompts be offered or extra credit be offered due to their failure to complete all of their assignments. In contrast, those presenting as traditionally under-represented students verbally took responsibility for their own lack of effort when they initiated discussion of missing assignments with me.

This experiment reinforced that there are no easy fixes to approaching engagement for all. Ensuring inclusiveness will require consistent, intentional thinking in planning and executing curricular changes. This effort is no less than I require of my students in the Media and Society course. I will continue to experiment and reflect on what works, why it works or fails, and find in-class methods to motivate engagement to ensure diversity and inclusivity for all students.

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