IPRPD
International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Science
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 03; Issue no 01: January, 2022

Successful Classroom Techniques to Engage First-Year College Education Students

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection of successful classroom techniques for engaging first-year college education students. The authors pose that the traditional model of lecturing is not sufficiently engaging for first-year college education students. Through reflection, the authors aim to provide techniques for first-year college education students' retention and engagement. The provided techniques include a digital program orientation, a student panel discussion, an experiential learning activity, and a teambuilding and collaboration strategy. The authors conclude that the provided classroom techniques increased first-year college education students' retention rates by understanding the programs, sense of belonging, and classroom engagement.

Keywords: Techniques, Engagement, Retention, First-year college education students

The high college freshman drop-out rate has been a common concern for many universities. Among a total of 2,199 reporting higher learning institutions in the United States, approximately 26.4% of first-time/full-time students who enrolled in fall 2016 did not register at the same institution in fall 2017 (ACT, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the drop-out rate dramatically increases, and approximately 30% of first-year college students in the U.S. drop out before their sophomore year (Eye-opening College Dropout rates & statistics, 2022). College drop-outs impact both the individual and the institution negatively. Besides the money and time spent in vain, young adults who dropped out of college were reported to experience more difficulties in the labor market (Hällsten, 2017; Ortiz & Dehon, 2013).

Furthermore, student drop-out rates affect institution future enrollment adversely. Institutions with high drop-out rates are often viewed as having low-quality teaching and not providing sufficient support to students (Voelkle & Sander, 2008). Since the global pandemic, the higher education market has been extraordinarily competitive and vulnerable. Nationally, institutional leaders are concerned about a significant drop in future enrollment,potentially affecting an institution's financial stability and program sustainability.

The phenomenon of "losing" first-year college students was reportedly associated with both institutional and personal factors (Barefoot, 2004; Fike & Fike, 2008). Institutionally, school culture, program study plan, course sequences, attendance policy, advising structure, and grading system influence first-year college students' decision to stay (Barefoot, 2004). Personal factors such as students' maturity, characteristics, learning styles, time and stress management skills, financial situation, and a sense of belonging contribute to the decision to drop out (Barefoot, 2004; Fike & Fike, 2008).

In researching intervention methods to deter college students from dropping out, scholars mostly agree that increasing students' classroom engagement could help in improving students' retention; it positively impacts students' academic performances, overall college experiences, and their sense of belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). A sense of belonging at school is defined as a combined feeling of being included, supported, and connected to the learning community (Strayhorn, 2012). It impacts college-level students' motivation to learn (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007). When students feel valued and respected by peers and faculty, their sense of belonging increases; when students feel they belong, they have a better chance of persisting and completing the degree (Strayhorn, 2012). In contrast, students who feel disengaged and disoriented are more likely to drop out (Washor & Mojkowski, 2014). Thus, instructors play such a key role in helping students feel belonging and engaged inside the classroom and increasing students' persistence and retention of the program.

Being instructors who interact with first-year education majors daily, we primarily see the need to increase student retention rates through enhanced classroom engagement. After teaching different education major students, we

discovered that first-year college students are held to high expectations by both the program and the state. They are more prone to dropping out or switching majors due to academic pressure and personal reasons. For instance, in addition to maintaining a minimum grade of C, first-year college education students in the current intro education course must maintain a minimum GPA of 2.50 to move toward the next transition point. Besides attending face-to-face classroom learning sessions, the students must complete 10 hours of classroom observation in the fields. Additionally, if students' ACT composite score was lower than 21, they must also take the Praxis Core Tests and meet specific score requirements.

Moreover, as first-year college education students who just put a foot into the teaching door, their unfamiliarity with the program study plan, the milestone requirements, and advising procedure could overwhelm them easily. Thus, the mixture of the demanding course schedule, the amount of course works and fieldwork, the pressure of passing multiple standardized tests, and the unfamiliarity with the program could place first-year college education students in such a vulnerable position of wanting to drop out or switching majors. To maintain students' enrollment and ensure program sustainability, the College of Education, the Teaching and Learning department, and the instructors of the intro education courses went through great researching, selecting, adapting, and applying various methods into the intro level education courses. This paper presents four methods that were successfully implemented and received the most positive feedback from the students and faculty.

Digital Program Orientation

Traditionally, first-year college education students are encouraged to attend the in-person program orientation at the beginning of the semester; the purpose is to deepen their understanding of the program and be aware of the various transition points they have to reach to obtain a teaching license. Despite the college and department's efforts and good intentions, most students failed to attend the program orientations in the past few years due to schedule conflicts or lack of importance attached to the event. To confront the issue, faculty brainstormed and implemented various ideas of making orientation mandatory and offering incentives. However, the participation rate was still far from ideal. As a result, the instructors painstakingly adjusted their pre-designed course schedules. They invited different program key personals to provide program orientations to each classroom with first-year college education students.

Unsurprisingly, this method was reported to be far from being efficient and effective. It caused schedule conflicts among college and department leaders, faculty guest speakers, and instructors and impacted the quality of classroom instruction time. Since faculty guest speakers joined the class with only limited time slots, the presentation was often rushed, the provided information was disjointed, and caused students even more confusion.

Sample Activity

To address the participation issues and accommodate both faculty and student's needs, in the spring semester of 2020, the various program leaders collaborated and agreed to create a digital program orientation. Together, they created an orientation video with intensive valuable program information. In the video, both faculty and program leaders offered genuine advice in helping students navigate the program. Each program anchor person introduced various licensed programs and explained the requirements. In the end, student representatives who had already completed the course shared their strategies and lived experiences of being an education major. Due to the impact of Covid-19, the orientation video was delivered to students via the learning management system instead. First-year college education students were required to view the video, then reflect and answer 20 constructed questions.

Reflection

The orientation video received positive feedback from students, and it is reported to have various benefits. First, students said that the video orientation was informative and helpful; it included an intensive program introduction that they often missed out on. The students were convinced that our faculty was professional, knowledgeable, and approachable. It significantly increased first-year college education students' feeling of being supported. Second, the video orientation provided both students and faculty with flexibility. Students could allocate time to watch the video and review as needed to absorb the intensive information.

Furthermore, faculty no longer need to present in each classroom to ensure each student is informed of the critical program information. Third, the shared experience from the peers in the video resonated with first-year college education students in a way that faculty usually failed. First-year college education students were not presented with sugar-coated first-year college trajectories; instead, their peers in the video showed authenticity by sharing their stories of struggle and their sincere advice to succeed in the program.

Student Panel Discussion

Researchers mostly agree that the successful implementation of the student panel discussion promotes student involvement (Crone, 1997; Jones, 2014). The purpose of the student panel discussion is to allow university

instructors to move beyond the textbook and bring advanced pre-service peers' educational experiences into the classroom (Anwar, 2016). Through a panel discussion, the goal is to expand students' knowledge of the current course through conversations and promote their sense of belonging and self-confidence. The method of student panel discussion aligns with the framework of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2018), highlighting the power of language and thoughts in reflective learning and cognitive development (Alexander, 2008; Paul, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962). Dialogic teaching originates from Vygotsky's pedagogy of teaching and learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs during the collaborative dialogue with a skillful tutor. Students reflect, learn, and internalize through meaningful dialogues and more abled peers in the panel discussion.

Sample Activity

To run a fruitful student panel discussion, first collect a list of program-related questions by sending out a digital survey. Through collaborating with faculty who were teaching upper-level classes at that time, we recruited a group of diverse upper-class level students as guests to join the panel discussion, some of them were in their second or third year of the program, two of the students were in the process of field teaching and taking edTPA assessment, and one was in a job-embedded teaching position. The collected questions were distributed to them in advance to ensure guest students had ample time to be prepared. When hosting the panel discussion, the instructor took the roleof facilitating first-year college education program students took turns to ask advanced guest students questions. After finishing the panel discussion, we sent another survey to the first-year education program students and the participating advanced peers.

Reflection

The student panel discussion was a success, and it benefited both students and faculty tremendously. First, through organizing and implementing the student panel discussion, the understanding of students' learning, concern, and progress was deepened. Through conversation, students were provided a platform to voice their concerns; university instructors were allowed to hear the problems and provide possible solutions. Second, in the process of the panel discussion, first-year college students' self-confidence was increased by practicing public speaking (Anwar, 2016); they were able to identify the power of their voices and the role of communication in reflecting and learning (Simpson, 2016). Third, the panel discussion is a reflection of the dialogic teaching method. The collaborative dialogue generated during the discussion was not only a display of learning through dialogues (Alexander, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978); it was also a way of relating feelings to peers. The first-year college education students felt much more connected and belonged when the feeling was recognized and shared by a group with similar backgrounds.

Outdoor Experiential Learning

Traditionally, educational courses are primarily taught through a lecturing style, and some classroom activities mightalso be integrated. Both students and instructors could experience "course fatigue," for they are rarely given the opportunity to learn the same topic in a different setting. Inspired by the pedagogical method of experiential learning ((Dewey, 1897), the idea of incorporating an outdoor activity with the current educational topic was generated. Experiential learning (Dewey, 1897) is a pedagogical method that promotes learning through experience; outdoor learning opportunities enable students to embrace the challenge of freshness and unfamiliarity with new knowledge (Kesselheim, 1974). Outdoor experiential learning aims to promote engagement and collaboration by allowing students to internalize what they have learned inside the classroom (Kesselheim, 1974).

Sample Activity

Through researching and planning, we collaborated with the college STEM professor and organized the experiential outdoor simulation activity named *Oh Deer* (Reeder & Moseley, 2006; Vanderbilt University, 2004). This learning activity is primarily used to teach students about animal habitats, interdependent relationships, and the importance of diversity in ecosystems (Reeder & Moseley, 2006; Vanderbilt University, 2004). In the activity, one student was assigned as the deer lining up on one side of the field searching resources to survive, the rest of the students were asked to line up on the opposite side to be the water by placing hands over the mouth, the shelter by holding hands up above their head, and the food by placing hands over the stomach. Once the instructor said, "Oh Deer," the student as the deer ran toward the resources and decided the needs. As the resources started to move, the students decided on the type of resource they would like (Reeder & Moseley, 2006; Vanderbilt University, 2004). Through tagging and matching, the deer's needs could either be met or denied. After carrying out the simulation activity withour modification, we steered students' attention from the interdependent relationships in Ecosystems to the educational field. We led students to reflect on the importance of experiential learning in K-12 teaching. Students were asked to brainstorm and share their various ideas of the experiential learning activity they would like to implement when they become teachers.

Reflection

The outdoor experiential learning activity was a success, and it was reported as one of the most influential and unforgettable learning experiences by the students from the introductory education course. First, when students were placed in a real-world scenario, they were given ample opportunities to make predictions based on prior knowledge and observation; they were challenged to test hypotheses. For instance, in the "Oh Deer" simulation activity, while learning about diversity, animal habitat, and population, students are provided with tools to construct graphs for data representation (Reeder & Moseley, 2006). Socioemotionally, students actively collaborated and communicated with peers, worked as a team to collect data and scaffolded each other's learning by cross-checking collected information. At last, students were guided to extend the concept of diversity in the Ecosystem into the educational field. Several students were learning to be science teachers. They were inspired to adapt the experiential learning pedagogy and activity into their future teaching.

Team Building and Collaboration

There is an increasing number of college classroom activities that require the collaboration of individuals to accomplish. Collaborative practices inside the classroom benefit college students in two main ways. First, collaborative group activities contribute to forming an engaging learning environment; it positively impacts students' outcomes and retention (Clements and Minnick, 2012). Besides, positive peer interactions during collaborative activities are especially crucial in enhancing first-year college students' sense of belonging in the learning community (Strayhorn, 2012). In conducting collaborative classroom activities, students can communicate, connect, and build positive peer relationships.

Sample Activity

The *Marshmallow Challenge* (Wujec, 2010) was reported to be the most popular and inspirational collaborative learning activity, and it was brought into the classroom by a guest speaker. In the activity, students were assigned into heterogeneous groups to use 20 spaghetti sticks, one yard of yarn, one yard of tape, and one marshmallow to build the tallest free-standing structure in a limited time (Wujec, 2010). The main goal of the activity was to deepen students' understanding of teamwork and collaboration. Throughout the hands-on activity of building the tower, students experienced forming a solid team; they realized the power of the team in building a taller and steadier structure. They recognized the importance of collaboration in achieving a common goal. Upon building the tower, we watched the "Marshmallow Challenge" TED talk (Wujec, 2010) as a class and summarized that shared experience, common language, and prototyping/facilitation are the three essential factors in building a team. Students were asked to create ideas for implementing the activity in building their future classroom as a community to connect the implication of the activity with education.

Reflection

The *Marshmallow Challenge* benefited first-year college education students by providing essential tips for collaboration and future classroom management. First, the agreement utterances at the beginning were correlated with the height of the marshmallow structure (Suzuki et al., 2016). It also revealed the importance of teamwork and collaboration in improving achievement. Second, team member's satisfaction with performance seemed to be affected by the verbal and non-verbal communication among team members (Suzuki et al., 2016), the indication inspired first-year college education students to be aware of the influence that their verbal and non-verbal behaviors could have on students' satisfaction and learning. Last but not least, students can apply the inspiration for this activity to their future classrooms. For instance, one PreK-3 major student shared the group discussion for the preschool classroom. The preschooler will have shared experience during the morning whole group meeting. The teacher will lead the students to respect others as the common language, and the prototyping/facilitation is greeting each other in the morning meeting. Through the group discussion, each student shared their ideas about building the class as a harmonious community.

Conclusion

Increasing students' classroom engagement could increase student retention (Masika & Jones, 2016; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). As university instructors, we play a crucial role in effectively engaging students in the classroom and helping them persist throughout the entire educational trajectory. The more the student's engagement in the classroom, the higher the possibility they will continue through. Furthermore, tackling the retention issue of first-year college education students requires collaborative efforts from educational leaders, faculty, and students. Through collective endeavors, the strategies of program video orientation, student panel discussion, experiential learning activity, and teamwork and collaboration strategy were carefully selected, modified, and successfully implemented. The provided techniques positively impacted first-year college education students' understanding of the programs, sense of belonging, and classroom engagement. College instructors who are seeking high-impact classroom engagement techniques could implement them into their classrooms.

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