

Teaching Tactics

Describe a successful classroom teaching tactic that could be replicated by other instructors.

Theological Dialogue Partners (or Study Buddies for Graduate Students)

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The context:

I use this tactic in introductory and upper-level theology courses (usually required courses) for master's level (M.Div. and M.A.) students in theological schools, in classes with fifteen to thirty-five students. Student papers were of a low quality and I suspected that students were working in isolation. I thought that students might be keeping their thoughts to themselves, attempting to sort through them to write a paper, and turning it in just hours after sitting at the computer.

The pedagogical purpose:

- To encourage students to talk to and learn from peers with different perspectives than their own.
- To help students understand that theology is not done in a vacuum, but is dialogical – it is not just texts, sources, and assigned readings, but is done with living people.
- To transition students from being amateur theologians to more professional theologians who work in community.
- To give students a possible editor for their assigned papers.

Description of the strategy:

I assign students a “theological dialogue partner” about three weeks into the semester. This gives me time to get to know them. I pair students with different theological perspectives together. Before each assignment is due, dialogue partners must communicate with one another about each assignment by e-mail, phone, or in person. With each assignment, the student must attach a “theological dialogue partner form” that states who their partner is and what they learned from him or her. Blank theological dialogue partner forms are included in the syllabus in the online classroom technology.

Why it is effective:

This assignment had the desired effect of improving the quality of student papers. Some students were unresponsive and failed to communicate with their partners and some reassigning occurred, but only in about five percent of the class. Students indicated learning a different perspective on topics than they would have on their own. Many students indicated that they got to know a classmate better. Commuter students noted that they felt a sense of community they did not usually have in their educational experience.

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