



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range * (434) 982-2815 * trc-uva@virginia.edu * <http://trc.virginia.edu>

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Engaging Students from Beginning to End

Lisa Reilly, *Horace W. Goldsmith Distinguished Teaching Professor (1999-2002), Department of Architectural History*

I find the first class of the semester to be a particularly challenging one. I want to convey a sense of passion and enthusiasm for my course while establishing an atmosphere that will encourage discussion and active thinking. At the same time, I want to establish a framework for the course and find out what students know and think they know about the course content. To address these challenges, I pose on day one three questions relevant to each particular course, questions that are very basic, yet fundamental; we then revisit these questions throughout the semester and reconsider them more fully during the last class. I begin this way partly because I want my students to realize that they often know more than they think they do about the course content. Although they frequently assume, "Oh, I know nothing about the Middle Ages or architecture at all," they actually do know quite a bit about the subject already. Listening to my students' answers to these global questions also provides me with a sense of where the class is overall in its level of knowledge about the material. Through this simple exercise, the students reveal both their prior knowledge and any preconceptions or misconceptions they might have; I can then tailor subsequent discussions to best help them learn.

At the end of the semester, students write a short paper in response to a more refined version of these questions. This assignment requires students to synthesize the material explored in the course and gives them a sense of how their thinking has changed over the semester. It also provides an

excellent review for the essay questions on the final exams. On the last day of class, as the students discuss their responses, I remind them of the ideas they voiced at the beginning of the semester, asking such questions as "How did you change your thinking? How have your ideas about the material changed?"

This technique works in a number of different teaching settings, including my large lower-level surveys, mid-level courses, and even graduate seminars. Although I might vary the kinds of questions or how students share their answers, these activities open up the discussion and encourage students to think critically about the course material. In addition, this technique encourages them to consider each class session in terms of a larger framework. Rather than focusing exclusively on such details as dates or definitions, students learn also to consider broader implications.

Introductory Courses

In my 100-level Survey of Western Architecture, for example, I might divide the class into three groups, asking each group to answer one of the following questions:

- "What is architecture?"
- "What is history?"
- "What is Western?"

After writing individually for a few minutes, each student compares responses with two people nearby. This exercise not only provokes students to articulate their background knowledge and perceptions, but it also serves as an icebreaker. Particularly in large, introductory survey courses, where most students are new to the college experience and often nervous, talking in small

groups diffuses some anxiety and helps them to become comfortable speaking in class. This activity also introduces students early on to the kinds of group work I use extensively in my classes. During these group discussions I usually move around the room, talking to different groups to see how they are doing, introduce myself to the students and make myself available for questions.

To transition into the larger group discussion, I ask one of the groups to volunteer a definition of the term they worked on, and I never have a problem finding someone to start the conversation. Having worked in groups, students can speak more confidently, often referring to the partners with whom they worked. Instead of "I think," they can now say, "Our group thought ...," or "My partner came up with this great idea..." As they speak, I note their responses on the board. After each "expert group" has finished, I open discussion to the whole class, asking whether anyone would like to add something to the list or respond to the items already noted. Only after students have thus generated definitions of architecture, history, and Western on their own, do I introduce definitions scholars have offered and tell them what I think of them. At this point, I outline how the course will deal with these questions and what type of materials we will work with. In short, I use this activity as a springboard for my course introduction. The trick is, however, to ask students first; otherwise you won't be able to assess their background knowledge. The final stage of this exercise comes at the end of the semester, when I either ask all students to write a one-page paper in response to a question I posed at the beginning (for instance, "How would you define architecture?" or "What is history?") or ask the TAs to return to these questions in their discussion sections.

Upper-level Courses

In smaller, upper-level classes—in my case, courses on early- and later-medieval architecture—I start with more specific questions, often asking my students:

- "How would you define 'medieval'?"
- "Make a timeline of ideas you are familiar with from the Middle Ages."
- "What is 'dark' about the Middle Ages?"

Once again, I ask them to write their ideas or perhaps produce a concept map and then discuss these in small groups. When the class discusses the questions as a whole, I make sure that any incorrect items (e.g., the student who thinks Henry VIII lived from 1525 to 1600) are properly placed on the timeline. This exercise allows me not only to correct a few misconceptions regarding the chronology of historical events but also to clarify what is and is not covered in this particular course.

At the end of the first class, I collect their papers, so we can return to them at the end of the semester. On the last day of class, I ask them again: "How would you define the Middle Ages now?" or "How is this period different from what you thought?" This usually generates a very rich discussion in which students analyze their own perceptions and acknowledge the nuances and sophistication their understanding has gained in the course of the semester. Because their earlier ideas are tangibly present when I hand their papers back, the students are forced to contrast their earlier ideas of the Middle Ages, which often viewed the period as a primitive age of barbarians, with their newly acquired knowledge of a sophisticated architecture produced by a complex society.

Graduate-level Courses

When using this technique in graduate courses on Norman Architecture where students bring a variety of background knowledge, I make sure that the medievalists, or specialists, join different groups. I then ask the class the following questions:

- "What is Norman Architecture?"
- "What kind of questions would you like to ask about these buildings?"
- "What kind of material do you think will be available to help us interpret them?"

After asking a volunteer to record the discussion, I put their answers up on the board. This discussion usually provides a nice segue into a discussion of research projects for the course. This exercise allows me to target their interests on the first day, with comments such as, "If you are interested in these particular questions, you might want to pick project x because you will be able to explore the issue of y." The final question concerning the types

of material evidence gives me a chance to clarify what sources we have available. For the study of medieval architecture, for example, there is a lot of textual evidence, so I ask questions such as these: "What kind of texts survived? What do these texts tell us? Are there images of buildings?" Following this discussion, I have a better understanding of the students' particular interests and level of understanding while they are beginning to understand the broad issues the course will raise as well as the possible means of addressing those issues.

To close out the seminar, I ask students to bring a one-page paper to the last class; in it, they are to address one of the central questions posed at the beginning of the semester on the basis of the work they've done since. We then spend at least an hour discussing their response and their shifts in perspective. Once again students have an opportunity to consider the course content more holistically, which is particularly valuable in seminars where students tend to become overly focused on their own research project and lose sight of the larger issues.

This approach can easily be adapted to any course: simply think in terms of the broad issues you want your course to raise as well what you want your students to think about and learn through their class experience.