

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Introducing the “5-Minute Rule” to Teach Ethical Communication

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

In this communication course, the instructor discusses ethical communication. The class starts with a short discussion about biases and plagiarism. Students complete a background inventory that includes different characteristics related to students’ upbringings. Students are asked to note which aspects are most important to them. This activity is designed to help students understand their different perspectives and lived experiences, how these may impact their biases, and how they may impact their ability to listen and understand others.

The instructor encourages students to engage in a discussion about the inventory activity. If students do not participate, the instructor will often talk about personal experiences in order to prompt others to share. After discussing ethics, the instructor informs the class that they will watch a short video with controversial content that they may find objectionable. For instance, the instructor may show a video in which a speaker advocates for mandatory gun use. It is important to find a video to share that is controversial but is not triggering for students. Before showing the video, the instructor tells the class about the “5-minute rule”: For five minutes, no one can say anything positive or negative about the content of the video.

After the video ends, the instructor reminds the class to observe the “5-minute rule.” Students can point out observations made about the speaker but not about

the arguments the speaker makes. Students can point out features of the arguments that they thought others might have overlooked. Students can also describe circumstances under which they might agree with the speaker’s arguments. Students often note that the points the speaker made were “interesting” or they discuss the speaker’s style of talking.

During the “5-minute rule,” students are not required to speak. However, in order to ensure that all students are engaged in the conversation, the instructor will observe students’ body language and other non-verbal feedback and will make eye contact with the students during the activity. By doing this, the instructor is able to gauge whether or not students are attentive to the class and how they may be reacting to the content in the video and the activity. The content shared during the video may be difficult for some students to reflect upon, which is why the instructor does not require students to verbally participate in this activity.

The instructor sets a timer for five minutes for the “5-minute rule,” and when the timer goes off, students are permitted to say anything they want (positive or negative) about the video. The purpose of this exercise is (a) to encourage students to listen to something without immediately criticizing it, (b) to give students a tool to use if they find themselves stuck in situations or conversations about issues that make them uncomfortable, and (c) to encourage students to keep thinking even when they are uncomfortable.

At the end of the exercise, the instructor discusses with the students how they felt. Most respond that they listened more closely than they ordinarily would to an objectionable argument. Some students are very uncomfortable at first, but they are often pleased with themselves for being able to think through the initial five minutes and respond only to how the speaker was talking, not about the content shared. Students are also told that the “5-minute rule” is an ethical response technique that can be used outside of school to help them become better listeners.

Notes From the Instructor About This Innovative Teaching Practice:

“I’ve noticed that students’ listening skills and their critical thinking have improved as a result of the “5-minute” reflection portion of the class. When students listen and respond critically, these indicate that they are learning the course content.”

How to Prepare for This Innovative Teaching Practice:

Instructors should select a short video of three or so minutes to present to their class in which the speaker discusses a controversial topic. Instructors should bring a device to class to time students during the “5-minute rule.”