

READINGS OF INTEREST

What Is a Good Question from Students about Your Course?

Students have a litany, it seems, of questions they regularly ask instructors on the first day of class. You have your own list of those questions you've heard time and again:

“Do you put your PowerPoints in D2L?”

“Are there study notes for the chapters?”

“Are your exams multiple-choice, essay, or fill-in-the-blank?”

“How many sources do you expect us to cite in the papers we write in this class?”

Has a student ever asked:

“What will we learn in this class?”

Why don't you hear that question very often on the first day of your class?

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Faculty can become jaded, can jump to pejorative conclusions, about student motivation and therefore assume that students don't care about learning and only care about the grade. Consequently, many faculty might decide first-class-day questions are posed because students want to figure out how to game the system in order to get the highest grade.

Certainly there are students with exactly that intent, and they will ask the questions that can be so nettlesome and so focused on logistics and the requirements that relate to grading. But doesn't it seem odd that questions about what will be learned, what the class is actually about, occur so infrequently on the first day of class, even assuming that students will always be concerned about their grades?

Don't write the students off so quickly. There's a big reason that students *do ask* questions out loud about grading but generally *don't ask* the what-will-we-learn questions that may actually be in their heads.

In her book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, Professor of Anthropology Dr. Rebekah Nathan (pseudonym) describes her experience of taking a sabbatical in order to enroll as a freshman at her state university. Her discoveries about what students talk about concerning courses, and when they talk about it, gave her pause, including why there are so few questions the first day of class about what is to be learned in the course.

(It's notable that she devotes a section of the book to a discussion of the ethics of doing her study, how she worked with the IRB at the university, and other topics related to doing this kind of field work. Specifically because of such considerations, she published

the work pseudonymously.)

Concerning students' conversations about course content:

The time before and after classes, when teachers were not within earshot, was instructive. It was a time for academic and social small talk, including stories about the recent weekend, the "fun" things that were done, or how tired or "wasted" the speaker was at the moment. Academic discourse was limited to a narrow sort of mutual questioning. "Did you do the reading for today?" and "Did we have anything due today?" were both common pre-class queries. Shared complaints about the way a course was going ("I can't believe he hasn't turned back either of our last two assignments") or the prospect of the upcoming class ("I hope he doesn't do that in-class writing thing again") were also heard. What wasn't mentioned struck me as significant. One would never hear, "Did you like that reading?" or "That paper assignment really made me think." It's not that students didn't like the reading or find the assignments provocative; it's just that these weren't acceptable or normative topics to introduce in informal conversation. (Nathan, 2005, p. 96)

Talking about course content other than on topics related to grades, work due, and so on, is neither "acceptable nor normative" among the students with whom Rebekah interacted. This was the case across all her time as a student. (Her research included living in the dorm, attending orientation, taking the course which other students advised her was life-changing for them — a sexuality course — noting conversations as students gathered to eat, noting the scribbles on the women's bathroom posting areas where she placed questions from time to time as did other students, and many other common methods of anthropological field work.)

And we faculty hope that students gather to talk about our inspiring lectures, about the big questions we raise in class, about the meaning of life whether it's related to our class or not. Is it false hope?

What Dr. Nathan discovered was the *social norms* of college life have militated against the kind of collegiate experience that faculty wish students would have. It's not that students *don't* think about transformative topics, that they *don't* ask themselves important questions prompted by what happens in and outside of their college classrooms; it's that *it's just not right to do so* if one wants to be a "normal" college kid.

Peer pressure, it seems, demands that college students never go public with questions like, "What will we learn and why is it important?"

You know how this works. Nathan describes student reactions when a "brown-nosing kid" (the perception of other students when this happens) who wants the professor to think she cares about his course asks a question close to the end of class. Nathan's revelations about her insider's view of college life as a student on this topic are pointed: it's just not cool to engage with course content in a public space.

Think about what means for a university trying to create Transformative Learning experiences for students.

Can we change the culture here among students?

Can we create a place where students are so excited about learning that they fearlessly talk about what we teach? In public?

Nathan, R. (2005). *My freshman year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.