

Cool Calling: A Creative Way to Start Discussions

I'm starting to clean out my article files. Nowadays, with journal content accessible, downloadable, and storable electronically, there doesn't seem to be much reason to keep file drawers full of paper copies of articles. So I'm sorting through mine. Progress is slow—I seem to be doing more reading than sorting and tossing.

One thing I am noticing: good teaching ideas are pretty much timeless. Yesterday I was rereading Bill Welty's great piece on "discussion method teaching." As you can see by the reference, it

was published 20 years ago. If you are a veteran reader of this publication and have one of those steel-trap memories, you will remember that in the November 1989 issue of this newsletter I summarized key ideas from that article.

I still think the best part of that article is something I wrote about in the *TP* piece: Welty points out that the questions teachers ask in class should be prepared beforehand. He recommends outlining the material for the class session and identifying the most important concepts.

Then an instructor should prepare a question outline that accompanies the content outline. "It is important at this stage that you carefully think out questions that will promote *discussion*, not answers, about the concepts you want understood." (p. 42) Too often we arrive in class well prepared on the content but unprepared with questions. We ask what comes to us as we make our way through the material. That part of Welty's article

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has stayed with me, and in my experience, the caliber of discussion in my classroom was always better when I came to class with prepared questions. I also discovered that prepared questions can be kept in the content folder and recycled (sometimes revised) for use in subsequent classes.

What I missed in Welty's article (or maybe forgot) and never mentioned in the *TP* piece was a very creative suggestion for calling on students. If you're a

regular reader, you know that we've done any number of for and against pieces on the strategy researchers have labeled "cold-calling." It happens when a teacher calls on a student who has not volunteered to participate. Lots of teachers use this strategy because it effectively accomplishes goals like getting more students coming to class prepared and keeping more students paying attention to what's happening in class. Lots of teachers don't use this strategy because many students find it very anxiety provoking, and calling on students does not help them develop the ability to speak up when they aren't

called on. Like so many teaching practices, this one is neither definitively right nor wrong. It very much depends on how the teacher uses the strategy.

Welty describes an approach he names "cool calling," and it represents a creative compromise between cold calling and recognizing only volunteers. When class begins, Welty asks his first question (you could easily have it in a PowerPoint presentation when students arrive in class). He "calls on" someone, meaning that he asks a student to think

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about an answer, and asks a second student to back up the first one. Then he proceeds with all the normal opening class duties—making announcements, responding to questions, reviewing upcoming assignments—giving the student who has been called on a good five minutes to think about and prepare an

answer. Depending on time, you could also ask the backup student to share his or her answer, and then solicit responses to both answers from the rest of the class.

Just in case you might be curious about where Welty stands on the cold calling or volunteering issue, he writes: "I prefer to stay with volunteers ... I would want to think that those students who participated wanted to do so because

they had something to contribute at the time of the participation, not because I wanted them to participate." (p. 46)

Reference: Welty, W. M. (1989). Discussion method teaching: How to make it work. *Change*, July/August, 41-49. ♥