

How One Teaching Expert Activates Students' Curiosity

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Welcome to Teaching, a weekly newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. This week's edition was curated by Beckie. We'll begin with some tips on using a "naïve task" to pique students' curiosity that I picked up at a conference I attended last week. Next, Beth shares readers' responses on the training — or lack thereof — they received to teach online. We'll finish off with a calendar update and a book recommendation. Let's dive in:

The Power of the 'Naïve Task'

Most of the time, instructors use activities as a way for students to demonstrate their mastery. But activities can be used differently — to spark curiosity and get students thinking, before they know much of anything about a particular topic. That was the premise of “The Power of the ‘Naïve Task,’” one of the most interesting sessions I attended at the Designing Effective Teaching conference in Bethesda, Md., last week.

The session was led by Kimberly Van Orman, an instructional consultant in the Institute of Teaching, Learning, and Academic Leadership at the University at Albany. The center’s unofficial motto, Van Orman said, is “students don’t need to know everything before they can do anything.”

Van Orman seemed to believe the same of conference-goers because she kicked off her presentation by throwing us into the kind of “naïve task” she suggests professors try in the classroom. She divided the audience into small groups and had us work together to match a list of ways people might injure themselves — “motor vehicle” and “house and yard work,” for instance — with the bars of a graph showing the most common ways U.S. adults were hurt. There was a lot we didn’t know, and much of the discussion centered around definitional questions. Did the category “school” include injuries to staff, or only students? Would “sports” injuries include those that occurred shooting hoops with your kids in the driveway? We were left to make our best guesses.

After giving us some time to work, Van Orman had each group report its answers. But she didn’t reveal the correct ones right away. After all, she had our attention.

Instead, Van Orman explained the thinking behind naïve tasks. Such activities, she said, ask students to attempt disciplinary thinking using only their pre-existing knowledge. Naïveté, Van Orman said, is a useful stage of learning, great for fostering the kind of curiosity that gets students excited about a discipline. Too often, instructors blow right past it.

Naïve tasks require students to make a decision about a real problem, then reflect on and discuss their reasoning. They stretch students by asking them to predict a result, rather than simply describe one that’s laid out in front of them. We would have been less interested in the material, Van Orman said, had she asked us to analyze a graph that was already labeled.

Professors, Van Orman said, are “freaks” who are incredibly excited by their fields. Often, students don’t feel the same way — but instructors can help them get there, and this is one way to do so.

Finally, Van Orman shared the correct answers with a curious audience. The No. 1 accident-causer? Leisure activities, excluding sports. The room was surprised. Even though we had the answer to the puzzle, everyone wanted to know what made it right. Had Van Orman gone on to teach about injuries, it’s safe to say we’d have listened.

Van Orman led us through another naïve task. This time, we read about a brain-injury patient and discussed how different theories fit his symptoms.

This activity, Van Orman said, had some features that work especially well in her own discipline, philosophy. Students often come to the field convinced that it boils down to common sense and that their own opinions are correct, she said. Realizing that a professor doesn't see things the same way only affects them so much, Van Orman said. But when students debate with their classmates — people like them — and realize that they don't all agree, it begins to challenge their assumptions.

Naïve tasks also help train students to do something that Van Orman desires and philosophy requires of them — but that their focus on grades cuts against: take risks. Solving a problem before you've begun to learn the content is low-stakes by definition.

For professors, there's one more reason to add naïve tasks into the mix, Van Orman said: "It makes your lectures land."

Have you used an activity to introduce students to a new idea in one of your courses? What benefits did it bring? Tell me about it at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com and your response may appear in a future newsletter.

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Training to Teach Online

Last week I [asked](#) readers to tell me about their experiences teaching online. I want to share two responses because they say a lot about the challenges facing online instructors.

Reader No. 1, who asked to remain anonymous, has been teaching online for more than a decade at her public university. When she began, she told me, she received a one-time stipend to take a class about how to teach online. But, as she put it, "it was all technology, no pedagogy." Over the years, as her university changed content management systems, the training would be updated, but still, nothing about online pedagogy.

Instead, she taught herself by reading, doing research, and consulting her friends. She uses practices like putting students in small discussion groups and planning out the course well before it begins. Not surprisingly, when the IT department sponsored a [Quality Matters](#) workshop (the organization provides training and certification for online courses), her classes received high marks, but some others did not. Students tell her that other online classes on campus are built around multiple-choice quizzes, so they go to Quizlet, an online study tool that allows users to upload course-related material, make perfect scores, "and never have to actually learn anything."

"It irks me that there is no quality control at my university, no coherent online program, no reward for doing all the extra work," she writes, adding: "I think there is a general lack of awareness that online education can be effective and fun."

Contrast that with Christina Heisser's experience. The associate professor of history at Los Angeles City College also received a stipend to develop an online course. But to get the money she had to participate in an online-pedagogy course. It emphasized the importance of

building community, for example. “It was really helpful to have a dedicated and experienced online instructor help us get the feel for the experience of an online class — and also offer support in person,” she writes. California’s [online course design standards](#) also helped her think more clearly about building an effective online course.

Heisser would like more help on the technical side, though. She has been encouraged to create her own videos to personalize the course, but, as she notes, “creating and editing videos is a daunting task.”

She also put out a query to others: How do you retain students? She started her semester with 45 in her U.S. history survey course and ended up with 21. If you have responses to either of these readers’ experiences, or want to share your own, email me at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com and we can continue the conversation about teaching online in a future newsletter.

June Conferences

- The International Consortium for Educational Development Conference [is underway](#) this week in Atlanta.
- The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education will hold [its annual conference](#) in Sherbrooke, Quebec, from June 19-22.

Want to let us know about a conference — or open call for proposals — we might want to mention in the newsletter? [Tell us here.](#)

A Recommended Read

Ryan Strader, a doctoral candidate in rhetoric and composition at Georgia State University, recommends *Unforgettable: Enabling Deep and Durable Learning*, by W. Michael Gray. The book, Strader wrote, focuses on getting instructors to teach their disciplines as a way of thinking, rather than as a body of knowledge. It helped Strader, who has taught introductory writing and research courses at Clayton State University, pose engaging questions and run better class discussions, she wrote, which in addition to helping students learn, is “more rewarding and fun for me.”

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, or beckie.supiano@chronicle.com. If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Beckie and Beth

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