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Herding CATS: Practical Classroom Activities for Active Learning

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Herding CATs: Practical Classroom Activities for Active Learning

I wrote last week about teaching styles, about lecture versus more interactive instruction. How helpful would some practical tactics be? The ones I will now share are called "CATs."

That acronym stands for Classroom Assessment Techniques, from a book with that title by Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross (2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 1993.) I learned about the techniques and the book from a Go2Knowledge presentation, "Best Practices in College Teaching: Creating an Active Learning Environment." (And now for a plug: watch that presentation at Go2Knowledge and join us for a discussion about it on February 14 at 11:00.) We have two copies of the Angelo and Cross book in Dacus Library, and I have found this large book so helpful from my first perusal that I plan to have a TLC session soon about CATs. Therefore, today's column can be a preview, but I think it can also give us

some immediate help in our classrooms as we strive to promote active learning.

The fifty techniques Angelo and Cross outline are assessment techniques, but they provide formative rather than summative assessment. That is, they provide ongoing assessment of student learning, as well as being part of student learning itself. I have already used variations of some of these techniques without knowing the book, as I am sure others have, and I am glad to learn some of the theory behind some classroom activities I have already employed. Here are six strategies you can try in your classrooms right away.

Signs Up—This one was in the presentation but not the book, as far as I can tell. This activity gives an instant gauge of student opinions and reactions, and can be very good at sparking class discussion. Tell the students to draw an arrow on a sheet of

paper, then ask a question. The students hold their sign up, with the arrow pointing up for yes or agree, down for no or disagree, or sideways for not sure or ambivalent. I tried Signs Up in my 20th-Century American Fiction and Drama class the other day, our first day discussing Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms.* "Do you like the novel?" I asked. "Signs up." The immediate feedback of student reaction was interesting and helpful, and seeing student reactions allowed me to get to discussion much quicker: it was very easy to identify students to call on. Four or five questions and Signs Up got the class off to a good start, and the activity also gave me some important feedback about student engagement with Hemingway.

Minute Papers—I have encountered this activity in several forms and by different names, and it is one I have used for a number of years. Angelo

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and Cross say it is the most widely-used of their CATs. At any point during class, pause and ask the students to write. They suggest doing so at the end of class, asking students to write about the most important thing they learned, or about their understanding of a specific concept or skill. This is a good way to find out how effective a class session has been. This activity also works well at the very beginning of class to start things off, or in the middle, to provide a change of pace or a transition. Writing theory clearly shows that having students write is one of the best ways to promote deep, active learning.

Muddiest Point—Give the students an index card, or have them write on a half sheet of paper. In the last few minutes of class or at a natural juncture in a lecture or presentation, ask them to write down the muddiest point. Take up the sheets and respond either in class or at the start of the next class. I tried the muddiest point in my CRTW class the other day, a very important day when they first encountered the elements of reasoning. I was interested to find that of the ten elements we covered, the class as a whole listed nine of them,

including two or three that I thought were so clear that nobody could misunderstand them. I was much better prepared for the next class! After we did more work with the elements, I gave them their index cards again, and every single student wrote that the muddy concept was now clear. Success!

Empty Outlines—Instead of giving students the outline of a chapter they have read or a unit they have covered, give them an empty outline and have them fill it in. This could be good for them to do either in class our out of class. I have done this in the past, and then adapted it to PowerPoint: a "Reverse PowerPoint," I called it, thinking I was inventing something. The students had read chapter three for the day, and my PowerPoint was a blank outline. I had one student stand at the podium and fill in what the class identified as the key points. This activity shows you what the students know (and don't know), but it also makes the students learn, and learn deeply.

Pro and Con Grid—Have the students make a pro and con list based on a decision, a judgment, a dilemma, advantages and disadvantages, or costs

and benefits, depending on your discipline and course. Tell students how many pros and cons they should list, and whether they should make the lists parallel. I have not tried this one, but I can see how beneficial it might be.

Approximate Analogies—Students complete the second half of an analogy (A is to B as X is to Y) for which you have supplied the first half. I have not tried this one, but it appeals to me. For my American fiction class: "Hemingway is to Faulkner as X is to Y." That should yield some interesting results, spark discussion, and reveal student understanding (and misunderstanding). I can imagine writing up a half dozen or so of these and have students complete them individually, then discuss in small groups, or even complete collaboratively in small groups. I think I will try this tomorrow as we move on to Faulkner.

Angelo and Cross provide fifty such activities, so we have just scratched the surface. Join the Go2Knowledge Group on Valentine's Day to discuss these and others, and look for a TLC session on CATs later in the semester. And one more copy of that book is sitting on the shelves in Dacus!

XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with

those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and

technology. You'll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxxite.ning.com/ Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

Join XXITE 2.0 or Register for a TLC Session At www.winthrop.edu/tlc

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person.   All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop See you there!

Thought for The Week

"Architects cannot teach nature anything."—Mark Twain