

How do I plan an effective and engaging class meeting?

A traditional class meeting is organized around the instructor presenting content while students listen, take notes, and if we're lucky, ask questions. Planning a class meeting that ensures student learning shifts the instructor's focus from delivering content to designing a set of learning experiences that require students to use content in the service of disciplinary thinking. While presenting content may be part of any given class meeting, evidence shows that lectures alone (even the best ones!) aren't enough to lead to deep learning. Putting student learning at the center of our class planning requires instructors to think differently about the structure and organization of the class meeting to ensure that students are practicing disciplinary thinking from the very beginning of class.

What does an effective class plan look like?

Principles to guide teaching decisions about planning a class meeting

- Effective class planning begins with a clear goal for changing students' thinking.
- The majority of class time should focus on students working to change their thinking.
- A class meeting should provide multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback on their current (mistaken or insufficient) thinking.
- An effective lesson requires students to reflect on the changes in their thinking.

Putting these principles into action

- **Articulate (write down!) your goals for yourself and your students for each class.** Instead of asking what content to cover in any given class period, begin by considering the disciplinary thinking we want our students to practice in that class. Articulating your goals for yourself and for your students can help you stay on track by giving a clear sense of direction. It is helpful for you to commit to your learning goals for each class and to share those with your students so you (and they) can make sense of their progress. These goals should be directly related to your larger course goals and the major assignments students will be asked to complete.
- **Start each class period with a challenging task that draws on and pushes students' current thinking.** When class time begins with the instructor delivering a lecture, students tend to fall into the role of passive receiver of information. If you want students to work actively to integrate new information and ways of thinking, they need to start by examining and questioning what they already know. This means that instead of delivering information and then asking students to respond or ask questions, start class by asking them to make a meaningful disciplinary decision that allows you to ask them questions and respond to their thinking. Beginning class in this way immediately implicates students in what will follow and gives them an authentic reason to listen actively and make use of any information that is presented during class.
- **Design tasks that require students to make meaningful mistakes that are typical of novices who are learning the concepts in your course.** Identifying

typical areas of confusion should help you to design practice activities that will surface students' current thinking. This means that instead of designing tasks that ask students to show you what they know or can do, you want to design tasks that make visible the novice thinking that causes them to struggle in your discipline. When a task provokes mistakes, it provides the opportunity for you to help students examine their thinking and provide feedback on the gap between their current ideas and expert approaches. The best class meetings are the ones that require students to make mistakes and then use your feedback to begin changing their thinking.

- **Make time for guided reflection in each class period.** While making mistakes is essential, students won't automatically see the difference between their prior thinking and the new ways of thinking that have been introduced during class. For this reason, students need time and space to reflect (in writing!) on how their thinking is changing as a result of the work they've done. Guided reflection can help them to articulate the changes they are undergoing and help them plan for how they will use new ways of thinking to approach course assignments.

Example of an effective class plan from a management course

Goal: By the end of this class period, students will be able to identify the most effective mode of conflict management in a given situation and use the appropriate strategy to manage and resolve conflict.

Class plan: Before this class meeting, students have been required to read a book chapter that explains three key modes of conflict management (defensive mode, compromise, and creative problem solving).

1. At the beginning of class, students read a brief, complex scenario describing a workplace conflict.
2. Students are given five possible strategies for responding to that conflict. (These strategies represent features of the three key modes of conflict management from their reading but none is an exact match with a single mode.) Students work on their own to choose which of those five strategies would be the best way to manage the conflict and work toward resolution and write down their answer.
3. Students work with a group or 5-6 other students to compare individual answers and come to consensus on which strategy they think would be the best for responding to the conflict described in the scenario. After they have arrived at a consensus decision, groups are asked to report their answers by holding up a card (options A-E) and then explain their reasoning. Disagreements and different ways of thinking surface; the instructor makes notes regarding the differing rationales and asks questions to probe students' thinking.
4. After the groups have thoroughly explained the thinking that guided their decisions, the instructor provides a 10-minute mini-lecture that responds to the issues that were raised by the task and discussion and ensures that students see connections between the strategies they chose and the three key modes of conflict management.
5. Students write for 5 minutes in response to the following prompts.
 - a. How has your thinking about conflict management strategies changed as a result of what you learned from this activity?

- b. What do you understand now about the three key modes of conflict management that you didn't understand before?
 - c. What do you still not understand about conflict management? In what ways are you still uncertain about how you would apply these principles in a workplace setting?
6. Students are given another brief scenario to read. This scenario incorporates new complexities that point to the reading they will complete for homework.

Resources about effective class planning

- Bransford, J. D. (2004). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Acad. Press.
- Lang, J. M. (2016). *Small teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Making thinking visible: How to promote engagement, understanding, and independence for all learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

If you'd like to learn more about how you can create class plans that will ensure learning and engagement, please feel free to [request a consultation](#).