



## Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

November-December 2016

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### Message from the Director



Universities are not insulated from major events in the world, and when a particularly noteworthy one occurs – a controversial election, a terrorist attack, or a natural disaster – the question arises of how classroom instructors should respond (or not). Most or all of the students will be aware of the event and many will be eager to talk about it in class. For classes that are directly relevant to the subject matter of the event, this is truly a teachable moment. For example, the day after the 9/11 attacks, I was teaching an undergraduate international conflict class and this proved to be a good opportunity to discuss many of the ideas and policies covered in the course as they applied to this particular happening. It is less clear whether class time should be devoted to an event when the event is unrelated to the course material. Is the surprising election of Donald Trump something that should be discussed in a class on literature or mechanical engineering? On the one hand, students might not be ready to learn the assigned topic of the day and discussing contemporary events is a way for students to discuss and interact with one another in important ways. On the other hand, under what conditions should an instructor in a course unrelated to the event decide to devote class time to that event? Should the magnitude of the event matter? How often should this diversion from the subject matter occur? Is the diversion valuable enough to justify delaying or eliminating planned lectures or class activities? There are no easy answers for instructors even as they might have the academic freedom to make such judgments.

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### Upcoming Events

#### *Faculty and Graduate TA Workshops*

Feb 2-3, SU 2.905 Dr. Stephen Chew, Samford University: *Improving Student Performance by Addressing Student and Teaching Misconceptions about Learning*

Dr. Chew's workshop on Thursday afternoon will be directed primarily to Graduate Teaching Assistants. Friday morning's workshop will be directed primarily to faculty members. Everyone will be welcome to attend the session that is more convenient, or to attend both.

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### Teaching Tip

In making classes relevant, instructors don't have to wait for major events to happen; proactive approaches can enhance student motivation and learning. Before starting a class session or launching a new topic, consider asking students "What is happening in your world that connects to \_\_\_\_\_?" or "How have you experienced \_\_\_\_\_?" and insert the topic of your choice. Another possibility is to assign a different student(s) for each class period to come up with something in the news or other

events that can be directly related to the material in the course. In some disciplines, students will readily realize and welcome the opportunity to apply course concepts to better understand their personal observations and experiences. In other courses, the relevance of subject matter to students' immediate or future concerns is far less obvious, but no less important. In these situations, it is even more important to be explicit in pointing out the connections between what students should be learning and why they should be learning it, whether you are teaching linear algebra, Shakespeare, or Viking history. Relevance of course material and the skills developed via specific course assignments is often appreciated in hindsight, but we don't need to wait until after students have left our classes for them to appreciate this relevance.

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### Research into Practice

Many if not most instructors believe it is easier to encourage discussions in smaller classes than in larger classes. However, it is typical for classroom observations to reveal that 5-8 students are responsible for 75-95% of verbal participation, regardless of the size or type of the class. This social norm comes about through the tacit acceptance of *consolidation of responsibility*. Students who speak up in class early in the semester become the ones who are expected to continue to do so, with the added expectation that it is *inappropriate* to expect others to do so. Changing this norm can be done, but it requires intentional effort on the part of the instructor. First, expose the norm, perhaps even by explicitly acknowledging it. Second, restructure the opportunities for interaction, such as by organizing small groups or pairs, or by requiring all students to generate a response to the discussion topic, with a sample of those responses then shared with the whole class. Here is an example of a way to get more students involved when discussing a difficult or controversial topic. Ask everyone to use an extra piece of paper to write their anonymous answer to a question. Tell them to crumple the paper into a ball and have a (gentle) snowball fight. After about 30 seconds of throwing the balls around the room, everyone picks one and shares the anonymous answer. Students who might never otherwise do so have a chance to be heard in a nonthreatening way.

For more on this, see:

Howard, J. R. (2015). *Discussion in the college classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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### What the Students Say

Students love classes that are "relevant" to their lives and connect to contemporary events. Thus, devoting class time to major events in the news is likely to be welcomed by students. That said, there are a number of risks involved. Major events might be closely connected to student identities, especially if they intersect with race and ethnicity, religion, or political ideology; shootings involving police are a notable example. Students report they are likely to react negatively to at least two different things. One is when the professor exhibits what is perceived as bias toward a given position, such that students believe that they must support or acquiesce to that viewpoint to be successful in the class. Another is listening to classmate statements with which they strongly disagree and have visceral reactions. Exercising personal restraint and structuring discussions appropriately can go a long way to making discussions of controversial happenings into learning experiences rather than ones that deepen student

frustrations.

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