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Encouraging Student Participation in Large Classes

By Angie Thompson, Ph.D.

If you're interested in approaches that encourage students to participate in class and develop their public-speaking skills, as well as techniques that help you learn student names, then my "daily experts" strategy may be of use to you.

What are daily experts? I list five or six students' names on a PowerPoint slide at the beginning of my classes (which are typically 65-150 students). These individuals, assuming they are in class that day, then become my daily experts—the first ones I ask questions to or opinions of before opening discussion to the whole class. The approach provides for one-on-one dialogue in the midst of a larger class creating an environment that encourages interaction.

In my first-year class, I tend to pose questions that review materials covered in the previous lecture. These questions are listed on PowerPoint, and I ask them at the beginning of class to remind everyone of the content we worked in the previous class session. I often build on the students' responses, asking related questions and/or adding depth to the material myself. In my fourth-year classes, I may use daily experts to review as well. More frequently, though, I ask them questions or inquire about their opinions in the middle or latter half of class after new content has been covered. These queries tend to be more application-oriented, often requiring lengthier responses from which I can build a class or small group discussion.

Why use daily experts? For my first-year class, the main reason is to break the ice, which hopefully helps students realize that I am approachable. It also ensures that each student has at least one opportunity to speak in front of the class. In my fourth-year classes, I use the daily experts concept to provide the same speaking experience, but more as a tool to ensure that all students have the chance to share relevant experiences and opinions with me and the rest of the class.

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How does the professor benefit from daily experts? I get to know my students' names and I am more likely to remember them outside of class as well. Indirectly, my use of daily experts encourages class attendance. Students want to be there when their name appears on the PowerPoint. They don't want to hear from their classmates, "You missed being a daily expert today" or have me say, "I missed you in class today; you were one of my daily experts."

I also benefit because using daily experts forces me to teach in another



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way—a way that gets me focused on individuals. Every interaction with a daily expert becomes a teaching opportunity. It may be a chance to help that student become a bit more confident when he or she interacts with a professor. It's a chance to help students face and conquer that fear of speaking in class. Most important, the strategy gets students actively engaged with the class and its course materials.

What about the rest of the class? There are benefits to the whole class when I interact with my daily experts. It gives others the opportunity to learn classmates' names. They also benefit when they consider how they might have responded differently. They can learn from others' experiences and see how to ask questions in a nonthreatening way. The technique helps everyone engage more actively in the course material. So if you want your classes (even large ones) to be interactive, a daily expert approach might be just what you're looking for.

Angie Thompson is an associate professor at *St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia*.

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