



## Using Student-Led Seminars and Conceptual Workshops to Increase Student Participation

Victoria Budzinski McMullen

To cite this article: Victoria Budzinski McMullen (2014) Using Student-Led Seminars and Conceptual Workshops to Increase Student Participation, *College Teaching*, 62:2, 62-67, DOI: [10.1080/87567555.2014.885876](https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2014.885876)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2014.885876>



Published online: 25 Mar 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1293



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Using Student-Led Seminars and Conceptual Workshops to Increase Student Participation

Victoria Budzinski McMullen

*Webster University*

This article examines the use of two strategies designed to increase student participation in a teacher education class: student-led seminars and conceptual workshops. Quantitative data, collected by a graduate student observer, showed increased student participation in classroom discussion and activities. Also, qualitative findings collected through a third party interview revealed students' perceptions of in-depth understanding, practical application, and synthesis.

**Keywords:** classroom discussion, pedagogy, student responsibility, teaching methods

After a disappointing semester of teaching Classroom and Behavior Management, in which students participated minimally in discussion after lecture and even less in classroom activities, I asked the seniors in this class about their lack of enthusiasm. I discovered most were not reading the text “because it was covered in lecture,” and a few had not even purchased the book. This lack of preparation for class limited their ability to meaningfully participate in class discussion. The students also indicated that they were ready for student teaching and did not see how what they were doing applied. I knew the material was applicable, and that without this particular set of knowledge and skills, they were unlikely to be successful in student teaching. Somehow, I needed to modify this class to engage students in synthesizing and integrating what they had learned in previous education classes so that they would be well prepared for teaching.

I decided to change how core content and application activities were presented. After selecting specific instructional strategies that I believed would encourage greater student participation and receiving Institutional Review Board approval, I arranged for a graduate student to collect data on student responses and made plans to have an outside evaluator come in and hold an interview with the class without my being present at the end of the semester to evaluate the changes.

## Student Participation and Engagement

It is generally accepted in postsecondary education that greater student participation produces greater student learning (Lo 2011; McKeachie and Svinicki 2012). The traditional method of college teaching, however, has been to assign students readings and problems to work on outside of class, while listening to lectures and taking tests in class with some minimal student participation occurring during class discussions. Brewer and Burgess (2005) found that students are more motivated to attend class when active learning methodologies are used as opposed to lecturing. Once there, students who participate in class activities learn more than students who do not participate (Weaver and Qi 2005). Most students, however, are silent during discussions (Howard, James, and Taylor 2002). Weaver and Qi (2005) found that only 25% of students participate in class discussion in any given class, with only 12% of students being regular participants. How then do faculty go about getting students to participate and actively engage? From a faculty point of view, Barkley (2010) sees engaged students as those who “are involved in the academic task at hand and are using higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing information or solving problems” (5). Active learning requires students to participate and hopefully to engage. Menges and Weimer (1996) describe active learning as an informal social process where the exchange of ideas occurs through student involvement in interpersonal, intellectually focused activities.

Finkel (1999) describes a number of active learning strategies in his book, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. He specifically calls for faculty to conceptualize good teaching not as “telling” but as creating an environment that is conducive to

---

Correspondence should be sent to Victoria Budzinski McMullen, Webster University, 470 E. Lockwood Ave, St. Louis, MO 63119, USA. E-mail: mcmullen@webster.edu

student participation in the work they need to do to learn. He believes that instructors must downplay their authority in order for student to take ownership of their learning. Similarly, Weaver and Qi (2005) indicate that student perceptions of faculty as authorities of knowledge diminish student participation. Two of the strategies Finkel describes for creating such environments are student-led seminars and conceptual workshops.

A student-led seminar is “an open-ended seminar to which students bring their own questions (about some topic or reading), and in which through conversation and inquiry, they address some of these questions” (Finkel 1999, 33). Classroom discussions such as student-led seminars allow students to deepen their understanding of material with which they have already encountered (Abowitz 1990; Jones 2008). Together, students explore the implications of what they have read or experienced while looking for application in their own lives and learning to view the material through multiple perspectives. Casteel and Bridges (2007) found that students reported higher levels of satisfaction with courses and perceived a greater amount of new information learned in classes using a student-led seminar approach.

According to Finkel (1999), a conceptual workshop uses an engaging puzzle, problem, or question as a basis for a structured learning experience for students. It involves peers to talk to, a series of questions, a teacher to call on, and an end to the experience. Creating a conceptual workshop involves (1) identifying an overall problem or topic for investigation, (2) creating a series of questions that move the students toward (an) answer(s) of the overall-problem-to-be-solved, (3) offering a mix of individual reading, writing, and discussion as relevant to the topic, and (4) affording students an opportunity to provide feedback to the instructor about their learning.

Conceptual workshops can be thought of as a type of structured cooperative learning as they are small groups in which students work collaboratively to help each other learn academic content. Tsay and Brady (2010) demonstrated that participation in cooperative learning activities is a strong predictor of academic success.

### Format of the Class

Participants in this study were thirteen pre-service educators, all of who were seniors and who were concurrently enrolled in a practicum experience before their final semester of student teaching. The students’ areas of teacher certification included elementary education, middle school education, secondary education, special education, and K–12 specialists.

The class met twice a week for 80-minute sessions. Of the 30 sessions, there were seven paired, student-led seminars and conceptual workshops. The student-led seminars and conceptual workshops covered the same topic and culminated in a written piece of work on that topic. These replaced seven lectures and seven class periods of follow-up

application activities. The other class sessions included introductory lectures (2), small-group work activities on disciplinary models and behavioral supports (6), role plays of lesson plan disruptions (4), computer lab sessions using Simschool (2), and guest speakers (2). All of these components were the same as in other semesters.

Taking into account Fassinger’s (1995) caution that students and faculty may have different perceptions of what adequate preparation for class consists, students were directed to prepare for student-led seminars by:

- reading the chapter/assigned readings and take notes while doing so,
- reviewing the PowerPoint posted online,
- developing three upper level Bloom’s taxonomy questions related to the material and bring them to class,
- reviewing the assigned items posted under Support Materials on the website,
- taking the ten-question multiple-choice quiz online prior to coming to class, and
- bringing their book and all handouts to class.

Prior to the first student-led seminar, students were told that they were responsible for running the class and that the instructor would be observing but not participating in the discussion. It was suggested that everyone write one of their three questions on the whiteboard upon entering class.

I arrived early to the first student-led seminar and sat at one of the side tables in the U-shaped classroom configuration. I returned student greetings but did not provide any direction. About ten minutes into the class period, one of the students initiated the start of class by reminding others that they were supposed to write questions on the board. This same student led the rich discussion that followed. Students discussed a variety of issues related to developmental needs and educational structure for 70 minutes without pause and without irrelevant comments. Notably, the topics discussed were all generated by students without instructor input and covered the major issues from the text.

The discussion reflected a careful reading of the text, with incorporation of relevant evidence when making a point. Not only had students come prepared with questions, but most also had complete sets of notes and had highlighted appropriate textual support for points they wanted to make. Multiple applications of the material to experiences in the students’ practicum also occurred. For example, one student posed the following question: “On page 39 of the text, Lipsitz is quoted as identifying the need for diversity as an early adolescent need; in my practicum, I’m not seeing this—the main emphasis of the students is on conforming. Do any of you see evidence of this in your practicum experiences?” Additionally, students often described the behavior of an elementary or secondary student or teacher and then analyzed that behavior based on models described in the text; this was frequently

followed by a discussion that evaluated the relative effectiveness of the behavior or strategy described.

I did not speak at any time during the discussion but did take notes and posted them on the course website following class. This allowed me to provide feedback on well-made points and to outline alternative arguments. One student led a round of applause at the end of the discussion commenting that they had not thought it possible for me not to speak for an entire class period. (I had had many of these students in introductory lecture-style classes before.)

I did observe some uneven patterns of participation with a few students talking a great deal and a small number of students making only a few comments. My observations led me to present the students with data on participation after the second session. All students were individually given the range of participation (number of initiations and responses), the class average for participation, and their individual data for the preceding seminar. Over the next few sessions, most students moved toward the mean in terms of participation with several students taking the initiative to invite the comments of quieter class members so that all voices were heard. As the semester went on, I began to participate in the seminars, but always taking care to speak no more than the average student. I made a point of asking questions in response to student comments rather than agreeing or disagreeing with their statements in order to maintain my role as a participant rather than an authority.

Each student-led seminar was followed by a conceptual workshop. Students were directed to:

- take notes during the student-led seminar;
- read any assigned materials related to the conceptual workshop prior to class; and
- bring their book, all handouts, and all scoring guides to class.

The conceptual workshops in this class were designed to help students synthesize information and skills from a variety of classes and field experiences that occurred during the previous three years of the program. Each conceptual workshop prepared students to complete a writing assignment on a specific topic. During the conceptual workshops, students were placed in small groups related to their age-level or disciplinary preparation.

The first conceptual workshop focused on analyzing and fine-tuning their philosophy of education statements. Appendix A shows the conceptual workshop directions given to students. Students worked with ease in these small group sessions with others who were focused on the same subject and age-level concerns. A number of students remarked how the time recommendations for each section of the conceptual workshop helped keep the group on track. One student commented during the following class session, “taking notes during the Conceptual Workshop, I was able to take those and put them over to my classroom management paper. I was

able to organize my thoughts and use the ideas in my paper,” thus demonstrating both synthesis and application. Appendix B shows the directions and scoring guide for the first section of the classroom management paper. This section of the paper was due one week after the completion of the conceptual workshop shown in Appendix A.

### Evaluation of Student Participation

A graduate student observer collected data on total student responses, student initiations and irrelevant responses in both student-led seminars and conceptual workshops. During student-led seminars eCove software was used to discreetly capture the number and type of initiations and responses of each student. Across all student-led seminars, the average number of student responses per session was 156, with a range of 91–216 responses. The average number of initiations of new ideas or questions was 20, with a range of 10–53. The average number of substantive responses to those initiations was 120, with a range of 75–163. Lastly, the average number of off-track or irrelevant comments was four, with a range from 0–22. Most sessions had zero off-track comments, but there were 22 such comments in one session when an off-handed comment related to an episode of “Glee” took the class down a rabbit hole for a few minutes. The total number of responses for individual students ranged from an average of 6 to 24. Table 1 shows the group activity for each student-led seminar.

During conceptual workshops, ten-minute time samples for each group were used to estimate the number of responses made. Similarly, the average number of student responses per session was 192 responses, with a range of 98–297 responses. The average number of initiations of new ideas or questions was 45 with a range of 4–91. The average number of substantive responses to those initiations was 129, with a range of 94–198. Lastly, the average number of off-track or irrelevant

TABLE 1  
Whole Group Data for Student-Led Seminars

	Total-IP	Total-RP	Total-IT	Total-RT	Total-IR	Total-T
Jan 31	20	154	1	1	6	182
Feb 7	14	114	3	9	0	140
Feb 14	14	93	1	13	0	121
Feb 21	17	163	0	14	22	216
Mar 6	10	75	0	6	0	91
Mar 27	53	108	8	4	1	174
April 3	12	134	5	20	0	171
Average	20	120.1	2.6	9.6	4.1	156
Range of individual student responses	.7–4.9	4.5–16.4	0–4	0–1	0–1.4	5.7–23.9

Note. IP = Initiation to Peers, RP = Response to Peer Comment, IT = Initiation to Teacher, RT = Response to Teacher, IR = Irrelevant Comment, T = Total.

TABLE 2  
Whole Group Data for Conceptual Workshops

	Total-IP	Total-RP	Total-IT	Total-RT	Total-IR	Total-T
Jan 31	56	144	1	0	2	203
Feb 7	73	127	8	0	1	209
Feb 14	91	125	16	25	8	265
Feb 21	55	198	16	21	7	297
Mar 6	25	106	5	0	2	138
Mar 27	10	107	6	10	2	135
April 3	4	94	0	0	0	98
Average	44.9	128.7	7.4	8.0	3.1	192.1
Range of individual student responses	2.2–8.0	7.7–17.2	0–1.7	0–2.1	0–.9	11.1–25.5

Note: IP = Initiation to Peers, RP = Response to Peer Comment, IT = Initiation to Teacher, RT = Response to Teacher, IR = Irrelevant Comment, T = Total.

comments was three, with a range from 0-8. Table 2 shows the group activity for each conceptual workshop.

During the last week of class, an outside observer from the university's Faculty Development Center videotaped the students responding to a series of questions without the instructor present. When asked to describe a student-led seminar, one student said, "we write our questions on the board, our discussion topics, and then go around and bounce ideas off one another about each question that's on the board." Another student added, "and just like this, people can add in comments. It's really just a constant discussion and then once the conversation dies down, we move on to a new topic, and then once we feel like it's really been discussed, we are finished." When asked to describe the role of the instructor, a student indicated, "sometimes the instructor will interject to make sure that the topic is clarified and that we're not missing out on important things that may have been left out; she really tried not to though." Another commented, "For the most part she's just a guide; she didn't talk really at all."

When asked how well they felt they learned the material as a result of the student-led seminars, students' comments were overwhelmingly positive. One student commented, "I think that I learned the material pretty well because I actually had to read the book and bring in questions or discussion topics that made me think outside the box." Another student indicated, "I liked it in the sense that I learn best by bouncing ideas off each other and talking about things so that really helped out and I think certain things stuck in my memory better by doing that as opposed to a teacher showing a PowerPoint." One student summarized, "I agree, and I will look at you and say this as a promise: I would not have even opened the book, probably, had we not done this. So, I learned the material a lot better, this . . . changed my life."

Students' reactions to the conceptual workshop indicated that they felt "able to organize thoughts for the classroom management paper" and to "bounce ideas off each other in

a smaller group." The conceptual workshop helped students synthesize the material. One student remarked, "I remember one day, that Tuesday morning, or Thursday morning, we were talking about something in a different class and that afternoon I put what I had learned onto the paper." Another student remarked, "It was mostly reflection and application of the concepts that we were learning from the student-led seminars." Students also commented that "it was nice to have the prompt where we had something to discuss for each chunk of minutes so it was very guided where in some other group work in other classes we'd just kind of been told what to do and then it's like, 'what do we do again?' but it was all right there." When asked how effective conceptual workshops were, one student commented, "Time will tell how effective it was, but I personally think it was the most memorable of my education classes." Lastly, one student summarized the use of these strategies by saying "these really worked for building a community, I think that we all are really comfortable with each other and we can discuss easily and learn from each other."

## CONCLUSION

As an instructor who has taught this course many times (usually successfully), this was clearly the semester in which students learned the most. The students wrote more in-depth papers, discussed relevant issues at length and in-depth, and demonstrated a deeper understanding of the material. Course grades were not significantly different, as I always allow students to rewrite for mastery; however, there were far fewer rewrites this particular semester than in the past. When talking with other faculty in other sections of the course and in other courses using these strategies, there were a few things about this methodology that seemed essential to address. First, it is important to discuss with students not only the how of the methodology, but the why. Students need to understand the rationale for this type of learning as it may be very different from the lecture-based classes they have previously had. Second, students may initially be reluctant or nervous about engaging in these strategies. It is important to debrief with them after the first few student-led seminars and conceptual workshops to gain their input for improving the structure for their particular class. Lastly, it is really difficult for an instructor who may be a skilled lecturer to not talk. I recommend not speaking at all for at least the first two student-led seminars and then limiting oneself to the average level of participation by students.

## REFERENCES

- Abowitz, D. A. 1990. "Teaching Demography to Undergraduates: A Pedagogical Dilemma." *Teaching Sociology* 18 (1): 63–8.
- Barkley, E. F. 2010. *Student Engagement Techniques*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Brewer, E. W. & D. N. Burgess. 2005. "Professor's Role in Motivating Students to Attend Class." *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education* 42 (23): 23–47.
- Casteel, M. A. & K. R. Bridges. 2007. "Goodbye Lecture: A Student-led Seminar Approach for Teaching Upper Division Courses." *Teaching of Psychology* 34 (2): 107–10.
- Fassinger, P. A. 1995. "Professors' and Students' Perceptions of Why Students Participate in Class." *Teaching Sociology*, 24 (1): 25–33.
- Finkel, D. L. 1999. *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Howard, J. R., G. H. James III, & D. R. Taylor. 2002. "The Consolidation of Responsibility in the Mixed Age College Classroom." *Teaching Sociology* 30 (2):214–34.
- Jones, R. C.. 2008. "The 'Why' of Class Participation: A Question Worth Asking." *College Teaching* 56 (1): 59–62.
- Lo, C. C. 2011. "Student Learning and Student Satisfaction in an Interactive Classroom." *The Journal of General Education* 59 (4): 238–63.
- McKeachie, W. & M. D. Svinicki. 2012. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, 14th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Menges, R. J. & M. Weimer. 1996. *Teaching on Solid Ground: Using Scholarship to Improve Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Tsay, M. & M. Brady. 2010. "A Case Study of Cooperative Learning and Communication Pedagogy: Does Working in Teams Make a Difference?" *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 10 (2): 78–89.
- Weaver, R. R. and J. Qi. 2005. "Classroom Organization and Participation: College Students' Perceptions." *The Journal of Higher Education* 76 (5): 570–601.

## Appendix A

### Conceptual Workshop A

#### *Mission (15 minutes)*

Review: Your notes from the Educational Outcomes discussion and your Philosophy of Ed. List: Four words that you believe are essential educational outcomes for your classroom.

Present: One of your outcomes to your team, define your terms and defend its importance.

#### *Vision (15 minutes)*

Imagine: Close your eyes for one minute and imagine what your classroom looks and sounds like. What is the emotional tone and feeling evoked when one walks in the room?

Write: Four adjectives you would use to describe your classroom

Describe: Spend three minutes per group member describing your classroom.

#### *Theory of Teaching and Learning (45 minutes)*

Discuss: How do students learn? What happens internally when they encounter new information? Is the process different when new academic information is presented as opposed to learning a new social skill? (5)

Review: The short summaries provided for each of the learning theories. Which one(s) fit with what you believe about learning? (15)

Consider: Your responses on the Beliefs on Discipline Inventory. Were you primarily a non-interventionist, an interactionalist or an interventionist? How does this information about teaching style mesh with your beliefs about learning? (5)

Write: One paragraph describing your beliefs about teaching and learning. (10)

Trade: Your papers and write comments/questions on each of your peer's work. (10)

#### *Evaluation (5 minutes)*

Write: An exit card to the instructor evaluating today's learning experience. Was this conceptual workshop helpful or not in aiding you in articulating your personal theory of teaching and learning?

## Appendix B

## Personal Model of Classroom Management

## Mission, Vision, and Theory of Teaching and Learning

In this section, describe your:

- Mission (approximately 50 words) - the purpose and goals of your classroom
- Vision (approximately 50 words) - what you hope the social and academic environment of your classroom will look like
- Theory of Teaching and Learning (approximately 500-750 words), discuss how learning occurs, the role of the teacher, and the role of students; deal with both academic and social learning in this discussion

	Unsatisfactory	Nearing Proficiency	Proficient	Advanced
Mission, Vision, and	Describes a purpose/goal	Describes 2 purposes/goals	Describes 3 purposes/goals	Describes 4 or more purposes/ goals in a thoughtful manner
Theory of Teaching and Learning	Does not identify a basic theoretical approach	Identifies a basic theoretical approach	Describes a vision  Describes a basic theoretical approach with examples that address both academic and social learning	Articulates a visionary future  Describes multiple aspects of a theoretical approach to teaching and learning that addresses both academic and social learning