University Studies Program
GENERAL EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Teaching in Quest II: Larger Classes, Small Communities

Quest II courses are part of each student's first-year experience, and are designed to build on students' experiences in Quest I. Quest I courses have the advantage of being small and of having a peer mentor attached to them. Quest II courses are a bit more challenging in that the class sizes double and there is no peer mentor; however, it is still essential to provide an active, intellectually inspiring, community-centered classroom environment.

This guide offers some tried-and-true suggestions for teaching Quest II courses. It is likely that many of you already practice some of these techniques, but you might find something new to enhance your courses. Many of the these suggestions were provided by Dr. Heike Alberts—recent Penson Award winner and author of several journal articles on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)—from the Department of Geography and Urban Planning.

Quest II Basics

Each Quest II course will have 50 students, but these students will already be assigned to smaller learning communities of 25 students each. Thus, your Quest II course will contain two learning communities of students who are taking another course—either the Quest Writing or Quest Speaking course—together, focused on the same Signature Question. It is important to acknowledge that these learning communities exist in your classroom, and you may wish to include classroom activities that capitalize on the fact that these students will be together all semester long. How can you take advantage of having two smaller classes in the same room? Some of these suggestions may help you do this more effectively.

It is also important to remember that *Quest II is still part of the first year*. As with Quest I, building relationships and a sense of community is still a goal of Quest II. To that end, instructors should think about how to welcome their students into the campus community and beyond, how to connect students with campus resources, and how to ensure that students have a solid understanding of why they are getting a liberal education.

TEACHING IDEAS FOR LARGER CLASSES

The following techniques, described by Dr. Heike Alberts, are designed to help students extract important information from course materials, engage with the material and with others, and challenge their assumptions. For first-year students, learning how to interact with the material and with their classmates may be one of the most challenging aspects of transitioning from high school to college-level thinking.

The Main Point
When you have students read a short text in class, simply ask them to write down the three points that they consider the most important in the text. Then ask them to get together in small groups to come up with a common list of the main points so that they get a chance to discuss as well. Alternatively, ask them to write a one-sentence or 50-word summary of a text. Because they do not have many words available, they have to choose carefully what they want to say.

You can use similar strategies for lectures, but there are other possibilities as well. To train students to listen carefully to presentations, you can give them "lecture notes" with blanks in them. At first, only leave a few words out, but then move to progressively longer blanks and eventually just bulleted keywords. This progression allows students to see that the length of the notes does not determine their quality.

Peer-Reviews and Evaluations
Peer-reviews are a powerful strategy that can be used in a variety of different contexts. The main point here is that students learn to evaluate each other's work, such as posters, presentations or written work. This activity benefits students in a number of ways. First, they see each other's work; students learn from seeing good and bad examples. Second, knowing that their work will also be judged by their fellow students (and not just by the teacher) is motivating for many students. Third, learning to evaluate is an important critical thinking skill.

Peer reviews can be used in a variety of different settings. For example, students can do a peer-review of a fellow student's term paper. Students bring a copy of their draft term paper to class, the instructor collects them, mixes them up, and then gives each student a paper to review. Before they start, the instructor gives them precise instructions on what to do. Here are some of the instructions students might receive:

- Correct all spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes you find.
- If you find a sentence that is poorly written, mark it and write a better sentence in the margins.
- Write comments in the margins—for example, compliment the author on a particularly good sentence or paragraph, or say when you do not understand a section.
- At the end, write an overall evaluation of the paper. Make sure that you give praise as well as criticism and suggestions for further improvements.

These instructions are developed for term papers, but they can be easily adapted for use with other assignments. The key here is to give students clear instructions about what they are meant to do. To give students an incentive to work carefully, the instructor might give them points for their review of somebody else's paper.

Apart from the benefits of reviewing another student's work, this exercise results in overall better papers. First, through reading other students' work, students develop an awareness of what is good ("I like this; I should do that, too!") and what is not so good ("That's really not a good way to do this—I did a better job with that!"). This awareness helps them to do better work. Second, since students have to revise their papers based on the input they received from a fellow student (and ideally the instructor as well), the final product will be stronger.

Similar strategies also work for posters or oral presentations. Students can either review/critique one another's work or evaluate it. In both cases, it is important to give them *exact instructions* and *grading criteria*. For example, since students have little or no experience with evaluation, they need a checklist or rubric to use. For example, students could work in groups to agree upon the components required in an oral presentation or poster, as well as the way those components are graded. Students can then review each other's presentation or poster based on a rubric that was developed collaboratively, and the instructor can use student evaluations as he/she evaluates the papers individually, with 50 percent of the grade being determined by student evaluations and 50 percent by the instructor. This is a good way to handle the grading, as it signals to students that their evaluation matters, but it also leaves half of the decision in the hands of the teacher. Since the students used clear criteria, their assessments are often similar to that of the instructor.

Prepared Discussion
Many students do not feel comfortable speaking up in front of the entire class before they have a chance to "test" their contribution. One way to assure successful class discussions is to first break the class into smaller groups and have them prepare and test their contributions. For example, a big issue in contemporary Europe is whether Muslim schoolgirls and teachers should be allowed to wear headscarves in state schools. To prepare for the class discussion, the instructor might first break the students into small groups. Some groups are told to come up with a list of arguments that could be made in favor of giving Muslims the freedom to wear a head covering, while other groups have to develop arguments against wearing it. When the discussion then later involves the entire class, the discussion gets very lively, as students now feel prepared to participate.

Two additional benefits come from having students prepare a particular point of view: Some students do not feel comfortable presenting their own point of view (especially if they believe that it is different from the majority's thinking), but are happy to participate by presenting a point of view that has been assigned to them. Second, it is a valuable critical thinking exercise in itself to try to argue in favor of a position with which you do not necessarily agree.

Class Debate or Role Play

A variation on the above technique is a class debate or role-play. The instructor first chooses a relevant topic to debate; for example, the exploitation of the Amazon rainforest. Several weeks before the debate is scheduled, the students are divided into two different groups—one group representing those that want to exploit the rain forest (e.g. loggers and settlers), and one representing those that want to preserve it (e.g. environmentalists, indigenous tribes). Each student then picks a specific role and researches information for that role. For example, the logger does research about logging in the Amazon rainforest and develops a list of arguments about why logging should be allowed. About a week before the debate takes place, the instructor gives students time during class to coordinate with others in the same group. (Time during class is highly recommended, as it is difficult for students to coordinate to meet outside of the normal class period.) During these pre-debate meetings, students compare the information they found, prepare visuals to use in the debate (e.g. a poster), and discuss strategies for winning the debate. The actual debates are usually enjoyable as well as informative. Initially the students tend to be nervous and reserved, but after a few minutes they warm up and a lively debate develops. They key for this exercise to succeed is good preparation, and the understanding that they are attacking one another's positions or characters, but not one another. This exercise contains elements of cooperation (to coordinate with one's own group to win the debate), and competition (to have better arguments than the other group) and helps students with research and oral communication skills. Beyond this, class debates are simply fun.

Problem – Solution – Evaluation

In order to get all students involved and encourage them to think critically, a problem – solution – evaluation activity is a good idea. Each group of about three to five students gets an overhead transparency with a problem statement and a transparency pen (or a piece of paper in classrooms equipped with document cameras). In the context of a class on urban poverty, a problem statement could be "Many of the poor have low education levels," or "Many of the poor do not have health insurance". In their small groups, the students have to think of solutions to the problem and write these on the overhead transparency. Encourage them to think about feasible (realistic, not idealistic) solutions and to try to anticipate problems (such as lack of money to carry out the proposed measures). After students have a chance to discuss their proposed solutions and sum those up on the transparency, they exchange theirs with that of another group, which has worked on a different problem. Each group now looks at the solutions proposed by the other group, and tries to evaluate / criticize them. Both of these steps—developing possible solutions and evaluating them— train critical thinking skills. The exercise can also provide practice in oral communication skills. You could ask one representative of the group who developed the solutions and one representative of the evaluation group to come to the front. They display their transparency and explain the main points. This then is often a starting point for a wider discussion, as other students jump in.

Problem Circle/"Send a Problem"

This is a variation on the above activity, as it also requires students to come up with solutions to a problem and evaluate these solutions. For example, instructors could use this

activity to get students to think about transportation problems in US cities and the environmental impact of cars. The class could be divided into four groups. Each group receives an envelope with a problem statement or question written on it, such as "How could Americans be convinced to use public transportation instead of their own cars?" The groups then get about five minutes to write possible solutions on a small piece of paper. Each group puts their piece of paper in the envelope and passes it on to the next group. For the next five minutes, each group works on the statement on the envelope they received. After one more round of finding solutions for a problem, it is time to evaluate them. Each group should now have an envelope they did not have before. They open the envelope, read the solutions suggested by the previous groups, discuss the feasibility of these solutions, and then write the best solution or two on a transparency. One by one, each group then comes to the front of the room to present what they considered the best solutions. The value of this exercise is that students get to compare and evaluate the solutions that the other groups have developed. By the time of the presentation of the solution, each group has had the opportunity to talk about each of the problems. This allows them to easily participate in a discussion as well as make connections between the different problems raised.

Scenario or Case Study
Another effective method to train a variety of skills is to use scenarios or case studies. For example, an instructor could use this technique to talk about child labor. The class might be divided into four groups. Each group gets a short text with a few simple statistics about a different child labor issue. These texts can be drawn from a variety of sources—such as reports found online, *Economist* articles, or case studies in textbooks, and might have to be adapted so that they are of about equal length and difficulty level. Each group then gets 15-20 minutes to read the article, discuss the issue presented, and think about solutions. On an overhead transparency, they write the following information, here presented for the case study about the children who make soccer balls in Pakistan.

- Statement of the problem: Thousands of children make soccer balls in Pakistan. They work long hours and get very little pay. The bend-over position results in serious health problems.
- Most shocking fact: Children making these soccer balls are often as young as six.
- Possible Solutions: Conduct educational campaigns in the buyer countries, encourage soccer clubs and stores to put pressure on the Pakistani government to stop child labor, create an educational program for the children in the "soccer ball villages", maybe boycott soccer balls made in Pakistan

Each group then presents their case study to the class, and all students are invited to provide comments or ask questions about the case study or the solutions. The final discussion then draws together all the case studies, for example by arguing that there are some measures that may work in the short term (such as boycotting) but that measures that address the underlying problem (such as poverty forcing Pakistani families to send their children to work) will be more successful in the long run.

In the above example, the instructor can use authentic materials that are adapted only slightly for classroom use, but you can also use real or invented scenarios that you have written to start a discussion. Scenarios do not only train critical thinking skills, but also creative thinking. For example, a simple scenario could read:

> After your class, you overhear a classmate bragging to another student that he cheated with the paper that he handed in. Rather than writing the homework assignment about global warming himself, he found a text on the internet, copied it, changed the title, and handed it in as his assignment. What would you do?

Scenarios work best when the topics are relevant to the students and they can imagine being in the situation described. Scenarios are a good starting point to talk about policies—in this case, a general discussion on academic cheating could easily follow. If you use real scenarios (situations that have actually happened), be sure to tell students the real ending after they finish their discussions.

Pro and Con
An important skill to master is to be able to see an issue from two different perspectives. A simple strategy is to have students develop a pro and con list about a certain topic. For example, your topic may be nuclear energy. You can ask students to come up with a list of points that speak in favor of building more nuclear power plants, as well as a list of points that speak against this strategy. After they have completed the lists, they have to form their own opinion. This exercise can be used productively in connection with essay writing. Students could write an argumentative essay based on the list of arguments created, or even an invented dialogue between people of different opinions.

Shift of Perspective
To learn to shift perspectives and think from another point of view, students can be asked to write a newspaper article as well as a letter to the editor. For example, students might write a short newspaper article arguing that Turkey should be admitted to the European Union followed by a letter to the editor rebutting the arguments made in the original article and arguing against admitting Turkey.

In addition to training critical thinking skills, this exercise also helps students improve writing skills, as the format of a newspaper article and letter to the editor demands concise writing and the logical development of arguments. You can also use this activity as a homework assignment or on in-class tests. For example, if the instructor discusses the issue of Turkey's European Union membership in class, he/she can then ask students to write the article and letter on the exam.

Contradictions
This activity is sure to surprise your students! Think of an issue that could be presented in two different ways or from two different points of view. Prepare a short text from both of these different perspectives—for example an account of the Boston Tea Party from the point of view of the British as well as of the colonists. Make the two versions of the text look

as similar as possible—same title, overall length, number of paragraphs, so that they appear to be the same from the distance. Without telling your students that you have two different versions, distribute one version to the students in the left half of the classroom and the other version to those sitting in the right half. Give them a few minutes to read the text, ask simple questions about it, such as why the Boston Tea Party happened, and collect answers on the blackboard or an overhead transparency. At first, some students may not notice what is happening, but eventually they will figure out that their fellow students did not misinterpret the text, but that there are two different versions of it. This gives you a powerful example to discuss different point of views and the need to question texts.

When well prepared, this activity works wonderfully. It does, however, work best in a class where students are willing to contribute and have already acquired some critical thinking skills, so that they have a fair chance of discovering that you "tricked" them with different versions of the text. A simpler version is to give students two different versions of a text and ask them to identify the differences. In order to stimulate communication, this is best done in groups.

Asking the right questions
Critical thinking, analysis and synthesizing skills can also be trained in standard class discussions if you ask the right questions. Here are some questions that you could use:

- What is the main idea of _____?
- What would happen if _____?
- What are the strengths and weakness of _____?
- How does _____ affect _____?
- What causes _____?
- How does _____ tie in with what we learned before?
- What are possible solutions for _____?
- What evidence supports _____?
- How does _____ compare to _____?
- From all that we have discussed, what is the most important _____?
- What themes or lessons have emerged from _____?
- How does _____ apply to _____?

WANT MORE?

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) has a library of teaching resources for you to use. Pop over to Pollock Alumni House and see for yourself! Additionally, check the CETL website for a complete listing of teaching workshops and best practice certifications that are sure to inspire you to try something new in your classroom: http://www.uwosh.edu/grants/cetl .

More teaching resources specific to the University Studies Program will be added soon.

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