



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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The Dog Ate My Homework: How to Deal With Unprepared Students

by Jann Lacoss

Just what do you do when you walk into class looking forward to insightful interaction with your students and find that you are the only one who bothered to prepare? Or when they seem to have read the material but have trouble retaining it? Chris Carlsmith facilitated a discussion of such issues during a Fall 1993 BYOB (Bring Your Own Brainstorm) lunch at the TRC. The main questions raised dealt with encouraging students to come to class prepared and what to do if they are not.

Carlsmith, noting that students are more likely to be prepared if they see from the start that individual preparation matters, suggests the following:

- ◆ Make routine participation of every class member.
- ◆ Use regular written assignments, and vary the questions to add spice.
- ◆ Assign discussion leaders to give students part of the responsibility for leading and carrying on discussions.
- ◆ Demonstrate your own consistent preparation for class and reward those who are prepared. A participation grade is a good reward.
- ◆ If possible, assign group work outside of class, giving each student a unique responsibility.
- ◆ Involve students in the choice of topics to be studied, wherever possible.
- ◆ Tantalize your students for the next class: read a key quotation, ask them to resolve a puzzle, imagine meeting the author.
- ◆ A new idea (see *Teaching Concerns*, Sept. 1994): Have your students use electronic mail to exchange ideas about the readings or discussion topics *before* the class meets.

When students are not prepared, you must have

a contingency plan. Expressing displeasure with unpreparedness is important, to show that you care about their studies (and your class!). Some potential scenarios for dealing with the occasional unprepared class follow:

- ◆ **Poll:** Try to determine *why* students are unprepared. Outside commitments were overwhelming? Parents' Weekend? Rush? Midterms? Difficult assignment? Be sure that they are aware that in order to learn they must do their share of the work.
- ◆ **Feedback Lecture:** Lecture for 10-15 minutes, then ask for students' reactions: problem-solving, formulating questions, speculating on the topic, and so on. Students can work in small groups or pairs for this exercise.
- ◆ **Dialectical Notebook:** Write a question on the board, and ask students to write brief responses. Each then trades notebooks with another student and responds to the first response. You may repeat this process 2-4 times to allow students to respond actively to each others' ideas.
- ◆ **Quotation exercise:** Put 3-4 key quotations on the board; ask students to work in pairs to determine the relationship between the quotations. You can also use this activity before an assignment to stimulate interest.

Further notes and handouts from *The Dog Ate My Homework* are available in the TRC. Videotapes and notes from past workshops are also available. If you have a teaching concern, a request for a workshop or BYOB topic, or just want to discuss teaching, feel free to stop by the TRC in Hotel D, 24 East Range.