

what they have learned to the next level: can students choose good topics for discussion, create useful exam questions, or lead segments of class? Can students develop useful research questions, choose appropriate projects, or pick useful methods to study something new? Can students make effective choices about how to adapt classroom activities and assignments to course learning objectives? Can they design their own ways to demonstrate that they have met those objectives? Such assessments use active learning to help students discover and amplify their own interests, curiosity, and motivations. They thereby teach students how to create and sustain engaged learning practices.

### Can They Assess Themselves?

Classroom practices in which students regularly explain the purposes of class activities and assignments and how they connect to course learning objectives can develop and assess students' habits of self-reflection in a relatively direct way. Asking students to reflect in writing frequently about their learning provides a deeper look into students' integration of their learning processes and how metacognitive they are about those integrations. The Student Assessment of their Learning Gains (SALG)—a free, online course-assessment instrument developed through grants from the National Science Foundation—was specifically designed to promote and assess this kind of metacognition and self-reflection on learning.<sup>3</sup> It can be used as a midterm or end-of-term assessment, and provides feedback on students' progress toward the course's learning objectives and on the effectiveness of the course's specific pedagogical strategies.

Finally, our assessments should enhance students' ability to self-assess by explicitly modeling assessment processes so students can internalize them. If students are to become capable of knowing when they have learned well and when they have not, they must learn how to critique and evaluate their own

learning. Being able to improve one's habits of learning intentionally, wisely, and strategically likewise depends on regular and effective self-assessment. Peer reviews, peer editing, and peer evaluations are common ways of teaching students to self-assess. Grading their own work brings this kind of work even closer to home. Students can also design evaluation rubrics, develop new assessments that demonstrate mastery of course objectives, and write critiques that assess their own progress toward their learning goals. When instructors explain grading criteria, why they set their standards as they do, and how those criteria and standards are related to learning objectives, they help students learn how to self-assess appropriately.

When our assessments teach students to independently and effectively assess their own learning, we close the gap between teaching and learning and transform our assessment praxes into meaningful ways to fulfill our real goals as teachers. And by creating expert and independent meta-learners, we create a better, more consciously chosen future. ■■

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that these other goals are unimportant. Accreditation, grades, and ability to prove the effectiveness of a program or curriculum are all vital parts of what college teachers do, but they are secondary to helping students learn, which is the *raison d'être* of higher education.

<sup>2</sup> Learning that lasts more than a few weeks does so because transformative learning physically rewires the brain, making new connections between neurons so that they create different patterns of responding to the world around us.

<sup>3</sup> Full disclosure: I am a member of the research team that developed the SALG. The SALG is a valid, reliable instrument for measuring learning gains that has been used by over 16,000 university instructors since it became available in 1997. Anyone can access and use it: [www.salgsite.org](http://www.salgsite.org).

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## PRAXIS

### Simple Strategies to Develop Rapport with Students and Build a Positive Classroom Climate

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I wanted to make my classroom a lively and engaging place. I hoped the “feel” of the classroom would motivate the students to come to class and participate in activities and discussions. To that end, I brainstormed ideas that would be simple, efficient, and effective strategies to develop positive interpersonal rapport, both student-to-student and student-to-professor.

My first step toward developing a rapport with students was to engage them in dialog. To do that, I needed to create a forum conducive to sharing ideas—one that was not too personal where students felt intimidated about sharing their lives, and also one that was not too broad where students could give a canned response every class. I wanted the forum to be a foundation of positive interpersonal exchanges where students shared non-course-related tidbits to establish common ground with classmates. Stemming from that common ground, I hoped, thinking, talking, and working with course content would emerge.

To that end, I designed two introductory activities used at the beginning of every class meeting, the Check-In and Warm-Up. The Check-In was discussed first and the Warm-Up followed. The Check-In was the forum used to get class started in a casual, social manner. It was followed by the Warm-Up,

which, while still casual, signaled the transition to a more content-based discussion. These were intentionally sequenced to, first, get the students comfortable talking about general ideas and then, use that comfort as a segue into the course content. Previously, I've tried simple Warm-Ups independent of the Check-In and something was missing. The participation was lacking—only the same handful of students contributed. My goal here was to “hook” all students with the Check-In and gradually use that momentum to get into class discussions and activities.

## Check-In

As students entered class, the Check-In was displayed as slide one of the day's PowerPoint presentation. It listed five questions:

1. What's new?
2. What's exciting?
3. What's bothering you?
4. What have you thought about from last class?
5. Describe your mood in one sentence (optional follow-up).

These five questions remained the same all semester.

## The Why

On day one, I explicitly shared the rationale behind the activities with the students. I explained I was exploring ways in which I could make class a more comfortable and safe place where everyone felt accepted and valued. I shared that it was my goal that those feelings of acceptance would transfer into course activities and discussions and that extra engagement would increase students' understanding of course content.

## The How

Each class started with the same five Check-In questions. Each class member had to select one—and only one—question and respond to it aloud. The responses need not be academic; in fact, they should not be. I designed the questions around the understanding that students come to class with a variety of

emotions and experiences, so each student could select the question that most appealed to him/her at that moment. The selected question could change with each class.

## First, get the students comfortable talking about general ideas and then, use that comfort as a segue into the course content.

The Check-In was conducted in a quick, roundtable format to allow, and sometimes gently prompt, students to use their voice and speak up in class. To make the initial sharing a little less daunting, I shared my personal experience that, for me, the most difficult part of speaking up in class was doing it for the first time. By encouraging all to participate—opting out was not an option—we could overcome that first hurdle. Because topics were vague and open-ended, students could select any topic and, briefly, address it. Since this was introduced in the very first class of the semester, students may have thought my participation request odd, but they complied.

On day one, I modeled a response for each of the five questions to show students the type of response that was expected—succinct and personal. For example, my exemplars included:

1. What's new? I have just purchased concert tickets.
2. What's exciting? I am excited about the upcoming trip out of state.
3. What's bothering you? I am bothered by the lack of campus parking.
4. What have you thought about from last class? Since last class I have thought of ways to inspire students to speak up more in class.

5. Describe your mood in one sentence (optional follow-up). I am optimistic about the new semester.

Following my samples, students were reminded they must contribute and they should select only one question. This initial round was met with a bit of skepticism, but all students, some with a bit of prompting, participated. These five questions were the tools used to begin to develop a rapport with and between students.

## Warm-Up

Following the round of Check-Ins, part two of the introductory activity was introduced, the Warm-Up. As with the Check-In, participation was mandatory and all had a turn in the same roundtable session as the Check-In. In contrast to the Check-In, which remained the same all year and was not content-focused, the Warm-Up changed with every class and *was* content-focused. Intentionally sequenced to come second, the Warm-Up followed the Check-In to capture students' emerging comfort with participating in class discussions, and use that as a springboard into the topic of the day.

## DIY Warm-Up

Warm-Ups were tailored to the content of the course. I found the best way to create a Warm-Up was to consider a favorite icebreaker. I used the frame of the game, challenge, or puzzle as the icebreaker and replaced the general question with a content-related one. Some examples include:

**Take Sides.** This Warm-Up presents two dichotomies challenges participants to take a side and justify their stance. To link this idea to course work, juxtapose ideas presented in a chapter, reading, or lecture and ask students to take a side and defend their choice. For example, in a psychology course, two choices could be: Piaget or Dewey?

**Who (or What) Am I?** This Warm-Up requires key concepts or names of people in the discipline printed, before class, on an index card. As

students enter the class, they are given one index card—but *cannot look at it*. Students can either hold the card against their forehead or tape it to their backs. Then each student must mingle with classmates asking yes/no questions to identify the person/idea printed on the index card. This is a terrific way to review content prior to an exam because all members of the class are responsible for working together to give clues and draw conclusions on professor-provided topics.

**One Word.** This Warm-Up challenges groups of students to describe a professor-provided topic or person. At the beginning of the Warm-Up, the professor will assign each student a number (1–5) that correlates to a small group. The trick here is to have students work with other students beyond those with whom they normally interact. The professor will give each group a topic from the assigned reading or course work and challenge the group to come to consensus with one word that relates to the given topic. By limiting the descriptors, students must exchange ideas within the small group and justify why they think their idea will work as they listen to, and possibly refute, peers' ideas.

The Warm-Ups serve as a bridge between the nonacademic Check-In and the professor-led lecture, discussion, or activity. I used the Warm-Up as a prelude into the daily topic and tried to interweave students' ideas presented in both the Check-In and Warm-Up into the activities and discussions. Having the students' voice embedded into the talking points of class engaged students and helped them link their understanding to the new topics.

## Large Classes

These activities were implemented in a small educational psychology class (n=20). From beginning of Check-In to completion of Warm-Up, the activities lasted approximately 15 minutes. On stressful days, like midterm or end of the term when students felt the pressures of the semester, the

Check-In lasted a bit longer. If these activities were being used in large classes, integrating technology, like "Poll Everywhere," to allow multiple students to share thoughts in real time may be a useful strategy. The oral contributions would be lost, but perhaps, the sharing via mobile device could inspire students normally reluctant to voice thoughts.

## From the Students

At the conclusion of the semester, I asked students to reflect on the Check-In and Warm-Up. In anonymous, ungraded paper-and-pencil responses, students shared:

"I admit, the first couple of classes were uncomfortable for me because the atmosphere was unparalleled to any other course I had taken. However, my initial moments of discomfort when I was asked to share turned positive and impacted my view of the class. I believe this has helped me learn more content than I have in any other course."

"The warm-up and check in have created a comfortable and safe environment for our class. As a senior, I have never been one to speak that much in class. Although I doubted this exercise at first, it has truly given me the confidence to actively participate in class discussions."

"The warm-up and check in is something I look forward to doing every class. I feel like it brought me closer to my peers and professor. It helped me feel more engaged and committed to class which in turn made it easier to work in groups, respond to questions, and present materials to the class. I feel if more classes did warm-ups and check-ins, more students would feel more connected and comfortable in class and get more out of going to the class."

"I really enjoyed the warm-up/check-in. I'm an introvert. I don't like to talk usually, but these warm ups have really made it easier for me to make connections and to answer questions in class. In my other classes, I don't speak at all; these activities helped me learn about those around me and that we aren't as different as we seem."

## Voices From Other Disciplines

As part of an unrelated project, colleagues from other departments observed my class and they shared some thoughts with me:

"I have never seen a college course start like this. It created a warm feeling I have not seen in other courses."

"You share a lot of yourself with the students. I have never considered doing this. After seeing the way the students respond, I may try some of these ideas next semester."

"Departments don't teach you to teach. I know my subject matter, but ways to present it and ways to engage students in learning are unsaid. This gave me ideas to try with my students."

## Now What?

One day, toward the middle of the semester, I was feeling pressed for time and suggested we skip the Check-In and Warm-Up. The class groaned at me, and two students complained, saying they had been looking forward to this part of class all day. I scrapped my crowded "to-do" list for the day and gave them the time to Check-In and Warm-Up. Finding a balance between taking class time to develop positive rapport and class climate while still addressing course content can be challenging. However, if we can take a few small steps to build a classroom that supports open sharing and the discussion of ideas in a positive, safe, and fun atmosphere, that is time well-spent, as we will meet both the students' need for a positive rapport with their professor and their need to understand and retain course content. I'm going to keep this as part of my class routine. |||

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