

Effective Strategies for Engaging OLLI Students

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THE CHALLENGE

Engage students who are . . .

- Smart, knowledgeable & curious
- Enthusiastic and voluntarily present (!)

And who . . .

- Have vast and varied life experiences
- Want to share their knowledge and opinions
- Participate actively in the world by reading, attending arts events, going to the movies, and volunteering
- Enjoy discussion and debate
- Take OLLI courses, in part, to have a social experience as well as an intellectual experience

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. **Start on time, fill up the time, and keep things moving.** In a 90-minute class, you probably want to change things up every 20-30 minutes.
2. **Explicitly connect each class to the goals of the course and to both previous and subsequent classes.**
3. Consider having a **“course-long” product** for each student to work on.
4. Everyone learns differently, so **vary your “mode of input”**—lecture, discussion, group tasks, video clips. (Don’t forget to provide visual support for your lectures.)
5. **Involve students as partners in improving the class.** (See “Plus/Delta” below.)
6. **Find ways to have everyone participate.** (See “Inviting Student Participation” on the next page.)

PLUS/DELTA

At the end of each class, ask students two questions and then write on the board what they say in response.

- **Plus:** “What worked about today’s class (for you as a learner)?” Their responses will let you know what the group values in terms of teaching and learning.
- **Delta (change):** “What would make it even better next time?” NOTES: (1) You are *not* asking “What was *wrong* with the class?”—so if they give you a negative, ask them to reframe it as a suggestion for improvement. (2) You are not promising to do everything they suggest.

INVITING STUDENT PARTICIPATION

1. **Rethink whole class Q & A:** Teacher pitches question to the class, students raise their hands, teacher calls on a volunteer, who answers the question. (Repeat until time runs out.)
 - a. Pitfalls of this strategy: the same few people dominate the discussion each time, and the shy class members never say anything.
 - b. To make it work well: ask for hands, wait a moment, select 3 or 4 for responses. After these have shared their responses, redirect by saying something like:
 - i. “I see that most of you agree that Does someone have a different take on the situation?”
 - ii. “That’s certainly a range of responses Is there something you think we have overlooked?”
 - c. If you have a lot of volunteers, become an Air Traffic Controller and line up the planes on the runway: “Ginny, Mike, Chelley, then Bob.”
2. **(A caution about)“Flipped” Q & A:** Teacher asks class “Questions?” Or “Do you have any questions?” if you are feeling verbose. Of course, there are many good questions, which you—or a class member—can answer confidently. However, this can be a risky move because, inevitably, some student will ask a question that you don’t have an answer for, or which will require such a long answer that you will have to abandon your time line. If this happens, keep in mind that all of the following are permissible responses:
 - a. “I don’t know. Does anyone have an answer for Phil’s question?”
 - b. “Great question, but I’m afraid if we go into that in detail we won’t get to the rest of today’s content. Can we put it in the **Parking Lot?**” (Write “Parking Lot” on the board and write the student’s question there. Bring it back at the next class.)
 - c. Boomerang: “That’s a great question, Mike, and it sounds like you have an opinion about that issue—what do you think?” (Make sure this is respectful and not sarcastic!)
3. **Think—Pair—Share:** Pose a question for the class or present a text (poem, article, video clip, song).
 - a. Think: Ask the class to take a couple of minutes to gather their thoughts and to formulate their individual response.
 - b. Pair: “Turn to the person next to you and share your response with each other.”
 - c. Share: Solicit whole class comments from the pairs to sample responses publicly.

3. **Randomly assign triads or groups using playing cards.**

For example, in my class on documentaries, I assert that a documentary operates on three tracks: Visual, Auditory, and Text (what you see, hear, and read on the screen). Students are given a card that is a heart, a diamond, or a club. I tell them that as they watch the upcoming clip from a documentary, the Hearts will pay particular attention to the visual aspects, the Diamonds will note the auditory elements, and the Clubs will note the written words on the screen. Roll the clip. Then the students form a triad of a Heart, a Diamond, and a Club. They tell their fellow group members what they observed in the clip. Finally, call the group back to “whole class discussion” and solicit volunteer responses.

The main advantage of this strategy is that everyone has had to be responsible for observing and then sharing what they observed. Everyone thinks, and everyone talks.

4. **“Jigsaw” Team Learning**

Assign each student to both a Home Team and an Expert Team. Each Home Team sends one representative to each Expert Team. In the Expert Team, students engage with a text or chapter or set of questions with the goal that they will become an expert in this content and then return to their Home Team and teach it to their fellows.

For example, I might use this in a class on Cinéma Vérité in which I wanted students to learn how three pioneer practitioners of this type of documentary implemented it. Each Home Team of three would send a member to each of three Expert Teams (David & Albert Maysles, D. A. Pennebaker, and Frederick Wiseman) where they would read a brief article about the filmmaker, find and watch a YouTube clip of a film by the filmmaker. At the end of the learning time in the Expert Team, the students would go back to their Home Team and teach their fellow Home Teamers what they have learned.

Again, the advantage here is that everyone is accountable for learning and then talking about their learning with their peers.

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