

The Power of the ‘Naïve Task’

Most of the time, instructors use activities as a way for students to demonstrate their mastery. But activities can be used differently — to spark curiosity and get students thinking, before they know much of anything about a particular topic. That was the premise of “The Power of the ‘Naïve Task,’” one of the most interesting sessions I attended at the [Designing Effective Teaching](#) conference in Bethesda, Md., last week.

The session was led by Kimberly Van Orman, an instructional consultant in the Institute of Teaching, Learning, and Academic Leadership at the University at Albany. The center’s unofficial motto, Van Orman said, is “students don’t need to know everything before they can do anything.”

Van Orman seemed to believe the same of conference-goers because she kicked off her presentation by throwing us into the kind of “naïve task” she suggests professors try in the classroom. She divided the audience into small groups and had us work together to match a list of ways people might injure themselves — “motor vehicle” and “house and yard work,” for instance — with the bars of a graph showing the most common ways U.S. adults were hurt. There was a lot we didn’t know, and much of the discussion centered around definitional questions. Did the category “school” include injuries to staff, or only students? Would “sports” injuries include those that occurred shooting hoops with your kids in the driveway? We were left to make our best guesses.

After giving us some time to work, Van Orman had each group report its answers. But she didn’t reveal the correct ones right away. After all, she had our attention.

Instead, Van Orman explained the thinking behind naïve tasks. Such activities, she said, ask students to attempt disciplinary thinking using only their pre-existing knowledge. Naïveté, Van Orman said, is a useful stage of learning, great for fostering the kind of curiosity that gets students excited about a discipline. Too often, instructors blow right past it.

Naïve tasks require students to make a decision about a real problem, then reflect on and discuss their reasoning. They stretch students by asking them to predict a result, rather than simply describe one that’s laid out in front of them. We would have been less interested in the material, Van Orman said, had she asked us to analyze a graph that was already labeled.

Professors, Van Orman said, are “freaks” who are incredibly excited by their fields. Often, students don’t feel the same way — but instructors can help them get there, and this is one way to do so.

Finally, Van Orman shared the correct answers with a curious audience. The No. 1 accident-causer? Leisure activities, excluding sports. The room was surprised. Even though we had the answer to the puzzle, everyone wanted to know what made it right. Had Van Orman gone on to teach about injuries, it’s safe to say we’d have listened.

Van Orman led us through another naïve task. This time, we read about a brain-injury patient and discussed how different theories fit his symptoms.

This activity, Van Orman said, had some features that work especially well in her own discipline, philosophy. Students often come to the field convinced that it boils down to common sense and that their own opinions are correct, she said. Realizing that a professor doesn’t see things the same way only affects them so much, Van Orman said. But when students debate with their classmates — people like them — and realize that they don’t all agree, it begins to challenge their assumptions.

Naïve tasks also help train students to do something that Van Orman desires and philosophy requires of them — but that their focus on grades cuts against: take risks. Solving a problem before you’ve begun to learn the content is low-stakes by definition.

For professors, there’s one more reason to add naïve tasks into the mix, Van Orman said: “It makes your lectures land.”

Have you used an activity to introduce students to a new idea in one of your courses? What benefits did it bring? Tell me about it at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com and your response may appear in a future newsletter.

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