



Let's Talk: Ideas for Making Lectures More Interactive

Dr. Gretchen Cole-Lade
gretchen.cole_lade@okstate.edu



Lecture courses continue to be a format most universities use to impart knowledge to adult learners (Nilson, 2010), in spite of some arguing it is an “ancient pedagogical device” (Bain, 2004, p. 98). Lectures may be viewed as a less effective format because, when taught using solely the sage on the stage strategy, lectures do not provide opportunities for deeper, more critical thinking. Instructors can strengthen the learning which occurs within lectures by systematically planning for and implementing a variety of instructional strategies to promote interactive conversations among students, either in pairs or small groups, or between the instructor and the students (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Research indicates that, when using a lecture format, instructors should plan for different opportunities for pairs or small groups of students to interact and discuss material covered in the lecture (Rowe, 1980). During these paired or small group discussions, students are provided time to pause, talk with a peer or peers, and process the request from the instructor using this time-controlled strategy (Nilson, 2010; Ruhl, Hughes, & Schloss, 1987). Based on the goal of the pairing, they can then compare their notes regarding the big idea of the lecture and share any information they might have that is different from their partner, reflect on what they have learned, develop a question they might have, or prepare to answer the question posed by the instructor (Filene, 2005; Nilson, 2010).

I have experimented with and now implement a few tried and true strategies for these paired or small group discussions to maintain students’ attention, provide opportunities for students to talk with peers and delve deeper into the lecture topic, and create a community of learners within my classes.

Here are a few:

1. Pair Share documentation

I provide a Partner Pair Share form for each student on the first day of class. The form has ten rows with spaces in each row for the date, the name(s) of and signatures from their partners that day, and the topic discussed. I collect these forms at the end of the semester and provide participation points for each time they participate in a Pair Share. I always have extra forms each class for students who may not have brought the form with them that day.

2. Preparing for the Pair Shares

Prior to asking the students to pair up, I give explicit instructions for what they will need to complete the Pair Share, for example, “You will need something to write with, your Pair Share form, and the article we will discuss today.” This will save time and help with the smooth movement within the class setting.

3. Breaking into pairs or small groups

It has been my experience that students prefer to stay in the same seat as the first day they come to class, which ultimately limits how many people they will talk with if allowed to remain in their seats. I use several strategies to address this. These strategies include:

- a. Find a partner you have not spoken with before. This provides the sense of comfort because it allows the first and possibly the second time for friends to talk together and for them to remain in their seat.
- b. Switch rows or sides of the classroom.
- c. Pick a Stick- I have all students write their names on a popsicle stick and then pull sticks to assign partners.
- d. Grouping items for students to pick from when arriving to class. I use a variety of grouping items (Starburst or Jolly Rancher candy, two or three-piece puzzle pieces, interlocking blocks in different colors). I then put up a slide on the board indicating how to group themselves together, either with similar colors, different colors, or a mixture of colors. We practice this the first time. The pairing up takes very little time with the visual representation on the board and clear, verbal instructions

4. Once in pairs or small groups, I plan for how they will respond to the prompt. I ask them to discuss the prompt in their pair or small group first, then will either pick sticks to choose a person's group to share out loud with the large group, will have them respond in writing as a group on a joint sheet of paper, or ask for a volunteer from a group to share.

These strategies provide opportunities for learning new information, encourage higher order thinking, and improve the communication skills of students (Nilson, 2010). When describing her teaching strategy using interactive groupings of students, Fay Godwin stated, "It's more like a gathering of minds looking at one subject and learning from each other." This quote sums up my enthusiasm for systematically planning for and implementing interactive pairs and small groups within each class I teach.

References

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