

“Classrooms and Social Justice: Why Start with Pedagogy?”

By Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis

Active Learning Activities You Can Use in Your Classroom Today

Think-Pair-Share. This works best with index cards and a timer. (a) Ask a question (e.g., What was the single most provocative/disagreeable/brilliant/inspiring comment you read in this week’s assignment?) Give students 90 seconds (max.) to write out an answer on their card. (b) When the timer sounds, have students take 90 seconds to take turns sharing in pairs, one person reads her card while the other listens, and then the second reads her card and the other listens. In the same short time frame, they then decide what they will present to the group—they can merge, edit, or choose one or the other. When the timer sounds, they must have synthesized one comment. (c) Go around the room (if less than 40 students), and have one person from each pair read/share their comment with the group. Whatever you do next, this method ensures that everyone is involved, alert, and already thinking across a range of different ideas. If you have more than 40 students, you can create a Google Doc or use another online collaborative tool and have everyone record their comment. OR you can collect all the cards and structure the rest of your discussion by reading from cards you pick randomly.

Exit Tickets. You can do this with any size group, even in a lecture for 600 students, or use it to substitute for pop quizzes or taking attendance. At the end of each class, have students (using index cards or paper) write down one idea from the class that they can’t stop thinking about, that they wish to discuss further, that they disagree with, etc. (You can vary this each class). You can begin your next class drawing from some of these reflections. You can also save these and hand back their cards at the end of the semester when they’re working on their final paper or studying for their final exam.

The Entry Ticket. You can also begin your next class with an Entry Ticket on which each student writes the one idea or quotation that sticks with them most from the reading assignment. You can ask for volunteers to share or go around the room and ask everyone to share. This shows many things, including how we may think we are all reading the same text, but our attention and interests actually shape and select what we read, what we remember. Turning the classroom from a site in which authority is modeled and rewarded to one in which there is Total Participation—where each student has a voice, agency, active participation—is an important step to turning your classroom into a site of equality and activism, not passivity.

Everybody Raise Your Hand. This is the method used by the polymath, self-taught speculative fiction writer Samuel Delany. Whenever you ask a question, have every student raise a hand. You call on anyone. They can either answer or say “I don’t understand the question” (in which case you ask “why?” and start a discussion there) or say “I don’t know the answer—but I bet Derek/Dahlia does.” This simple technique asserts that “I don’t know” is a starting place, not a source of shame. (Your students will also prepare more if they know they are responsible for every question, every class, even if they don’t know the answer.)

Question Stacking. Ask students to raise their hands in response to a question and write down the name of everyone with a hand up. Have everyone put their hand down and call on people in order, and no one asks a second question until each person responds or withdraws the question because someone else answered it already. We know seminars can replicate inequality even more than lectures, by seeming to be open but privileging those who are best at mimicking or mirroring the intellectual style, language, or even demographic characteristics (race, gender, sexuality, region, religion, etc) of the professor. (Admit it: we've all been to lecture where we know in advance who will be waving a hand and dominating the Q and A. That happens in class too.)

Collaborative Note-Taking. Set up a Google Doc or other collaborative tool for each site and have students take notes together in class, including with a back channel for conversation during class, where they also add links and other items they find in web searches. This puts a twist on the "laptop or no laptop" question. You can also create extra-credit reward systems for those who contribute most, make requirements that everyone contribute something, have students vote up and down ideas, and find other ways that the laptop becomes an instrument of learning not—like the school paper of old—a form of diversion and escape.

Interview. Have students work in pairs and interview one another. You might have them ask, "What three things are you most worried will be hard about this class?" and "What three things can you contribute to our class that we don't know about?" and do a skill pairing on the first day of class. You can also use the technique throughout the semester to ask about the assignment or problem sets or whatever is on the syllabus for the day. Have them together prepare what they think will be an interesting question, challenge, problem, to present to the whole class to address or solve. In a large lecture, you can have them work in a group on the topic.

Know/Don't Know. Set up three columns on the board with these headings: "Know," "Think We Know," and "Don't Know," leaving plenty of space between each of the three columns. You can do all of this together as a class to start out. Ask students to list what we know about (X); for example, the historical context of a book. You, or a volunteer student, can keep track of this list up on the board in the "Know" column. As students run out of facts they *definitely* know, the conversation will naturally drift into things we should probably look up together as a class. Put those under the list "Think We Know." Eventually the conversation will get closer what you *know* you don't know. Once you have a list of at least a few things in each column (you'll probably have much more than that), then break students up into small groups of 2-4 people, and assign them several of the "Think We Know" and "Don't Know" things you've written on the board. Set a timer for 10 minutes for groups to do research and find the salient points about those topics that they want to share with the class. Once time is up, go around and share.