Orienting Students to an "Inside-Out Course": Establishing a Classroom Culture of Interactive, Cooperative Learning

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Millennial students' perceptions and expectations are shaped increasingly by their saturation with technology and marketing, and their place at the center of their parents' attention. Millennials are optimistic, confident, and driven. They expect to work hard and to succeed. They grew up with the Internet and structured play dates, and they are masters of multitasking (Kohut, A. 2007; Howe, N. & Strauss, W. 2003).

The "Inside-Out Class"
In response to these changes, faculty offer an array of course formats and learning options. I have developed a course in communication theories that foregrounds active learning, with structured opportunities for support. The result is an "Inside-Out Course" in which students are required to turn in a "ticket" for entry to class—usually a concept map of the reading. Since the first exposure to material is through homework, class time is used for quick overviews and learning activities designed by student teaching teams. Students are motivated to create good concept maps for tickets, since they are allowed to use those maps for the case study exams, taken with open

notes. Assessments require students to select and use a theory to analyze a real life communication problem, and to use the theory to develop concrete solutions, writing the analysis and recommendations in a business letter, a personal letter, or a report, tailoring their writing appropriately. Students can readily see how useful these skills can be, but they need direction and practice to learn to do it well.

This course presents a set of challenges that is markedly different from most of the other classes these students are taking. Students must prepare for each and every class, turning in an original, accurate, concept map of the reading. (Students are given three "Free Passes" which excuse them from the ticket for any three days of their choice.) Each student is expected to work with two separate teams to teach the class about two theories. This involves speaking to the class about the theory, and collaborating with teammates to design and direct learning activities for that day. They will lead a discussion that invites their classmates to connect new knowledge to previous knowledge and experiences. Exams place students in the role of professional consultant, writing appropriately for an array of audiences.

Students are understandably daunted by these high level tasks, so it is my job on the first day of class to explain not only the structure of the class, but how the students will be able to succeed, and the benefits to them as learners.

Setting the Tone on the First Day of Class
On the first day of class, students typically come in with a rigid stereotype of "the college class", peppered with rumors about concept maps and excessive group work. I need not only to go over the syllabus, but also to explain how this structure works and why we do what we do. I need to *sell* them on actually preparing for each class, on the merits of concept maps over outlines or notes, on working in successful teams, and on taking risks—all things they are not particularly accustomed to doing in college classes. It is also essential that students begin to bond with their teammates and to hear their concerns expressed and addressed before they leave that first day. The student for whom this does not happen is likely to drop the class almost immediately.

The chairs are arranged in circles of five or six, so each student selects the circle that is most appealing—or perhaps least threatening. Before class, I bring in a loose-leaf binder of students' anonymous reflections on their learning from the previous semester, and encourage students to look them over and pass them around. After students have learned about the class structure, I assign each circle a theory/chapter to teach on a particular day, so they already share a future task. Then I give them time to meet each other and to prepare for one student to introduce the team to the class. They also have time to identify 1.) things they want the professor to do, 2.) things they do not want the professor to do, 3.) things they want their classmates to do, and 4.) things they do not want their classmates to do. This gives everyone a chance to articulate concerns about the class.

This exercise gets students' concerns out in the open. Students are suspicious that interactive learning activities might set them up for bad experiences. They do not want to be humiliated or used as bad examples. Students do want constructive criticism that is useful and respectful, but they do not want to be embarrassed in front of their classmates. They have all had bad experiences with groups, so they are understandably skeptical about group work. Some are nervous about public speaking; others are concerned that they won't have time to prepare for every class or that they won't be able to make good concept maps. They want to know if they can trust me to help them succeed. They want to know if it will be worth their time and commitment to work really hard.

When given a chance to say what they want from their classmates, students say they don't want people using cell phones or text messaging in class. They don't want people whispering to each other. They do want support from their classmates when they take risks to learn. Then I have a chance to add my concerns about attendance and plagiarism, and I can encourage creativity, risk taking, and playfulness with a purpose. If the students accept the rules we discuss, they sign at the bottom of the information sheets, where they also can tell me anything they want me to know. Finally, teams are encouraged to exchange contact information and to begin reading their chapter and thinking about ideas for their class.

Modeling and Supporting Performance of Higher Level Tasks

Before students can successfully attempt higher level tasks, they need to see them modeled; then they need opportunities to see what they can do in a low risk situation, with lots of support. They need specific feedback on what they've done well, and exactly what they need to improve, and they need another chance to try it again. This course sets students up to successfully complete four types of higher level tasks: concept mapping, teaching a class, using a theory to solve a problem, and writing appropriately for an array of audiences. For each of these, students have opportunities for modeling, low risk experimentation with support, specific feedback, and another chance.

For example, students learn concept mapping by watching, then trying it out with help, and using precise feedback to continue to practice. Most "tickets" are concept maps of chapters about individual theories. I use one class to demonstrate concept mapping, and to get them started mapping, with their groups, on the board. The next day, students bring in individual maps of an introductory chapter, and they compete in a "concept map gallery" for the coveted prize of an extra free pass. The gallery provides students a rare glimpse of their classmates' work, offering ideas on the many possible styles and approaches. It also inspires, and perhaps shames, students who brought in more shabby looking maps, so they have a chance to see the quality of work their classmates are doing. For the first couple of weeks, I provide detailed feedback on maps and give full credit for any reasonable attempt. By the fourth week of class, students are becoming experts on concept mapping. Students are thrilled to be able to use their maps when writing case study exams, so they are motivated to work for themselves.

A similar sequence of modeling, practice, feedback, and more practice is followed for the other high level tasks as well. This process requires a lot of precise feedback in grading, but it sets the students up for success.

Reflections on Learning
For their last ticket, students write a reflection on their learning. Almost to a person, students say they hadn't known what to expect at first, that they had been skeptical about taking such an active role in a college class. But they almost always say they were pleasantly surprised at their success in preparing for every class, and having teams in which every member contributed. They appreciate opportunities to get to know their classmates. Because the students have spent the entire semester using theory, it's not surprising that they agree that theory is useful.

It seems ironic that the same students who crave interactive learning experiences should also be so suspicious of professors' attempts to incorporate such activities into college courses. As the "Inside-Out Course" has evolved, I have developed strategies to persuade the students to buy into this approach and to prepare them for the high level tasks they will be asked to complete. Everybody has a chance to say what they do and don't want to happen, and students are assured they will be supported in taking risks to learn. They will get the help they need to complete high level tasks, which prepares them for leadership positions in their professional lives. Students expect to succeed, and the "Inside-Out Class" is one way they can be set up for that to happen.

Resources
Novak, D. *Concept Maps: What the Heck is this? Excerpted, rearranged (and annotated) from an online manuscript by Joseph D. Novak*, Cornell University. Retrieved August 29, 2008 from https://www.msu.edu/~luckie/ctools/.

Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2003). *Millenials Rising*. New York: Vintage Books.

Kohut, A. (2007). *How Young People View Their Lives, Futures, and Politics*. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Retrieved January 25, 2007, from http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/300.pdf.

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