



2-3-2014

Dipping Into the Weekly Reader Mailbag: You Have Questions? We Have Answers!

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Recommended Citation

Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "Dipping Into the Weekly Reader Mailbag: You Have Questions? We Have Answers!" (2014). *The Weekly Reader*. 43.

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February 3, 2014
Volume 5, Issue 18

The Weekly Reader

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Dipping Into the *Weekly Reader* Mailbag: You Have Questions? We Have Answers!

It has been a long time since we dipped into the *Weekly Reader* mailbag—in fact, we have *never* dipped into the *Weekly Reader* mailbag. All the more reason to do so now. So let's see what the first letter brings.

Dear *Weekly Reader* Mailbag:

I am having trouble with discussion in one of the sections of my class. I teach three sections of the same course. In two sessions, class discussion is no problem at all. But in the third section, I can't get them to talk. The same questions that spark great discussion in the other sections yield nothing in this one. Do you have any advice?
Signed, Puzzled in Kinard

Dear Puzzled:

I have had that problem many times. There's something mysterious about class chemistry: from day one, some classes just seem to clam up. Trying to get them to talk is like conducting painful dental surgery. I have tried a number of

strategies to deal with the problem. One that has worked well for me is using writing rather than talking to get discussion going.

Instead of asking a question and waiting for someone to respond, ask the question and tell them to write down a two- or three-sentence answer. Then ask for students to read theirs. I have found that can often break the ice and get discussion going. Sometimes this writing strategy solves the problem of the silent class for good; once they begin talking, it's like a dam breaking. Sometimes it takes longer. Some classes continue to clam up. But writing first will get at least some response from the stubborn section.

Dear *Weekly Reader* Mailbag:

I use class discussion as one of my main teaching methods, and I have had good success as a leader of discussion. But I have one student in my HMX class that I can't get to shut up. As soon as I ask

a question, she raises her hand and speaks. Her contributions are usually pretty good, but she seems to shut down discussion by the rest of the class. I even see some students rolling their eyes when she starts to speak. What can I do?
Signed, Perturbed With Chatty Cathy

Dear Perturbed:

Yes, I have encountered Chatty Cathy before—as well as Loquacious Larry. You may eventually have to talk to your student outside class. If you do, I suggest couching your talk in positive terms. I have told such students something like this: "I really do appreciate your contributions to class discussion. I am happy you are so engaged with the material. But I need to get other people talking too, so I want to ask you if you could wait when I ask a question to get other people to talk. I will call on you afterward, but I'd like to get others involved first. Would that be okay?"

The problem with such a

“Dear Weekly Reader Mailbag:

I use discussion as one of my main teaching tactics, and it works well. But we do it every day, and I can tell the students are getting a bit tired of it. To tell you the truth, so I am! I’d like to find a way to vary things a bit. I don’t want to lose discussion altogether, because I find it is the best tool for students to think and learn deeply. But I sure would like some variety. Can you help? Signed, Bored in Bancroft”



Continued from page 1

talk is that it can hurt the student’s feelings. I have found that students who contribute too much are often also very sensitive, and even a tactful talk with them can cause harm. In addition, a student like this is often really into the course, so why curb her enthusiasm when what you want to do is kindle that kind of enthusiasm in the others? So I try to use some other tactics first, saving “the talk” as a last resort.

One thing to try is to make a comment in class. When the talkative student raises his or her hand, I say something like, “Gee, are you going to make Jennifer do all the work? Who can help her out here?” Sometimes that works—all it takes is for other students to step up and carry their end of the bargain.

Another tactic is to use writing. “Puzzled in Kinard” had the problem of nobody talking, and you have the problem of one student talking too much. Writing can solve this problem too. As I suggested to Puzzled, ask your students to write a response first. Then you will have many students with an answer, not just one.

Dear *Weekly Reader* Mailbag:

I use discussion as one of my main teaching tactics, and it works well. But we do it every day, and I can tell the students are getting a bit tired of it. To tell you the truth, so I am! I’d like to find a way to vary things a bit. I don’t want to lose discussion altogether, because I find it is the best tool for students to think and learn deeply. But I sure would like some variety. Can you help? Signed, Bored in Bancroft

Dear Bored:
Variety is indeed the spice of life, especially in the classroom. Even the best teaching strategies can lose their bloom if used all the time. Here is what I suggest: a written discussion. I call this “write around.” If you have a small class, up to about a dozen, you can form one circle (and you should sit in the circle with the students); if the class is larger, make several circles of ten or so (and you should move from group to group, joining their circles in turn). Everybody needs loose sheets of paper to write on, name at the top of the paper. Ask a question and have them all write for a few minutes. (You should write too.) Then say “pass.” Students (and you) pass the papers to the left. Read what is written, then write a response. After a

couple of minutes, pass again and respond. Then pose a new question, with several response times, and so on. By the time the pages get back to the original writer, there will be a very full and interesting discussion. And other than you, nobody has said a word. If there is time left in the class, you can have a traditional discussion of some of the best questions. Signed, The *Weekly Reader* Mailbag

What a coincidence that every single question to the *Weekly Reader* Mailbag concerned the same topic! Wise readers no doubt smell a rat. I will let you discuss that among yourselves...

First Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Register now for our inaugural conference, Friday, February 21, 2014, 2:00 pm-6:00 pm. We have fifteen sessions, a keynote speaker (Dr. Gloria Jones), and a closing wine and cheese reception. *Weekly Reader* readers can take advantage of free registration! (Although non-readers can too...) <http://www2.winthrop.edu/login/tlc/default.asp>

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/>

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.

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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!

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BLOG POSTS

- NEW POSTS ON THE RENOVATIONS**
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 22, 2012 at 2:05pm
- CORE VALUES**
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 5, 2012 at 9:41am
- PLAYING TO TYPE**
Posted by [Blaiz C. Harding](#) on May 25, 2012 at 10:22am
- TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM**
Posted by [Amanda Hiler](#) on March 15, 2012 at 12:11pm — 1 Comment
- GONE WITH THE WIND...**
Posted by [Jo Koster](#) on March 6, 2012 at 10:33am — 2 Comments

[+ Add a Blog Post](#)

NOTES

- DO COLLEGE PROFESSORS WORK HARD ENOUGH?**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 25, 2012 at 11:34pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- WHO OWNS YOUR COURSE?**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 19, 2012 at 12:07pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF TABLETS INCREASES, PREFERENCE FOR GROWING**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 14, 2012 at 11:24am. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)

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Thought for The Week

*"Wisdom doesn't automatically come with old age. Nothing does -- except wrinkles. It's true, some wines improve with age. But only if the grapes were good in the first place."
--Abigail Van Buren*