

September, 2008 - Teaching Tip: Students Teaching

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When I taught my first course, Introduction to Psychology, I *thought* I had mastered the material. During my lectures, I saw blank faces. I asked them if they understood the concepts, theories, and findings. They wanted me to elaborate, give more examples, simplify, paraphrase; you name it, they wanted more. I found myself saying, “You know” a lot.

I always tell my students, if you can teach the material to someone else, you have really learned it. When I listen to students conversing in between classes, I rarely hear a student informing another student about some area in psychology. If a student has selected a major area of study, I would think that student would be interested in that area in general and want to discuss it. My colleagues and I discuss psychology all the time.

There are several ways to encourage students to be the teacher. Form groups to study for exams. Actually, form the groups in class either by asking them to get into groups or you decide the composition of the group. Unfortunately, many poor students will choose other poor students to form a group. Once they get to know each other (I am amazed at how many students in the same major don't know each other or even know their names.), they are more likely to preserve these groups after class.

In Computers in Psychology, many students are computer savvy; when they quickly learn some application, I ask them to help other students in the class that are having trouble. At first, they don't really want to waste their time helping, and they also feel some competition with the other students. After they help a few peers, they become confident

in their understanding of the material, and they seem to enjoy the experience. Students often stumble over the new jargon associated with specialized areas. As the tutoring progresses, their verbal and written skills become honed; their speech and writing become clear, concise, organized, and they are chock full of the new vocabulary. I have noticed that when students give oral presentations, they seem to learn that material better than non-presented material. They certainly rehearse the material more, and they probably practice out loud, perhaps in front of a small audience. Why do they rehearse this material more than when preparing for a test? They don't want to embarrass themselves in front of their peers; unfortunately they don't seem to care about our opinion as much.

Another way that students can be the teacher is to encourage them to educate their friends and family about what they are learning in school. When sitting around the dinner table, and their parents ask them what they are learning in school, students will typically respond in a broad manner. They think their family members won't understand the complex topics or that they will be bored by the material. If a student can't make the material sound interesting or applicable to

their everyday lives or simplify the material for laypeople, they should consider selecting a new major.

When I was an elementary school student, I always played the teacher with my younger brother as the student. I constantly created work sheets for him. I enjoyed that experience (event though my brother wasn't too crazy about it). I mastered the method and I think that the experience influenced me to become a teacher. Encourage your students to play the teacher at the college level. The worst that can happen is that they will go into academia.