

DLSI NEWSLETTER

Supporting Teaching and Learning at La Salle

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Interim Directors

February 2022
Issue 2

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

How can we help our students learn more efficiently and more deeply? In this second issue of the **DLSI Newsletter** we would like to focus on a concept from cognitive psychology called **elaboration**. It is how we build connections to existing knowledge, develop deeper understanding, and ultimately, how we learn. The more, and the more varied ways, we can help our students elaborate, the more thoroughly they will learn what we want them to know.

For our teaching, that means first gaining access to **what our students already know** (or think they know). Elaboration is about building neural connections to existing knowledge. **Questions** become a critical tool for both us and our students, as does supporting students in their use of an effective system for **taking notes**, which provides structure for elaboration.

In this issue we share some ideas for helping our students elaborate. We hope you find them useful.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

Why wait until the end of a unit of study, or an entire course, to learn what our students know? Since elaboration is about connecting new information to current understanding, **assessing students' prior knowledge** at the beginning of a course, or the start of a new topic, is critical for both our teaching and our students' learning. Perhaps more importantly helping our students access this knowledge early primes them for elaboration.

There are many strategies we might employ to access prior knowledge, and the depth of our students' understanding. In an effort to maximize participation, and encourage reflection, it is often helpful to do this in a low-stakes way; that is, without grades, or other pressures that might limit an honest response.

Some suggestions include ungraded assignments that are due on the first day of class, designed to explore foundational concepts. Pre-tests (often ungraded), or group activities where students

have the opportunity to answer introductory questions together can be engaging and productive. You might consider a [gallery walk](#), which is structured to allow interaction with text or pictures. [Here, you will find six additional strategies](#) that you might consider using, or maybe they will spark ideas of your own.

These activities, at the beginning of a course or new unit of study, serve several purposes. They help students **cue up prior knowledge** and give us insight into what they know. They often provide opportunities for students to **interact** with us and one-another. Finally, they provide **conceptual anchor points** that can be elaborated with upcoming instruction and practice. We encourage building them in to your instructional time.

[Feel free to share your thoughts, or contact us if we can be helpful as you consider your classroom practice.](#)

ENGAGING PRACTICES ON CAMPUS

Caitlin Taylor, Associate Professor in Sociology & Criminal Justice shares:

One activity I've found to be successful for engaging students and getting large group discussions going is **round robin writing**. I pose a discussion question (works best for some controversial topic) and give students a few minutes to write informally about it. Then, they swap their paper with a classmate, read their classmate's response, and provide their own written response below it (agree, disagree, additional arguments). Depending on time, they can usually swap with a few classmates, and then everyone gets their original paper back.

I invite students to share observations about the different perspectives raised, and identify the main sources of agreement and disagreement. We consider what was most surprising, or something they hadn't considered.

For students who may be hesitant to participate in discussions, I've noticed that it helps them feel more confident if they see others have already agreed with them...and talking about others' responses instead of just their own seems to take some of the pressure off.

Thanks, Caitlin! Round-robin writing, and the discussion that follows are terrific techniques for both engagement and elaboration.

We are always interested in your classroom practice. [Please let us know](#) what is working for you so that we can share it in a future newsletter!

I HAVE A QUESTION

A recent conversation with students about curiosity as the driver of human learning naturally led to a discussion of questioning as a tool for learning. Questions, which result from our innate curiosity, develop even before speech. They are critical drivers of human learning.

We can all probably recall classroom experiences (or even meetings) where we felt uncomfortable raising a question, or even were told questions were off limits. My (Frank) students shared such experiences recently. I was particularly taken by some of their comments about how they felt about asking questions right here, in our classrooms at La Salle.

One student, clearly expressing an interest in the content of a new class, recognized that she was missing some foundational

knowledge...just a succinct definition of a concept. However, she felt like her professor made it clear that everyone should already possess that knowledge. She did not feel she had the permission to ask her question.

Another student was clearly given the message that some types of questions were worthy, while others were not. These received messages, whether they were intentionally delivered or not, clearly have an impact on student learning and engagement in class.

Beyond opening the door for *any* question a student might have, deeply considering the strategic use of **questioning as a teaching tool** has significant merit. Asking and answering questions might be one of the most significant ways that we **elaborate** on our knowledge. We become actively engaged with each other, and with our learning.

[Questioning Strategies to Engage Students](#) provides several helpful tips. How do you use questions and questioning to promote inquiry? Do you limit questions, either purposefully or inadvertently? These are useful questions for our own reflection.

WRITE THIS DOWN

Notes and other types of documentation during learning are important for elaboration, but only helpful if done with intention and purpose. A significant challenge is that many students think the purpose of note taking is to *record or document a lecture*, rather than a tool for learning. So, we can first help by spending some time discussing **note taking**, how it can be structured, and how students can use it more effectively for our courses.

One way to begin is by building [advance organizers](#) (a method of visually organizing content before or at the beginning of a class) into our routine. They not only help students cue up prior knowledge, and preview what is coming, but also provide a structure for note taking.

We might also stop our instruction from time to time, to have students review, revise, rephrase, and/or share what they have written down, allowing for further elaboration, and an opportunity to hear what others consider important.

While some suggest that we are able to capture more information when typing. There is evidence that [hand written notes are more effective](#) than typed, as handwriting

allows more time for mental processing, encourages students to re-frame ideas in their own words, and allows for pictures and diagrams, which are critical for elaboration. We can help by providing space and guidance for this practice.

While written for a K-12 audience, the strategies and tools found in [this post](#) are directly applicable for us. We've certainly gleaned some useful pointers from it.

WORKING WITH OUR NEURODIVERSE STUDENTS

The La Salle Autism and Developmental Disabilities Education Resources (LADDER) Center celebrates neuro and physical diversity. **LADDER** serves La Salle University, the Bellfield community, and graduates of the Widener Memorial School. Its mission is to enhance the quality of life for neurodivergent and physically diverse elementary through college aged students and their families.

This spring the LADDER Center is hosting a speaker series titled **Everyone Belongs: Creating Inclusive Learning Context for K-20 Students, Parents and Educators**. This series will engage the La Salle community on ways to walk alongside and celebrate our diverse learning population. Three speakers will share their expertise and real-life experiences to raise awareness and support our effort to become a more inclusive community.

The series kicks off with [Dr. Kathleen Collins](#), an expert in disability studies, on February 22nd.

[Dr. Angel Miles](#), a graduate of Widener Memorial School and expert on the intersectionality of disability, race, and gender, joins us on March 23rd.

Anjanette Diagle an advocate for independence through education and work will join us on April 21st.

With the help of this diverse group of speakers, we hope to create opportunities for dialogue, learning, and increased awareness of our neurodivergent and physically diverse learners.

Dates: 2/22; 3/23; 4/21 **Time:** 6-7 PM. **Platform:** Zoom

More information on the LADDER Center Speaker Series coming soon!

You may also contact [Dr. Trent McLaurin Ph.D.](#), Education, and LADDER Faculty Fellow for further information on this event. or about contact [LADDER](#) directly.
