

# DLSI NEWSLETTER

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## GREETINGS.... ...AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!

The DLSI would like to present you with the first issue of what will become a regular newsletter. Our intention is to offer clear, succinct concepts that can lead you to think in new ways about your teaching and our students' learning. In future issues, we also plan to share DLSI activities and highlight the various ways our colleagues are focusing on teaching and learning.

Last semester, it became clear that **we need to re-engage** our students, find ways to improve success in our courses, and work together to rebuild the in-person community on campus. These critical elements work together to help us focus on teaching and learning. While we don't know how omicron (or other new variants) will impact our practice as we move forward, we must continue to build on our Lasallian heritage and focus on the characteristics of high-quality teaching and relationships that set us apart.

[Feel free to share your thoughts, or contact us if we can be helpful as you prepare for your courses.](#)

## CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS IN THE OFFICE

Few freshmen experienced in-person education before they arrived at La Salle. Sophomores, and even juniors, have now completed many courses at a distance. This has impacted relationships with our students in significant ways. The notion of what it means to be "in college" is quite different from pre-pandemic students. Even for many full-time students, "going to college" feels like a part-time experience, often culminating in a mismatch between instructor expectations and student effort.

Regardless, **students rarely understand the value, or even the purpose, of office hours.** It is not a high school experience. Further, over the course of the pandemic, office hours have diminished. While some have attempted to fill the gap with Zoom, the reach is just not the same.

Connecting with faculty or staff can be critical for our students' success. We have known for quite some time that there is a [positive correlation between office hours and student success.](#)

We might consider following the example of [Nowak \(2021\) who requires two office visits each semester](#), which count toward 5% of a student's final grade. In his piece, Nowak suggests that framing the visit, and supporting students so that they can take advantage of these visits is critical.

Framing the visit could begin with a simple name change. **Why not re-brand these times "student hours?"** This could go a long way in helping students understand the reason we are setting aside time for them. In a first visit, we can simply to get to know one another. Students are reluctant to seek us out. Beginning a relationship opens the door for students to ask questions or pursue our advice later. Features of the course might be clarified. Suggestions for class preparation and participation can also be offered.

Opening the door for our students increases participation in the classroom, communicates our interest in their success, and illustrates our availability to support them as they navigate our courses.

## HELPING STUDENTS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ASSIGNED READING

Unless a student was taught how to most efficiently and effectively use textbooks and other reading materials (and most are not), then they are, at best, simply reading and taking notes or highlighting phrases that strike them as important, and at worst, not reading at all. Gleaning an understanding from assigned course reading works best when students are (a) **curious** about the content, (b) **think** about the content, and (c) **deliberately connect** reading to things they know or wonder.

Probably the best-known strategy for making sense of textbook

material is SQ3R, which was developed by Francis P. Robinson and included in his 1946 text *Effective Study*.

The acronym stands for survey, question, read, recite, and review. It can easily be built into assignments that prepare students for class, or become part of a class session that dives more deeply into the text, making the activity purposeful. [Here is one of many explanations that can be found.](#)

Another suggestion for helping students connect readings to classroom discussion was recently shared by Dr. Dimple Martin in [a blog post on Faculty Focus](#).

He asks his students to be ready for class by having answers to three questions, and to be prepared to lead or co-lead a

discussion based on this preparation. The questions are:

1. After reading, I did not realize...
2. What were the most important concepts to YOU (and please explain why)?
3. What are two possible exam questions?

You can read his short, but impactful post by clicking the link. He concludes that this preparation for, and then active engagement in, robust discussion “**strengthened [his] students’ ability to lead, critically think, and assess their own learning.**”

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## ACTIVE LEARNING IN THE PANDEMIC CLASSROOM

Students need to be engaged with their instructors, and with each other to get the most benefit from classroom learning experiences. This, of course, has been one of the significant challenges of teaching during the pandemic.

Todd Zakrajsek, in a post in *The Scholarly Teacher*, points out that while lecturing doesn't hurt learning, it is **among the least effective teaching techniques we can employ**. [He goes on to share several active teaching and learning techniques](#)

that can even be used during these more socially distant times.

Lecturing is not going away, nor should it. Some of the most impactful teachers make use of short lectures. However, to enhance the practice one should **integrate active learning techniques to engage students**.

One example is a “pause technique.” This is simply a break, after a short lecture, where students review concepts and engage in any brief activity that

makes use of those concepts. Perhaps a little more entertaining, is the “find a flaw” strategy. This places students in the position of having to focus on a short lecture in order to find a purposefully included error, which they must identify.

There are also collaborative activities that can be included such as “think-pair-share” and creating “note-taking pairs.” Each of these, and more, is explained in the linked post.

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## HOW DO YOU ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Does your syllabus include points, or a percentage of the course grade, for participation? **Does it work?** [This blog post](#) from a few years ago offers an interesting perspective.

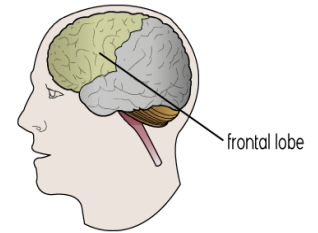
Of course, the techniques listed in [the column above](#) are all about actively engaging students. There are many more, and we know many colleagues who creatively employ them.

We would like to hear from you. Perhaps you can take a minute to share a technique you are using to engage your students during class. **How do you increase participation and interaction?** Which techniques facilitate interaction between students during class? In what ways do these practices enhance the experience in your classroom? Could someone else make use of your technique?

[Send a quick message by clicking here](#), and share your practice. We will collect your thoughts and post them in a future DLSI newsletter so that they might help us all improve classroom interactions.

## EDUCATORS BUILD BRAINS

Brain research suggests that instructors should make optimum use of what we know about several chemicals that are relevant to human learning. These chemicals enhance synaptic connections. They are worth considering as we construct syllabi and plan instruction.



Dopamine facilitates *motivation*.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centers. Dopamine also helps regulate movement and emotional responses, and it enables us not only to see rewards, but to act to move toward them.

Norepinephrine is triggered in *novel situations*.

As a stress hormone, norepinephrine affects parts of the brain where attention and responding actions are controlled.

Acetylcholine is activated during *movement*.

In the peripheral nervous system, this neurotransmitter is a major part of the [autonomic nervous system](#) and works to activate muscles.

(The above is based on this [2/1/12 TEDxEnola talk by Dr. Martha S. Burns](#))

Specifically, we can take practical advantage of this information by considering **motivation, novelty, and movement**. Building these three elements into each class session can facilitate student engagement and improve learning. Each class session should begin with an attention-grabber... the more novel the better. For example, [try simply posting a picture](#) for your students' to consider as they arrive.

Even before class begins, we might look for [ways to motivate students to read the syllabus](#) by using humor, novel statements, or activity to let them know how the course will be useful for them. Creative introductory pages (before all of the rules, regulations, and assignments appear) could help introduce the course and improve motivation from the start.

**We should always strive for active involvement in class.** Likewise, we should consider moving about the classroom as we teach. Paying attention to motivation, novelty, and movement in our classrooms pays off by ensuring that our students are engaged. We might even be helping them build their brains.