

The Power and Utility of Attendance Questions

Taking attendance in class can feel like a cumbersome obligation, but it has the potential to become an engaging activity that helps establish a learning community and inspire classroom dialogue. A number of years ago, I started developing and using attendance questions in my communication courses. After experiencing the positive outcomes, I can't imagine reverting to a different style for taking attendance.

Attendance questions can be easily incorporated into any class in which attendance is taken. Rather than orally running through the roster and having students generically indicate they are present, have them answer a question. If time is of the essence, make sure to ask a question with a short response. If class discussion is a significant portion of your lesson, you can ask an approachable question that feeds into the content you plan to explore later on.

The outcomes of attendance questions are surprising. First, they functionally allow you to take attendance. Beyond that, you are providing the students a casual opportunity to share with their peers. Students listen to each other and get to know each other better. You get to learn more about your students each day. If you start the process by answering your own question, your students get a glimpse into your personality, establish new connections, and change the dynamic in which students relate to you. You also break the silence and get students talking at the beginning of the class. Beyond this, what you hear in class provides a host of information that can inform the kinds of examples and illustrations you use in class. When you know your students better, you have more opportunities to personalize your lessons and build on those relationships.

An easy place to start, if you are interested, is asking students to name their favorite movie, TV show, or celebrity. I'm obsessed with food, so I often ask students to share their favorite area restaurant and menu item at the start of the quarter. It's amazing how interested students are to hear about the available options and to learn from each other. And I take notes because it always expands my list of places to go and things to eat. For more topics, search for attendance questions online. The options are nearly endless.

There are two guiding principles for effective attendance questions. First, ask non-threatening questions that everyone can answer. Consider the diversity of your classes, your students' backgrounds and experiences. Draw from the shared elements in a way that builds an inclusive and participatory situation. Second, try to ask questions with a host of right answers. I attempt to avoid creating rifts or making students take sides. The goal is to allow your students to share with each other and build community rather than to create divides. Last, (this one is my personal suggestion rather than a principle), have fun with it! Attendance questions can set the tone of the room or establish the mood for your class. Let the questions be a reflection of who you are and what you want your classroom to be.