

## Asked students to share ideas and experiences with others whose backgrounds and viewpoints differ from their own

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### Why this Teaching Method Matters

Faculty who encourage the interchange of differing viewpoints among students, and who create a safe environment for doing so, counter what Garcia and Hoelscher (1) call subtle, systemic, and exclusionary messages. Class and homework activities that require sharing ideas and experiences with others of different backgrounds facilitate educational outcomes that students appreciate as useful for success in a multicultural society (2). With student diversity in college classrooms increasing, teachers must make assignments diversity-effective – the chances that students will learn with classmates of varying ethnicities and preferences increase every term. This is a teaching strategy students say they want (3, 4), and the strategy produces multiple benefits, such as clear increases in understanding and academic success as well as decreases in prejudicial attitudes (4).

This IDEA Item highly correlates with diversity-sensitive teaching methods including: #13 (introducing stimulating ideas about the subject), #15 (inspiring students to set/achieve challenging goals), #18 (asking students to help each other understand ideas/concepts), and #19 (giving projects, tests, or assignments that require original or creative thinking). This method also highly correlates with learning objectives #28 (developing skill in oral and written expression), #30 (developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values), and #31 (learning to analyze and critically evaluate

ideas, arguments, and points of view). These correlations suggest a powerful connection between sharing ideas with others of different backgrounds and developing higher-order thinking skills and broader viewpoints. Major reviews of research on the effects of attending college (5) conclude that the greatest changes in students are in areas such as psychosocial change, attitudes and values, and moral development. These are all linked with increased involvement with others from different backgrounds. Widely used measures of engagement such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (6) explore such interactions. One approach to improving your effectiveness on Item #16 is to create collaborative activities using the IDEA methods above, and/or focusing on the listed IDEA objectives.

Be aware that many students practice what Perry calls dualist thinking (7). These students expect any question to have a single correct answer, one known to the instructor. These students perceive their role in learning is to listen for correct answers shared by their instructor and then memorize those answers for later use on assessments. These students can be uneasy when asked to listen to and learn from their peers. Illustrating to these students that some questions have multiple defensible answers, some perhaps better than others, can help move them away from dualist thinking and towards a mindset that more values the perspectives of others.

### Applying this Teaching Method in the Classroom

Success in facilitating this kind of interaction requires that you know your own beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices. The attitudes you exhibit in teacher-student interactions inform all your classroom behavior as well as your pedagogy and content (8, 9). Asking students to share their viewpoints and allowing for a diversity of responses

prompted by different backgrounds, cultures, and orientations, is easier if you are prepared to have your own ideas challenged and acknowledge the legitimacy of that process.

Two useful paradigms within which to structure oppor-

tunities for students to share with others of differing backgrounds are: 1) the transformative approach, which prompts students to “view contributions, events, issues, and course concepts from the perspective of members of targeted groups”; and 2) the social action approach, which empowers students to “make decisions on important personal, social and civic problems and take action to help solve them” (10). Either approach expands students’ communication, team-building, and relationship skills, and deepens understandings prompted by considering that content from multiple perspectives. A tactic to engage students safely in conversations involving multiple perspectives is to define class as a place where truth is sought. The truth will sometimes be within disciplinary content (in a physics class, I study Newton’s discovery of truth) and sometimes in discoveries made working with classmates of different backgrounds and beliefs (I re-evaluate what I have so far believed about Islam in light of what I now know about my calculus classmate who is Muslim). A good working process for having students share ideas and experiences is to encourage and demonstrate critical thinking as the basis for discussion and as a means to discern truth from non-truth.

Group work allows student interaction with others of different backgrounds in a more personal setting than class discussion. You can assign group membership to serve diversity. The Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Carolina (11) offers good tips for this. One tip concerns how to avoid having minority students feel you are singling them out as a result of your good intentions to expose other students to their potentially different perspectives; change group assignments occasionally so that a small group of minority students work together one time and are split among multiple groups at other times. The same UNC publication emphasizes the importance of establishing your classroom as a zone of safety for exploring the differences that come with diversity. You should set ground rules for objective evaluation of others’ opinions and viewpoints, modeling this as you lead the class. For your students to benefit from a class with diverse classmates, all must feel safe to express their ideas and beliefs. Emphasizing a critical thinking approach as the class seeks truth can help lessen anxiety in such discussions.

## Applying this Teaching Method Online

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Addressing diversity in the online classroom can be challenging. Students’ cultural identities are often hidden behind the electronic screen. However, because Facebook usage is nearly ubiquitous among typical college-aged

students, they are usually at ease meeting and working in a virtual environment where their interactions often naturally and quickly reveal personal information. West and West (12) indicate that millennial students “tend to be more open to diversity, differences, and sharing” than previous generations and are strikingly self-revealing, which the Wests say is a double-edged sword because this makes “early communications easier” while also opening the door to a “wide variety of distractions and off-task discussions” (pp. 24-25). One way to minimize off-topic exchanges online is to provide students a venue at the start of the course to share about themselves but then make clear that discussion in the virtual classroom will be about class topics. Providing a virtual “student lounge” as a place for social and off-topic exchanges can help students honor the distinction between class and non-class discussion.

Online students’ “perception of culture” among their classmates and instructor affects their estimation of the class, and sometimes students believe online learning activities do not consider students’ cultural backgrounds (13). While this could also be the case in face-to-face classes, careful wording of the prompts to elicit student thoughts and discussion can help ensure class interchanges which force a consideration of diverse viewpoints, whether the assignment is a group project, threaded discussion, a wiki, or other kinds of collaborative work. Owens’ (14) concept of “practiced empathy” breaks through stereotyping by asking participants to try to perceive magazine ads and photos through the sensibilities of diverse groups, and prompts which require such engagement help students to consider other worldviews in new and impactful ways.

Since students who perceive their views to be minority ones may be hesitant to share those views with their peers, consider ways to make it more likely diverse points of view will enter the class discussions. Create more risk-friendly environments by clarifying with students the ground rules for online discussions and general “netiquette.” Although discussion ground rules are helpful in face-to-face settings, they can be even more important in online environments given the ease with which text-only comments can be misconstrued.

Surfacing diverse points of view can be enabled by allowing students to respond to questions and prompts independently, submitting their own responses before seeing their peers’ responses. You might, for example, have student posts to a course blog be held for moderation by you. Once all the posts have been submitted, you approve them in a batch so that they all appear on the blog at once. This allows students to contribute their

unique points of view without being unduly influenced by students who respond to your prompt most quickly. See (15) for more on the importance of independent work to leveraging the diversity of thought and experiences in a group.

## Assessing this Teaching Method

It is critical that students understand your means of assessing their success with the process of class interactions. Otherwise, students in your class may wonder why part of their grade should be linked to how they interact with their peers. Define group learning objectives and provide good rubrics for measuring success in attaining those objectives. A group charter and guidelines (see POD-IDEA Center Notes Item #18) should define acceptable team member interaction as part of assessing interaction skills. Also, the course grading explanation in your syllabus should define acceptable interchange of ideas in the zone of safety that is your classroom.

One piece of instructional technology – clickers – can be useful when examining potentially contentious issues as seen through different perspectives. Minority opinion students may hesitate to identify themselves publicly with a show of hands, but anonymous feedback gathered with clickers creates a safer environment to do this, whether in face-to-face or virtual classrooms (16).

Accreditors generally have specific expectations about assessing quality in online courses. As distance education units have operationalized such expectations, student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction are key metrics. If there's not much, then the course differs little from a correspondence course. Given the importance of peer-to-peer sharing in online learning, good prompts that stimulate discussion among diverse learners and viewpoints should be common practice. Assessing the effectiveness of virtual class interactions should follow similar guidelines as for in-person classes, but at least one e-learning aspect helps the online instructor in this regard: students' interactions as captured in threaded discussions can be perused later and considered more carefully than when noting students' real-time contributions in a face-to-face class.

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