



What a great teaching idea!

Artineh Samkian, Associate Professor of Clinical Education in the USC Rossier School of Education, focuses on the use of systematic inquiry (primarily qualitative methods and evaluation approaches) to inform change in educational contexts. She also focuses on professional learning for teachers and faculty about inclusive teaching practices.

You use various techniques to check in on student engagement during your courses. Can you share one or two examples?

Asking students about their engagement and course progress over the course of the term is one way instructors check whether they are meeting student needs. This is particularly important in courses with a substantive discussion component. “Taking the temperature” of a course mid-way through can give instructors information about students' understanding of and level of comfort with course material and activities. One suggestion is to use the Critical Incident Questionnaire created by Stephen Brookfield. This is an anonymous way of getting feedback from students. I find that using the questionnaire 2-3 times per term works well. You can use the questionnaire as written or customize it with your own questions. I would suggest asking something along the lines of “what activities or content engaged you?” and “what didn't engage you?” and I would suggest making it anonymous as suggested by Brookfield. Even if your program solicits midterm and final feedback from students, it can be important to ask your own questions, get your own feedback, and analyze it in order to improve your course.

Another important activity is to check in, midway through the course, on the discussion agreements you and the students have created. By setting an expectation of holding each other accountable to the agreements, you demonstrate that you care about the classroom community. I check in on the discussion agreements and ask students if revisions are necessary. The agreements may need to be strengthened as students become more familiar with each other and are taking more risks in discussions. Building and maintaining rapport are both vital in creating an engaging and inclusive classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking questions and sharing their opinions during discussion. So, it is important to check in on the agreements throughout the semester and make sure they are still working.

What technique would you use to check in on course agreements?

Jamboard is a collaborative digital whiteboard I use for this kind of activity. I post the agreements on Jamboard and ask the students to reexamine them. Students will cross things off or post notes like “this isn't working” or “you're not really holding us accountable to this” or “you're not holding yourself accountable to this.” The jamboard then becomes a collective bulletin board. Jamboard is particularly helpful for large courses because it is an efficient way to get feedback from many students at once. However, Jamboard is not anonymous, so the instructor needs to make a choice about whether it is required or optional, which has implications for what you might hear back from students.

Do you have any advice for other instructors who want to implement a similar midterm check-in activity in their course?

Because I'm a researcher and I've done applied research for many years, I know that if you collect data but do not share and utilize the results, it looks to participants like they put time and effort into something that doesn't matter. This can undermine your efforts to be an inclusive instructor. If you collect this kind of data from students, it is important to share the results with them, and use them to make changes.

Ready to implement discussion agreements?

Steps:

1. Before class, the instructor creates their own list of agreements to frame the discussion.
2. During class, the instructor introduces process and purpose to students.
3. Instructor distributes agreements or poses questions to students to generate or revise agreements (e.g., paper, Blackboard, Google, Qualtrics).
 - Professor Samkian uses the Critical Incident Questionnaire to guide her class discussions on agreements.
4. Instructor solicits feedback on the agreements, either during discussion or anonymously.
5. After class, the instructor analyzes feedback (i.e., trends, multiple students with similar responses).
6. Instructor shares themes from student feedback and explains how it will contribute to the agreements.
7. Agreements can now be implemented in future class sessions.
8. Instructor may wish to revisit the agreements with students later in the term to ensure effectiveness.