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The Puzzle of the Class Personality—Why Is This Section So Lively, and Why Is This Other One So Dead?

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The Puzzle of the Class Personality—Why Is This Section So Lively, and Why Is This Other One So Dead?

Last week, my former student and now my new colleague in the English Department, Kim Farrier, posted on Facebook about her three writing classes at York Tech. The first and third were going great, she said, but the middle one was not. The students already seemed uninterested and disengaged, even though she was doing exactly the same things in each section.

I know the felling. I have had two sections of the same course in one semester that were as different from each other as ants from elephants, even though I was using the same texts, the same approaches, the same lame jokes.

Like individuals, classes have personalities. I find this very interesting, and it certainly poses challenges to us as teachers.

My ENGL 324 class, the 20th-Century American Novel, has only met twice so far, but I can tell that it is probably going to be an excellent class. The

students, almost all English majors, are very excited about reading works by Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Zora Neale Hurston, just to mention what we will cover in the first half of the semester.

Oddly enough, two students were missing the first day, and one student added after that meeting, so we were a slightly different group when we met again yesterday. I can't say better or worse, but it was perceptibly different. Even a slight change in membership can change the personality of the class.

And the personality of the class can change over time. I have had classes that were really into the subject, but then have them gradually lose interest over the course of the semester. And I have had the opposite happen: I start out thinking they are all tuned out, then something clicks and they get turned on (or most of them do).

The constant in this changing swirl of personalities is me in my classes, you in yours. I don't know about you, but my personality changes somewhat from class to class, largely due to the nature and level of the course. I am not quite the same person with a class of freshmen and sophomores as I am with a graduate class—although I am pretty sophomoric in all of them.

The class that works doesn't pose many problems. But what do we do with that class that just isn't clicking?

My first response is to give them some time and not to worry about it. I plug away as usual, hoping that things will change and that they will get on board the way I expect them to.

But there comes a time when you need to do something to try to change things up. What strategies have you used?

My inclination is to ramp up my enthusiasm level a bit to see if that catches

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on. My enthusiasm level is already pretty high, but I try turning it up a notch to see what happens. Another strategy I have used is to change my teaching methods. I reach into my bag of teaching tricks to see what might work.

If I have a class where not many people talk, I always turn to writing as a strategy. Rather than ask a question and have a few students answer (or just one in a really dead class), I ask a question and have the students write for a couple of minutes. Then have them share their responses with a neighbor or in a small group, or with the whole class. Writing makes each student focus and engages each student, and often that will break the ice.

If I have assigned groups in class and feel the groups are not working, I have made them switch. Sometimes shifting people around like that can make a difference.

But there comes a time when you have to face the fact that for some reason, this class is just not going to gel and percolate the way you want it to.

I remember a particular section of CRTW, our required critical thinking

class, that just wasn't working. This was about ten years ago, when we first started the course. I had taught it three times previously, always with excellent results. But this particular section was just dead. Where the other classes had been into mastering the elements of reasoning and the thinking puzzles I posed for them, this class was dialed out.

So one day I just stopped. I told them that every other time I had taught the course, the students had been really into it. Why were they not? What is wrong?

After a long pause, one student raised her hand and said, "Well, I'm an early childhood major, so I don't need critical thinking."

The astonished look on my face might have been enough, but when I literally collapsed to the floor (mostly an act, but I really was floored by her ridiculous answer), I really got their attention. I got up and brushed myself off, and we talked about their responses to the course. I'm not going to say that they were fully engaged from then on, but they did get better. When the course ended, most of the students said the class had been valuable to them.

I have been teaching for over 35 years, and I only remember a couple of classes that I just had to give up on. It was hard to give up, and by "giving up," I do not mean that I stopped teaching them. I kept covering the material and engaging the few students who were engaged, but I stopped thinking that the class might catch fire the way I want classes always to do.

Oddly enough, even in those extreme cases, I found when I read the course evaluations that most of the students were very positive about the class. Impossible to figure out this conundrum.

Actually, I am glad that this phenomenon exists. Things would be a bit boring if classes were all the same. And I do enjoy the challenges that different classes bring. A few I would like to erase from my memory banks, but those are rare. The change and the challenge sure make our job interesting!



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If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

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Thought For the Week

"...there is a good side and a bad side to most people, and in accordance with your own character and disposition you will bring out one of them and the other will remain a sealed book to you."
--Mark Twain