

Canadian Historical Association

BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY IN A FIRST-YEAR CLASS

Those of us who enjoy the interactive lecture technique as well as class activities that do not involve chalk and talk from the professor face a challenge when we enter that first class of the first year introductory history course. Apart from the serried ranks of unknown faces, there is usually a deathly silence. Efforts to create a learning community where even the instructor can be accepted as a well-informed participant seem to require new approaches with every class and still work better in some years than in others. In the ideal learning community, every student, and the professor, would feel at ease and accepted within the class environment. Students would feel sure that they were getting access to useful knowledge and that their work would be fairly assessed. They would also share a sense of ownership and become part of the process of choosing which knowledge is useful and how their work should be assessed.

The strategies described here have no doubt been used by others and do not guarantee success. However, they keep me fully involved in developing the course every year and provide some fun and lively feedback.

The first step is to hand out the basic course information: this seems to be a student security blanket. Those fresh from high school seem comfortable with an overview where assignments, exams, and the marking scheme are laid out. In upper level courses, I have had success involving students in the method and weighting of assessments, but I have not yet ventured to do that with the introductory course.

Then I want to break the silence. A successful class can be heard halfway down the hall before the instructor arrives. The well-tried method of getting students to interview someone they do not know is a start. It is valuable for the professor to be interviewed and to interview a student while the class is doing this. I am lucky enough to have classes that never have more than seventy students, so there is time to get the students to introduce each other to the class. If the interview notes are taken down on a file card that is given in, you have an instant supply of information that helps you make some personal contact when a topic comes up in class or when you meet outside class.

Students can give input to course content through interest questionnaires. These produce some thoughtful answers to 'What big questions about Canadian History would you like to know more about by the end of the semester?' The responses also serve as a way to discover how much more they still need to know. Questions on the particular interests of the students are useful to keep the class involved and to keep the professor alert. All the responses may be used to design the day-to-day course outline that follows the basic information sheet. This almost guarantees an interesting term for the professor sent scurrying to research some previously unknown area.

Weekly comment sheets can also provide a sense of ownership.

Accentuating the positive, I have used a handout asking, "What interested you this week? Why did it interest you? What questions would you still like to have answered on this topic? Is there anything else you would like to comment on?" Some students prefer to respond by e-mail. Answering the comments takes time, but it is often stimulating and entertaining.

Group work is a mixed blessing, but there have been no complaints from my students about "The Great Library Scavenger Hunt". Teams of students named after historians, in my determined effort to establish historiography early, rush around the library trying to find call numbers, information, signatures, books, articles, copies and even snacks. If any of the chosen historians such as "Fearless Fingard", or "Dauntless Dickason" and other eminent members of the pantheon could send photographs for the standards at the rallying points, it would be appreciated. Other library patrons, so far, have smiled kindly, but I can see this method might be a problem if we all used it. I am still trying various approaches to building small discussion groups. Allowing students to form their own seems more successful than my efforts to balance interests and abilities. Creating the group each time is inclusive and allows students to change if they are uncomfortable. Peer evaluation sheets can help the instructor get to know the students as well as assessing their contributions to the discussion. Getting students to identify themselves to the group by one characteristic can be very revealing and ensures that students know something about each other. Giving a few copies of a reading to the group to share makes contact outside class likely, although a copy on reserve at the library is an essential backup.

Paired work has fewer pitfalls than holding groups responsible for a common mark. It is easy to get students to move around the classroom if they are asked to find someone they do not know with whom they can share thoughts on a small set topic before a general discussion. First year students also seem more comfortable heading for the library together to find a shared reading. Normally I use this method for the first discussion and hold each pair of students responsible for finding one reading. They write separate reports on it for bigger group discussions. This requires a big general topic, but there are enough readings on Native/European contact, for example, to keep seventy students occupied.

The interest sheets collected early in the semester make it possible to design term paper topics to suit certain groups. It has been valuable to get these groups together, with their introduction, thesis, conclusion and outlines, to discuss ways of dealing with a question. Communal study and revision groups seem to develop spontaneously out of this process. Occasionally, I have also split up the class and left some with a video and a question sheet meant to be thought-provoking while I and an interest group discussed a common topic like the development of professional hockey or the blow-by-blow battles of the War of 1812.

Individuals can be given recognition by thanking them for suggesting a particular class topic or answering some particularly interesting questions in class. The questions can also show the professor as an individual in the learning community. Sometimes I have to say, "I tried to look that up last night and as far as I can tell..." Sometimes I have to say, "X asked a fascinating question. I have no idea of the answer. Does anyone else know? How can we find out?" Individual student presentations seem to be most successful when they are based on the oral history interviews. These have the added value of placing the students in a context of their own on a topic which makes them the undisputed experts. Collecting class suggestions on what makes a presentation work can be helpful and fun, if occasionally damaging to the professor's pride when certain idiosyncrasies are identified.

So far, I have limited student participation in assessment to their marks for peer contributions to discussion groups and to class development of the questions for examinations and quizzes. Developing the examinations together allows us to consider how questions might be answered and what information we need to know. It is another useful exercise in helping a student realize how

much there still is to find out. We draw up a list of possible topics and I make the final choice. Communal quizzes have several advantages. Allowing students to design their own questions and provide the answers focuses revision, shows me where information I consider has not been taken in, and encourages a sense of ownership. Asking the students to write and display their names on large cards so that they can identify and fire questions at each other makes an entertaining change of pace and helps to remind me who is who, while officially helping the students to get to know each other.

As I have developed these strategies, class retention and enthusiasm has increased. Feedback from students suggests that they get to know each other and exchange information and ideas. Many seem to enjoy including the professor in this process, even when they are not part of a class. These strategies have not trained a new generation of super-scholars. However, they may have helped to provide a foretaste of seminar work for those who might become super-scholars. Meanwhile, you can hear the first-year class halfway down the hall.

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