What if a Student Asks a Question I Can't Answer?

Presented by:
Dr. Therese Huston
Presenter Bio:

Therese Huston is the founding Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Seattle University. She had a great time writing her first book, Teaching What You Don't Know and is eager to write the sequel. Her other published works focus mainly on faculty mentoring, morale, and retention. Therese earned her Ph.D. in cognitive psychology at Carnegie Mellon University and her B.A. in psychology from Carleton College. Each spring, she facilitates a writing retreat on the scholarship of teaching and learning, and she regularly consults with faculty and administrators to identify sustainable ways to improve what we do as teachers and learners. She is on the Board of Directors of the Professional and Organizational Development network in higher education, and she teaches a course in neuropsychology.

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What If a Student Asks a Question I Can’t Answer?

Dr. Therese Huston

Outcomes
By the end of seminar, you will have

• Briefly reviewed research on why it’s important to encourage questions

• Concrete language for responding to questions you can’t answer
Outcomes
Participants will also

• Consider the hidden negative implications of certain strategies
• Identify better alternatives

Preparations

• Please grab a pen or pencil and some paper.

Common Problem

• A student asks a question you can’t answer
  – Can happen in your area of expertise
  – Certainly happens outside of your expertise
  – How do you respond?
Why is it stressful?
• Students expect / pay me to know
• Vulnerable or under-prepared ("Is the answer in the reading?")
• Over-prepared
• Challenge to your credibility

Credibility Check-in
• Rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5
  – 5 = Do this always, in every class
  – 1 = Never do this

Credibility Check-in Part 1
Questions
1. I regularly ask students if they have questions or understand my explanations
2. I attempt to answer all students' questions
3. I give clear expectations & unchanging answers to questions re: course policies & graded work

(COOK, 2002)
Credibility Check-in Part 2

Other credibility sources

4. I show up on time for class
5. I follow all course policies outlined in the syllabus
6. I explain difficult concepts in terms students understand
7. I am highly familiar with the text
8. I remind students of upcoming due dates

(HUSON, 2000)

Three-Part Strategy for Handling Questions

• **Step 1: Clarify**

(Adapted from ADUBATO, n.d.)
More answerable question

Three-Part Strategy for Handling Questions

**Step 2: Acknowledge**

- “Great question”
- “I’m so glad you asked that”
- “David, that’s an interesting question, but it takes us off-topic. Can I return to it later?”

*Huston, 2009*

**Step 3: Answer**

*Huston, 2009*
Answering – Several Approaches
• Ask the class the answer
• Go meta
  – Ask “How should one answer a question like this?
• Offer an educated guess
• Offer to find an answer
• Admit you don’t know

(DAI, 2010; HUSTON, 2009)

Admitting You Don’t Know
• That’s a great question. No one has ever asked me that.
• I believe the literature is mixed on that….
• To be honest, I haven’t read that literature.

(HUSTON, 2009)

Other Phrases
• I’m not sure of the answer, and I don’t want to lead you astray. Let me think about it.
• That’s a very precise question, and it deserves a precise answer. Let me get back to you on it.
Do, Don’t, & Maybe

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<th>Maybe</th>
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<td>Confirm you’ve answered the question</td>
<td>Get angry with students for asking</td>
<td>Ask a student to research the answer</td>
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<td>Let students know if you were wrong</td>
<td>Fake it</td>
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<td>Ask “What are your questions?” instead of “Does anyone have any…”</td>
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“What if students discover I’m not perfect? … I don’t try to be perfect, not anymore. They won’t learn better if I’m perfect. They will learn better if they feel comfortable asking questions.”

- Codrina Popescu
Ursinus College, PA

Conclusions

- Create an environment where students ask questions
- It’s ok if you don’t know
- Don’t pretend you’re certain when you’re not
Thank you for your time

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