



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants
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Teaching Idea: Generating "Irrefutable"

Statements

Students bring to any discipline some prior perceptions, opinions and biases which, left unidentified and unchallenged, can hinder the development of their critical thinking. Yet these same perceptions, when elicited, identified and confronted, offer thought-provoking discussion topics and can help define a relevant class agenda.

To discover students' views, have them generate "irrefutable" statements by asking them to agree upon three generally accepted statements about a given issue: for instance, "It is irrefutable about slavery that ...;" "We can all agree that World War II resulted in ...;" "Everyone knows that Freud ...;" "It is true that the feminist movement"

To capitalize on the inherent controversy these declarations create, try this method with small groups in a discussion section. As students report their "irrefutable" statements, someone will certainly challenge them to defend their position. Because ensuing rivalry and debate are usually based in strongly held beliefs, students are highly motivated to respond critically. As instructor, you keep the discussion focused on relevant issues and encourage students to argue cogently. Disputes that can't be settled during class provide excellent topics for papers or follow-up presentations. With larger classes, ask individuals or groups to hand in "irrefutable" statements several days before your lecture. You can then incorporate evidence for and against these statements into your presentation.

This method is most useful with topics about which students feel fairly knowledgeable, and while it is unlikely that the "truth" will actually be discovered, students will come away with a list of questions and issues that demand further thought.

(Inspired by Peter Frederick, "The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start," *Classroom Communication*. Ed. Rose Ann Neff & Maryellen Weimer. Madison, WI: Magna, 1989. 9-16.)