

NEW CHALK TALK

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Bridging the Great Divide: Teaching to Interest (Part I)

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Part of our professional development as higher education professionals is to stop and reflect on the approaches, content and techniques we employ to facilitate teaching and foster effective learning. This is paramount when dealing with first year students as they cross the great divide from high school to college level education. We, as faculty at AUC, often observe that some students are not engaged or fail to transfer skills, attitudes and knowledge attained in their first year at college to the courses within the major they ultimately choose. How do we best deal with this vital transitional year and how do we excite our students about learning and engage them in their college level courses?

If we assume that there is a missing link in the first year, how can we close the great divide and engage more effectively with our students?

During the work of the Freshman Program (FP) task force in 2011-2013, unanswered questions and concerns loomed large and the group's mandate was challenging. One of these challenges was to envision a re-designed FP that ultimately addressed the following problem statement:

"Over the past decade and more, in speaking with outside accreditors, members of the Board of Trustees and others, AUC faculty have often expressed the view that too many of the students in their classes lack the reading, writing and critical thinking skills needed for success in university-level work. Many specify, in addition, that students entering major study do not have sufficient knowledge about how to construct well-argued essays and assignments, make proper use of evidence, and correctly draw on, and cite, primary and secondary sources. Although opinions differ as to where responsibility for this lies, there is general agreement that AUC students face significant challenges in these areas, and that the University is not addressing these issues as effectively as it should."

For many, this problem has only been exacerbated by the recent growth of new programs, new emphasis on research, and other factors that take the time and energy of full-time, professorial-rank faculty away from teaching students in the Core Curriculum, especially at the foundational Primary Level. The result has been too much reliance on adjunct faculty and an increase in class sizes in many courses taught at this level; students, and their parents, complain that they are not getting the quality they expect (and pay for) in a Liberal Arts institution such as AUC. "

I recently stumbled upon an article written by John D Sutter for CNN Opinion. The piece flipped an aspect of journalistic writing and was quite rightly named "The people have spoken"ⁱⁱ. In a nutshell, CNN held a poll asking readers to vote for the story from a list that they would most like to read about. This is, as the author states, "journalism as democracy-rebalanced to give the readers power".

Among the winners were *American's widening rich-poor gap, Illegal animal trade, The world's poorest children, Where rape is most common and America's most endangered rivers*. The author put aside his personal view on what mattered to readers and what he personally loved to write about and thought...why don't we just ask them? And he did...

I stopped for a moment and reflected upon this context. Should we be asking students about what they *want* to learn and *how* they prefer to learn? Should we be prioritizing student interest in the content and themes we teach? Are we assuming we understand their concerns and interests when in fact many of us were in their shoes 20 years ago?

There are multiple approaches teachers can employ to foster engagement. To mention a few; purposeful and planned in-class discussion, collaborative group work, student-led class sessions, debates, multi-modal student projects...the list goes on.

As a probing exercise in the spring of 2013 Carol Clark, as Co-Chair of the FP task force, asked the three student representatives on the Task Force to select their top preferences from a list of proposed course titles. This was a very valuable exercise, albeit limited, enabling us to gauge to some degree “student interest”ⁱⁱⁱ. More importantly, this exercise recognized the need to “teach to interest”. In addition, the courses developed in the FP CORE/RHET tandem courses (courses taken concurrently and taught by the same faculty member or team-taught) took student feedback and interest into consideration as they were being developed, and faculty developed several of the courses that were selected by Task Force student members, in addition to others according to perceived student needs in the first year. Those courses were the following:

- ***Expressions of Resistance: How can we react and respond to oppression?***
- ***Civic Engagement, Public Leadership and the Right to be Human.***
- ***How do we know what's true?***

One thread common to all the approaches listed is simply stated-interest. If we can engineer courses, assignments, discussions, projects along the lines of student interest, it should at least help solve the problem of engagement.

That however would be a risky assumption. Many will debate the fact, and quite rightly so, that there are skills and content that students *need* to know, knowledge that is vital to understanding more challenging concepts in higher level courses. I tend to agree. However, my suggestion here for content-laden courses is that we stop for a moment and re-think the interplay between the “How” and the “what” of our teaching.

A few key questions come to mind.

- *How can we increase student engagement in class content and encourage class participation?*
- *How can we increase and ensure higher degrees of retention and transfer among FP students?*
- *How can we instill FP students with 21st century skills such as critical thinking and effective communication, which can help ensure student success in their majors and have been identified by faculty as student needs?*

This semester, New Chalk Talk will try to address these crucial questions and we hope this will lead to new conversations about our students and their engagement as we embark on a new Freshman Program.

Comments can be sent to: hodamostafa@aucegypt.edu

ⁱ Adapted from proposal for FY program at American University in Cairo, March 2013.

ⁱⁱ The people have spoken. John D Sutter, CNN. Retrieved June 18th 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Email correspondence, Carol Clark, Department of English Language Instruction, Academy of Liberal Arts, American University in Cairo.