Great Ideas for Teaching Students

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One aspect of teaching English that I appreciate is a focus on teaching skills rather than subject matter. In order for students to develop skills, they need practice and lots of it. Encouraging students to share what they have learned, to ask questions about material, to participate in class, or in other words, to become an active learner is a daunting task. However, active students can develop and thrive in a classroom environment that fosters a sense of community relationships, respect, responsibility, and rigor. One teaching strategy I use to create such a classroom setting involves the use of some index cards distributed to students the opening class session of each semester.

As I take roll and pass out course information the first day, I also ask students to fill out two index cards, one for the instructor, and the other for themselves.

1) On the instructor card, I ask them to share some information about themselves. I ask many questions to get to know them, such as: What name they would like me to use? What their major is? Why did they enroll in the course? What question(s) do they have for me? What would they like to know about the course? What is something you would like to share about yourself with the class? When completed by the students, these cards are collected, and I use them for various purposes throughout the semester that will be explained later.

2) The second card is the student’s appointment card. The students draw the face of the clock and write some numbers on it (I like to use 12, 3, 6, and 9). Throughout the first class, I have four questions prepared for students to discuss and share. With each question, students pair off and introduce themselves to another student. The two students have two minutes for introductions and discussion of the question. This first student becomes their 12:00 appointment, so they write the individual’s name on their clock. The process continues with another question and another new appointment until each student has four classmates identified on their clock.
Both cards are now valuable resources throughout the semester. When I want to review reading material for class, or ask questions to encourage class discussions, I simply ask students to meet briefly with one of their clock appointments. As a result, I can quickly gauge how well students prepared for class. Students have also had the chance to warm up for a topic of discussion, and they have shared some of their own ideas and heard ideas from others. After the meeting with clock appointments, I use my set of class cards to call on students. I always call on at least three students before taking volunteers. The randomly selected students from my stack of cards always have something to share, either their own ideas, or the ideas discussed with their appointment partner. Every four weeks I like to have students set new clock appointments, so students continue to meet additional classmates.

The use of the index cards have many positive benefits. First, students meet several classmates. Second, the cards provide me with information I can use to talk about their lives. I often pull cards and talk to students before class begins. Thus, the professor is now approachable and personally interested in each student. Although, some students see the clock cards as a threat, selecting the cards is an unbiased moment of suspense that encourages all students to participate in class throughout the semester. Finally, the use of the cards helps promote the expectation to prepare for and participate in each class session.

I have found that the cards are an effective and simple way to encourage interaction and promote positive relationships in the classroom environment. It does take time to develop the routine of students meeting with a partner, but the effort to establish this practice is rewarded with an active, engaged, and open group of students.