

A Simple Trick for Getting Students to Ask Questions in Class

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By Meriah L. Crawford

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Your students have questions, but they rarely ask them—especially at the beginning of the semester. They feel awkward or embarrassed, or maybe it’s just inertia. Whatever the cause, the vast majority of student questions go unasked. For teachers, this is wildly frustrating because we can’t answer the questions they don’t ask (though some questions can be anticipated). In many cases, the unasked questions represent anxieties and uncertainties that negatively affect students’ performance in class and inhibits their learning. This is a particular problem in the sophomore composition class I teach. It has a reputation as a difficult class, so many students arrive intimidated and nervous.

In the past, I’ve tried approaches such as requiring students to ask questions (though not on the first day)—even going around in a circle so each can take a turn—but they hate that. They’re tense, resistant, sullen. Definitely not the right way to get students motivated and engaged. I’ve also tried asking playfully, or suggesting questions that they might have, but with limited success.

And then, I came up with another idea: index cards. And it turns out, index cards are MAGIC.

I start on the first day of class, after introducing myself and reviewing the course and the syllabus. “Does anyone have any questions?” I ask. Sometimes there are one or two, and other times I get blank stares. In the best cases, we manage a few minutes of further

discussion, and then: silence. At this point, I hand out index cards. “These are anonymous,” I tell them. “Ask me a question, or tell me what concerns you about this class.”

Even with a few hesitations, I nearly always get a card back from everyone. I mix them up a bit, so it’s not possible for me to know who asked the question. In fact, I like to make a show of shuffling the cards to let them know that maintaining their anonymity is important and I won’t try to embarrass them publicly. And then I read the questions and comments out to the class, responding to each one individually.

By the time we’re done, everyone has had the opportunity to get their questions answered, and they get to hear answers to questions they didn’t even know they had. In time, the students become more comfortable with me and with each other, as well as with the course goals. These are all tremendous benefits for the whole class—including me.

I do this same exercise two or three more times at critical points during the semester, usually when we are beginning or are in the early stages of working on a new assignment. At times, if the content of the card seems to warrant a longer conversation (or a personal one), I say, “If you wrote this, please speak with me in person—after class, via e-mail, or during office hours.” They have a choice at that point, and they usually do speak with me directly.

What do students think about the index cards? In end-of-semester reflective letters for Spring 2017, one student wrote: “Something that was really minor but appreciated was the anonymous writing of comments and questions on notecards. As someone who takes a bit of time to open up in new environments and as someone who dreads public speaking in front of strangers, it took a lot of the pressure off of getting the information I needed without making a complete and utter fool of myself.”

Another student wrote: “Another part of the class I really enjoyed was the notecard activity employed every once in a while. It was a good way to get unresolved questions answered as well as possibly obtain crucial information I hadn’t thought about based on the answers to other students’ questions.”

I use the index cards in classes of 22 to 25 students. Though I rarely have more than a couple of duplicate questions per class, I would probably use an online tool in larger classes, where students could edit or expand some questions, and avoid duplicates on their own. I expect the cards (or an online tool) would be just as useful, if not more so, for classes in STEM fields.

The only real negative to me is that the frequent use of index cards is wasteful. I plan to try an online solution sometime in the next academic year. In the meantime, I am thrilled each time the cards provide me with such a wealth of information that, previously, wild horses could not drag from my students.

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