

From Awkward to Awesome: Building Community and Engagement in the Moments before Class

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Abstract: The proposed activity involves showing a relevant video immediately prior to the beginning of class. This activity may prove beneficial to both the instructor (reducing the generational divide and reducing interactional awkwardness) and for students (building community and student engagement). This activity is particularly appealing for younger generational cohorts in courses throughout higher education.

Key Words: Engagement; Generation Z; Classroom Community; Digital Natives

Introduction and Rationale

A challenge facing many instructors involves an increasing generational divide between themselves and their students. Whereas many professors can recall their own education facing green chalkboards and breathing chalk dust, today's students are digital natives. As we move to classrooms filling with Generation "Z" (or "Gen Z") students, expectations for education have shifted. Mohr and Mohr (2017) argue that instructors can more effectively teach these newer generations by actively evaluating their curriculum to assess the "value and appeal to students" (p. 92). Roseberry-McKibbin (2017) recommends the use of YouTube videos as one way to add appeal for Gen Z students. The use of videos in class often involves a balancing act for instructors. On one hand, an instructor should engage students yet on the other instructors should use instructional time wisely.

In addition to the generational divide, some faculty experience social challenges in interacting with students. Introverts, socially reticent people, and people with high levels of communication apprehension (CA) teach courses and need to navigate the sometimes uncomfortable waters of social interaction. Some instructors who can pontificate about theories draw a complete blank when it comes to small talk. Baiocchi-Wagner (2011) studied teachers with high CA and found that the moments just before class began were among some of the most challenging. "For some teachers, initiating small talk with students before lecture was unpleasant" (p. 231). She offered an example of an instructor who would come to class immediately before the lecture began to avoid an awkward silence. Admittedly, I am one of those faculty (teaching communication classes, of all things) who has experienced feelings of anxiety and awkwardness in the moments preceding class. Attempts at small talk with students sometimes left me feeling awkward. After twenty-five years of teaching, much to my surprise, one of my most transformative teaching practices involved transforming those previously awkward minutes before class starts.

Explanation of the Activity

On the first class meeting of the semester, I initiate the ritual of showing a video before class starts. When class time begins, I clearly state that the content of the videos will not appear on the exams and that they are not required to put away their phones or pay attention to the videos. Thereafter, I come to class and play a short video clip – from a movie, television program, music video, commercial, or just a viral video that in some way relates to content that we will be discussing that day. Later in class,

I try to remember to refer back to the video when discussing the related topic. The reference to the video is general, so that it is not necessary for the students in class to have seen the clip.

Given the extensive resources on the Internet and on YouTube, the possibilities of materials to show before class are extensive. One student favorite is a video that I show in my Intercultural Communication class on the day we discuss dialects. The YouTube video is titled “Hot Girls Don’t Poop.” It is a cleverly written commercial for a real product that eliminates odors in the bathroom. The key figure in the commercial is an attractive woman with a high-class British accent. During class, when discussing dialectical differences, I refer back to the video elaborating that I find no coincidence in the choice they made to use an attractive woman with a posh accent for a rather graphic discuss of defecation.

Another example that I use in Public Speaking is included on the day we discuss logical fallacies. I show Rob Cantor’s “Shia LeBoeuf Live” video before class, then as we discuss *non sequiturs*, I suggest that the before-class video provides an example of what I like to call “artistic *non sequitur*”. Some students have indicated that when they see the video before class, they sometimes find themselves trying to guess about the relevance of the video to that day’s materials. Each semester, the video selections shown before class get revised as I identify further videos that relate to each course’s content.

Debriefing

The activity accrues benefits for both the instructor and the students. The benefits to me, as an instructor, have been sufficiently compelling to incorporate this activity in all my undergraduate courses. First, it offers the benefit of providing a means for more anxious instructors to ease into the class meeting more comfortably. Second, the activity allows the instructor to teach beyond the confines of the traditional class periods. I often see materials that are relevant to class however choose not to share these resources during class out of a fear of “wasting time.” Students who might consider the videos a waste of time during class avidly engage with the videos before class. I have been able to essentially extend the length of the class without a single objection from students.

This exercise also benefits students. My primary student-focused objective in using this exercise is community-building. Many of the videos I choose are humorous. The laughter is important in building community and setting a tone. A study by Kashdan et al. (2014) found that experiencing shared laughter led to “increased intimacy, enjoyment and positive emotion” for the interaction that followed (p. 18). My own experience suggests that this exercise begins class on a very positive note and that the positivity is more likely to continue throughout the class session.

This exercise is also successful in engaging “digital natives” in the learning process. Using the time before class gets the students “plugged in” and helps to bridge the generational gap by engaging the students through a visual medium that appeals to this generation. It is extremely rewarding to see the vast majority of students choosing to pay attention to the video. Rather than shutting down conversations among students, the exercise often seems to spark increased interaction among peers.

Appraisal

The exercise has limitations. First, some students do not engage with the videos before class. Instead, some continue talking, which puts them at cross-purposes with those who wish to view the video. There are also some who prefer to text friends during the video. One semester, I discontinued showing the videos due to lack of interest, however that has only occurred once out of approximately fifteen classes wherein this exercise has been used. Although the diverging responses to watching the videos can be seen as a flaw with the exercise, it also has the benefit of giving students a choice, which some

have argued is more consistent with the preferred learning styles of younger generational cohorts (Mohr & Mohr, 2017).

I have assessed the exercise by asking students about whether they prefer I use it or not. To my surprise, no student has offered a negative response. They appreciate that they do not “have to” watch it, and most indicate that they very much enjoy the videos. Some indicated that it made them think about the class at other times as well when they recalled the video and the concept to which it was related. The videos seem to stick with them in a unique and appealing way.

In sum, the introduction of this exercise has been one of my strongest teaching innovations. Students have almost universally expressed appreciation for, and interest in, the videos. Occasionally, when a student arrives to class right on time or a couple of minutes late, people sitting near the new arrival will let the person know that they “missed out” on the video. I have also had more students approach me after class to ask me if I am familiar with a video that they see as relevant to the course. If I have not, they either tend to describe the video they are thinking of or offer to email me a link to the video. It has resulted in several purposeful interactions with students. Instead of trying to engage students in small talk, this activity has produced more organic and enthusiastic interactions centering on academic topics. I have seen the outcomes as a “win” for both the professor and the students.

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