

Case Study One:

At the end of the semester, Professor Regan is confronted with several negative evaluations from students who criticize the use of group work. They argue that they are paying tuition to learn from an expert, the professor, not from other equally uninformed students. It was interesting and even sometimes fun to talk and debate about issues like environmental justice or unequally distributed health issues with other students from varying backgrounds. But when all is said and done, they want to know the answers to the complex problems posed. They are frustrated by the professor's abdication of authority, and think that objective issues got clouded by subjective perspectives.

In this case, Professor Regan is using an active learning approach, promoting group work and discussion, rather than passively giving the information from the professor to the students (Fink, 2003). However, the students seem to perceive themselves, perhaps from prior experiences in classes, as "received knowers," where the expectation is that they will simply download information from an expert; they expect to memorize the answers given to them and not question how those answers were reached (Bain, 2004; Clinchy, 1990). The students appear to be utilizing pre-reflective thinking, in which they believe there is a correct answer to the complicated issues that they are discussing, and looking to their professor as the authority figure to tell them those answers explicitly (King, 2000). When Professor Regan is giving them topics without clear-cut correct answers, and asking them to work through their thoughts as groups, the students perceive that the professor is not doing their job, and rate them negatively on their evaluations. At the same time, the students did find value in some of the debates they had in class which allowed them to hear from other students with diverse backgrounds; this value is well documented in literature (Barnett, 2011). But they still expressed that they did not trust their peers or themselves to reach answers, as they called themselves and their classmates "uninformed."

The most important strategy that would help Professor Regan would be to explain and to show students how these activities are supporting their learning. Group work can come across as the teacher taking a lazy way out, so the Professor should provide students sources proving the effectiveness of collaborative learning through group work (Davis, 2009). The professor should reflect on whether the class design is well-integrated: whether the group activities align with the assessment methods and learning goals, and if so, explain to the students how these things support each other (Fink, 2003). Professor Regan should also make sure they are giving sufficient feedback and critique on the groups' thinking processes and performance on their assigned tasks; this could help the students see how the Professor's help is essential for these activities to work and will make the

group work more focused and effective at promoting learning (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Lovett, 2023).

Besides boosting the value that students place on the group work, Professor Regan could also enhance student motivation by raising their expectancies of themselves and their peers. If students believe they are not capable of reaching valid conclusions on their own, they will not value the learning that they are doing through such discussions (Lovett, 2023). The final suggestion would be to vary the types of activities done in class, maybe include more individual activities, to enhance the learning process for those students who do not benefit as much from group activities, following the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024). Students could do independent reflective writing like journaling or minute essays in class, and they could put together a learning portfolio, so that students can see how far they've come despite the learning activities looking different than they expected (Fink, 2003).

Case Study Two:

Professor Courtney sometimes invites students to the board to solve problems in front of the class. She believes students learn more from solving problems themselves with her guidance than from passively watching her complete the process. But the same students – all White men and one Black woman -- always volunteer. She knows, from the homework assignments, that there are other women, as well as a few international students, who are also doing well and who should feel confident solving before the others. But if they don't want to participate, she thinks that may be their choice. She also notices that some of the international students don't make eye contact and it bothers her. She perceives them as disengaged in the class.

Professor Courtney also ascribes to active learning principles, where students doing the problem-solving themselves are more likely to remember than if she demonstrates problem-solving as the teacher (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Fink, 2003). And some students do participate in these activities and likely benefit greatly from the opportunity. However, it is not surprising that not all students would like to participate. There is gender, racial, and personality disparity in which groups of students are more likely to want to volunteer: white men may want to control the conversation or feel more confidence in their abilities, extroverts may want to think out loud, international students may come from cultures where students are expected to be silent and respectful, or racial minorities may have lower expectancies placed upon them by society (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Lovett, 2023; Rose et al., 2006). Professor Courtney also fails to take such cultural differences into account (Davis, 2009), and projects onto her international students that their lack of eye contact means that they are disengaged. It does not appear this is the only learning activity, homework assignments are mentioned, so she may somewhat ascribe to Universal Design for Learning principles (CAST, 2024), but she appears to value participation in this activity highly.

The front-of-class problem-solving is likely beneficial for the students who do it, and can also be beneficial for even the silent listeners, who get to observe the process (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Fink, 2003), so she should not stop doing this activity. Professor Courtney can encourage other students to participate by first giving students time to think, maybe asking them to write their own answers down first, then asking for people to share with the class, prioritizing volunteers who do not regularly contribute (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Davis, 2009). She also should not purposely exclude women or international students who she does not want to put on the spot, thus depriving them of this learning activity (Davis, 2009; Miller, 2005). It is stated that she thinks students are

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capable of solving these problems, based on their homework assignments, so perhaps helping support these students expectancies, their belief that they *can* perform well, by giving frequent feedback on homework, not just in-class activities, would boost their motivation to participate (Lovett, 2023).

However, solving problems in front of the whole class is not something that everyone will likely want to participate in, even if they are confident that they can do it. Professor Courtney should also consider adding alternative activities: small group problem solving such as the Think-Aloud-Pairs or Send-A-Problem activities (Barkley et al., 2014), or short writing assignments in class to reflect on their thinking and problem-solving process (Bean & Melzer, 2021). Adding alternative ways to engage embodies the Universal Design for Learning principles, to ensure that the diversity of students in her class can all benefit from learning activities (CAST, 2024).

Case Study Three:

Professor Forter allocates 20% of the class grade for class participation. She believes the discussion is one of the most important parts of the class and that students must be encouraged to participate fully and be rewarded for the intellectual work they do. This semester, she has a student with a pronounced stutter and another who is struggling to speak English as a second language. While she tends to call on people who are not speaking up, or make encouraging comments “let’s hear from someone we haven’t heard from yet today,” she has avoided putting these students on the spot. The students are not participating and seem increasingly alienated from the rest of the class. And then there is the problem of grading. Should these students be penalized for not speaking up in class?

Professor Forter values discussion and class participation very highly, as evidenced by the participation grade making up 20% of their total grade for the class. Her belief aligns with literature that there is a lot of value in discussion as an active learning activity (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Davis, 2009; Fink, 2003). She does attempt to encourage participation from those who are less inclined to, by calling on people or asking for those she had not heard from yet, which help getting more introverted students to take part (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Davis, 2009). She also is aware of the difficulties faced by some students, including the student with the stutter and the student whose first language is not English, but she incorrectly assumes this means they are not *capable* of participating and therefore doesn’t call on them (Davis, 2009; Miller, 2005). The lack of her faith in her students may be clear to these students as well, and this would decrease motivation due to a decrease in their self-expectancies (Lovett, 2023). Professor Forter also appears to only include speaking up in class when considering the participation grade, and therefore is considering grading these students poorly for this major portion of their class grade.

While large-group discussion is a powerful tool for teachers, making it the only method of class participation does not embody the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) – it is clear she has in class at least two students not benefiting from this learning activity. She could include alternative options, and/or vary the learning the activities, to include individual writing assignments, pair/small-group discussions in-class, or online discussions, to make the activities more accessible to students uncomfortable with speaking in front of the whole class (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Davis, 2009). In large group discussions, she could prompt or poll students whether they agree or disagree with the statements made, and to provide additional examples; essentially asking them to build off of the other students’ responses, which is a lower-pressure method of participation (Davis, 2009). She could do regular check-in surveys with

the class to see how discussions are going, if there are barriers preventing their participation, to build trust with the students and make them more comfortable with speaking up (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012). Importantly, Professor Forter should not try to “protect” her students, who she views as likely to struggle, from the opportunity to work through their thoughts out loud, thus depriving them of learning that other students are experiencing through discussions (Davis, 2009; Miller, 2005).

As for grading, Professor Forter should think through how these activities align with her learning goals, and whether assessment based on discussion participation is aligned with her goals (Fink, 2003). If so, she should think through her grading criteria, and maybe create a rubric for what she considers good participation, which could include things in addition to volunteering to speak during large group discussion, like taking part in polls and writing activities, etc., to capture the range of student participation (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Stevens, 2023). And whether she has a rubric or not, she should make it explicitly clear to students what her expectations are for their contribution to class discussions and what she will be grading them on (Davis, 2009).

Case Study Four:

Professor Hoffman's class is discussing a novel in which a Native American teenager is sexually abused by her stepfather. He asks a question to prompt the discussion, and one white student says it's an important thing to depict, because "we all know that male dominance and violence against women is more widespread and damaging in minority communities than white communities." She argues that the novel courageously represents a cultural difference that needs to be brought to light. A few students look uncomfortable, and someone changes the subject entirely. An African American student speaks up, "Excuse me for interrupting, but that's not right. At first it sounded like a feminist comment, but I think it's really a racist comment." The students look to Professor Hoffman.

Professor Hoffman has prepared for a discussion on a difficult topic: sexual abuse and violence against women and children, from the perspective of a Native American teenager, a non-dominant cultural group. The inclusion of such topics embodies Universal Design for Learning, by providing diversity of perspectives and fostering belonging and community, for students who may identify with the identities represented in the novel (CAST, 2024; Rose et al., 2006). Both the cultural and gender elements of the topic are likely to prompt emotions, and may be expected to involve discomfort and vulnerability in the students (Barnett, 2011). From the description provided, it does seem like the students have trust in their professor, as they are participating in the discussion about these difficult topics and do not appear to be afraid to speak their mind (Barnett, 2011). One student who spoke up brought to the discussion her own inaccurate prior knowledge and racial biases, stating that minority communities experience more violence against women and male dominance (Lovett, 2023). She likely did not intend the comment to be racist, and stated it through feminist language, her own perspective, but other students were uncomfortable regardless. Another student who spoke up in response, calling out her comment as racist, was also polite towards her. Despite it being a "hot topic," the moment itself was not portrayed as a "hot moment" (Warren, 2005), but may become so if nothing is done by Professor Hoffman to properly address it.

One strategy involves prevention of the moment, or at least prevention of it happening in this way, if that is desirable. It is expected that topics like this may come up when discussing a novel like this, given that the first student's belief is unfortunately not an uncommon one to encounter in white American culture, and Professor Hoffman could have prepared ahead of time what to do (Warren, 2005). He could have prompted the discussion himself, bringing up the perspective, perhaps providing resources with facts and statistics, and asking the class to talk through it together, without making one student

the “bad guy” in the discussion (Barnett, 2011; Warren, 2005). However, prevention may not be the desirable outcome – learning involves productive confrontation across varied perspectives (Barnett, 2011). Giving students the chance to confront their biases and make them more self-aware of their beliefs and reasoning is an extremely valuable part of lessons regarding diversity, and of learning to become reflective thinkers (Barnett, 2011; King, 2000).

So another strategy is to turn this moment into a learning opportunity (Warren, 2005). It is important that Professor Hoffman not to make up reasons in his head why she thinks this, and instead asks her to explain herself further (Warren, 2005). Perhaps she phrased it in a way she didn’t mean. Or if she meant it that way, ask her questions about where she heard this idea from, or her reasoning for her statement (Barnett, 2011; Lovett, 2023). Professor Hoffman can also open up the floor to other students to direct the focus away from this student as an individual, and ask the group to talk about the argument itself critically, what may be the historical basis for this argument and biases of people promoting it (Barnett, 2011; King, 2000). And he should make sure to acknowledge the bit of truth in her argument, that violence against women and children is a problem that *should* be discussed. He should make sure that the discussion stays calm and respectful, but also should acknowledge the potential emotional response of students who were offended, and open the floor for them to talk about how the arguments being made harm their communities. If discussion becomes too heated to continue, Professor Hoffman could ask for reflective silence, and could prompt individuals to write their self-reflections to cool down, and they can return to the discussion at a later time (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Warren, 2005). Regardless of strategy, Professor Hoffman should *not* ignore the comments, as this would likely make minority students feel less welcome and supported, nor should he berate the student who made the comment, as this would make others afraid to speak their mind if they are afraid of being unintentionally offensive.

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