What a great teaching idea!

Min-Kyoung Rhee, Instructional Assistant Professor at the Leonard Davis School of Gerontology focuses on exploring diverse social determinants of health and mental health and understanding the mechanisms among those social determinants, particularly among ethnic minority older adults. In her courses, she uses anonymous student feedback to increase engagement.

Can you describe a specific teaching technique you use to engage students?

The core element of my teaching approach to enhance student engagement is to create a class environment in which students feel safe and comfortable to express their voices and to provide them with opportunities to apply the knowledge they learned in class to their real-life situations.

One technique I often use to encourage students to participate free from concerns about being judged is asking them to provide anonymous feedback. Using online tools that allow real-time anonymous interactions with students (e.g., google forms or Mentimeter), students have opportunities to share their thoughts during or at the end of the class. Anonymous participation during the class allows students, whether they're assertive or quiet, to freely share their personal thoughts on a topic. Students are also encouraged to provide anonymous feedback at the end of the class. Using google forms, students write one takeaway message they learned during class, one thing they liked about the class, and one suggestion or request to improve the class. The form is also linked on the Blackboard so that they can provide feedback any time they want to, and this serves as a critical channel for honest communication between the students and the instructor during the semester. I find this approach helpful especially at the beginning of the semester when I meet new students as it helps me to gauge and address student needs about the class right away, rather than waiting until midterm or final evaluations.

Another technique that I use to help students apply the knowledge they learn in class to their real-life situations is giving them time for brief self-reflection on the topic they learned and sharing with classmates through group discussions or class activities. They sometimes work collaboratively on a concept map (using Google Jamboard or Slides) or have a debate on a controversial topic. Students are also given a mini-project that they can work on to

improve themselves throughout the semester based on what they have learned. For example, students have worked on topics, such as tackling procrastination, improving sleep deprivation, building healthy eating habits, managing stress and anxiety through meditation or exercise, or teaching their grandparents how to use technology. It's always exciting and rewarding to see how students grow through challenging and overcoming their limitations in their unique ways.

For professors in other disciplines who would like to use this technique, what do you look for to let you know it's working.

The techniques I have introduced above may work best for small or medium-sized classes with less than 50 students. At the beginning of the semester, I introduce the anonymous feedback system to students explaining its purpose and methods. For the first 4-5 weeks, I give them 2-3 minutes at the end of class to invite as many students as possible in providing their thoughts. I also openly share the summarized comments at the beginning of the following class, and if needed, I briefly discuss how their suggestions will be incorporated into the class.

You're on the right path if you find the information that students provide helpful to better understand their learning experiences and notice that they honestly share constructive and creative ideas for the class. As the semester goes by, the anonymous feedback system may naturally wear off as both students and instructors share common ground on class expectations and course directions.

An instructor may also notice the increase in the number of students actively and voluntarily sharing their ideas in class without being hesitant. They may seem more comfortable sharing their ideas in class as they get closer to their classmates through multiple discussion sessions and class activities. They also enjoy learning through listening to other classmates' perspectives, rather than solely through the lecture. You will notice the difference as there will be an increased number of interactions among students before, during, and after class. Students may also approach the instructor to share how the class content was related to their real life and start asking further questions. By the end of the semester, both the instructor and students may feel that they have created a safe class environment in which their sharing will be heard and respected.

What advice do you have for other instructors who are interested in doing something similar?

The key to this approach is to find ways to communicate with students and invite them as active contributors to their learning environment, rather than them being passive receivers of knowledge. Putting students at the center of learning creates opportunities for collaboration and increased engagement. For example, there once were suggestions that students wanted to review the course content by playing games, and that led me to explore ways of how to do that. We now sometimes play Kahoot, Quizlet, Jeopardy, etc. Many students express appreciation for the fact that their voices are heard and integrated into the class. However, you as an instructor cannot always address every suggestion that students

make. In that case, you can acknowledge the importance of their suggestion and share why you can't address it. Additionally, although the anonymous feedback helps the instructor know better about the student's experiences and thoughts, it may sometimes make you feel like your teaching is being constantly evaluated. Negative comments may also provoke stress. Rather than taking those comments personally, you may take them as a way for students to express their unmet needs. Based on my experience, there were far more rewarding and heartwarming sharing than negative comments. Instructors can adjust how to apply the anonymous feedback system at their own discretion (e.g., frequency, level of anonymity, etc.) based on the class size, course topic, or student dynamic.

Tips from CET

If you would like to implement anonymous feedback into your course, consider the following steps.

1. Choose a prompt for students to respond to, such as one new learning, one challenge, and/or one question. Or choose a prompt specific to the topic at hand.
2. Determine a method of collecting feedback (e.g., google forms, piece of paper, interactive online application).
3. Prior to the next class session, read student feedback and look for themes and any actionable responses. (e.g., if students appeared to have missed an important concept, consider providing supplemental materials).
4. Briefly address the findings of the feedback with students to demonstrate the relevance of the feedback activity.
5. Make clear to the students that this is anonymous and voluntary participation.

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