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Preparatory Notes As a Way to Individualize Teaching and Learning

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Preparatory Notes as a Way to Individualize Teaching and Learning

Floyd Cheung
Smith College

As professors of classes in the 13–50-student range, how can we individualize teaching and learning in a sustainable way? While lectures, whole-class discussions, and other activities can reach a large group of students, it can be hard—if not impossible—to engage with every single student's particular curiosities, questions, and ideas on a week-to-week basis. Teaching a class *in toto* as inclusively and equitably as we can is essential, but when students know that we care about them as individuals, they report higher levels of self-motivation and professor credibility (Teven & Hanson, 2002; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

Some of us have had success accomplishing this goal by requiring individual conferences or setting up online discussion forums. Personally, I haven't been able to solve the scheduling challenges of required individual conferences, especially if there are to be several during the semester. Online discussion forums have their uses, but I've found that many students post contributions perfunctorily. Moreover, because the structure of an online discussion forum invites communal response, it doesn't seem quite right for instructor-student engagement.

Individual Contact

The solution I've been implementing for years now is a refined version of the response paper, which I call the preparatory note. In most of my courses, students must email me at least two hours before class with their preparatory notes of about 250 words in length. My syllabus explains, "These notes are a way mainly for you to gather your thoughts and secondarily for me to get a sense of what is on your mind. You might write a brief reaction paper; pose some questions; share your observations on a striking formal feature, passage, or pattern; describe a connection between the primary and secondary readings; or explain a connection between the reading and your own life, another class you're taking, or contemporary popular media. I will respond with a brief email before class, perhaps to encourage you to share your idea in class, follow up with me during office hours, or pursue your thinking in some other way."



Opening Dialogue/ Seeding Discussion

For efficiency, I limit my responses to two sentences: one that acknowledges the significance of whatever they are observing or asking and one that encourages them to share their question or observation in class, pursue their idea in writing, and/or talk with me about their note during office hours. In courses with more than 40 students, I make the workload more manageable by dividing the class in half (e.g., students with last names beginning with A–L send notes on Tuesday, while students with last names beginning with M–Z send them on Thursday; we switch days at midsemester). Note that no preparatory notes are expected when other major assignments are due.

My opening sentence often begins with “Thank you, _____, for observing/asking about/challenging _____.” My second sentence can take several forms, like “Consider asking about this in class discussion today,” “When we discuss this passage in class, may I ask you to say something about what you noticed?” “If you have time later, consider reading _____ on this topic,” “This is a promising seed for your next essay,” or “Let’s talk about this further during office hours.” If the preparatory note falls far short of 250 words or seems insufficiently thoughtful to me, my response would ask the student to develop his or her idea more fully next time.

A Co-Created Lesson Plan

Of course, this means that I must block out the two hours before my class begins. I understand that those of us with heavy teaching loads cannot do this, but I’ve decided that within my constraints, the time is worthwhile. Instead of simply re-reading and crafting my own lesson plan, I weave my collated sense of what is on



my students’ minds into something more like a co-created lesson plan for the day. Recently, I’ve boiled my lesson plans down to no more than five items, which I put on the board as an agenda. Usually, I begin with the topic or question that is on most students’ minds. Unless my students have given me permission to call on them regarding their prep-note idea, I don’t single anyone out. In many cases, it works simply to say something like “Based on your prep notes this morning, I can tell that many of you are thinking about...” Because I have encouraged students to speak up beforehand, and because they have had time to gather their thoughts, students normally jump right in.

“These notes are a way mainly for you to gather your thoughts and secondarily for me to get a sense of what is on your mind.”

Respecting Privacy- Building Trust

Sometimes, however, the ideas that emerge in preparatory notes are not meant for communal discussion. Because the notes are private—i.e., not posted in a forum—many students feel free to pour their hearts out to me. I often assign works of Asian-American literature that evoke strong reactions from many of my students, either about their own identities, their family, or their friends. Some students use preparatory notes to start conversations with me about issues that would not come up in any other way—certainly not in class discussion and only sometimes during office hours. My responses to these emails acknowledge both their trust in me as well as their content.

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Editor's Note:

The greatest lesson I brought back from the series of monthlong residencies I undertook in 2015 on college campuses was this: There is no greater gift one person can give to another than the gift of having them know they have been listened to. I learned this in leading discussions with groups of faculty, faculty who seldom have the chance to talk with one another about teaching qua teaching. This experience led me to respond with enthusiasm when I heard **Floyd Cheung** of Smith College speak about “preparatory notes” at a recent conference. I immediately asked him to write about his practice for *NTLF*. The practice is a bit like “just-in-time teaching” approaches, with the vitally important difference that it makes a very personal connection with students. It allows them to feel listened to.

Socratic dialogue or the Socratic method is something many faculty profess to be using in their teaching, but a true Socratic dialogue isn't easy to pull off. It's a rigorous, demanding endeavor and, while Socrates might presume a willing, interested audience, contemporary faculty can't always, thus adding to the challenges. **Charles Szypszak** of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill contributes a useful review of the challenge and good advice on how to meet it.

This issue's **SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE** column by **Howard Aldrich** (also from UNC-Chapel Hill) echoes some of Jose Bowen's thinking discussed in our last issue—students' need for helpful nudges, if not the old *in loco parentis*. In his piece, “Why Students Need Small Wins in Their Milestones,” Aldrich explores what he learned from something he tried with students that initially failed. He tried to give them “easy wins” in the form of points earned from a few postings about class discussions and assignments on the internet. His failure lay in not setting deadlines for the postings, and students (who had other priorities) waited until the last hours of the semester to post anything. They needed to be nudged by set milestones to make these postings throughout the semester.

The **CREATIVITY CAFÉ** column in this issue by the Eastern Kentucky University trio of **Charlie Sweet**, **Hal Blythe**, and **Rusty Carpenter** not only offers snapshots of current thinking about creativity and teaching creativity, but it also offers in itself a model of creative brainstorming. Few of us set out to do anything without wanting to know what others have done along similar lines. Reviewing their efforts can both inform ours and spur us to more creative approaches—at least that's what this trio's random walk through current research implies. It's worked for Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thoreau. Why not us?

We also reprint a short handout from **Georgia Southern University's Center for Online Learning** on Nine Events of Instruction. Good teachers already know these things, but as Atul Gawande famously explained in his book *The Checklist Manifesto*, even the best practitioners can benefit from a checklist. But what about the “new literacy”? **Melissa Cheese** and **Cassandra Sachar** of Bloomsburg University explore how to transfer student savvy in reading memes to reading academic texts.

They can also benefit from the little capsules of wisdom quotations often capture. This issue includes a selection of quotations on failure culled from the collection of the famous quotation compiler Dr. Mardy Grothe. Generally, faculty don't see themselves as needing to impart wisdom, but they do. And the wisdom of what to do with and how to confront and learn from mistakes and failures is a vital part of the wisdom students need to improve their learning. These quotations address that issue.

Finally, **Marilla Svinicki's AD REM...** column looks at the research comparing the value of practice tests versus simple practice.

—James Rhem

These small assignments not only serve as low-stakes nudges to make sure students prepare for class—just doing them earns full credit—but also work as a form of “light-touch, targeted feedback” (Carrell & Kurlaender, 2017). Carrell and Kurlaender found that personalized emails to students encouraging them to perform self-efficacious and help-seeking behaviors increased their sense of engagement and belonging.

Maintaining the ‘Zone’

Preparatory notes achieve a similar goal with the added benefit of addressing students' particular intellectual musings and supporting their sense of individual worth. It remains difficult to keep an entire class of diverse students in the “zone of proximal development,” but this individualized attention can help (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Furthermore, instructor responses can operate as microaffirmations, or “tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening” (Rowe, 2008, p. 4). Yes, thinking about and answering all those preparatory notes take time, but I've found the time well-spent. ❖

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