



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range (434) 982-2815 trc-uva@virginia.edu <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/>

January 1993

Teaching Idea: What Do Students Know About Course Content When They Begin?

(Adapted from "A New Twist on the True-False Test," by M. Kathryn Dennick-Brecht [Robert Morris College, PA] in *The Teaching Professor*, December, 1992, p. 2.)

To engage your students in thinking critically about your course material, to discover how much they know already (or think they know), and to encourage them to discuss with their peers, try a test of background knowledge on the first day. This classroom assessment technique is a collaborative learning activity that builds upon a true-false, ungraded quiz and takes about 30 minutes of class time.

Design a set of 10 to 15 true-false items that represent the major concepts in your course or unit of study. It is important that the level of difficulty vary among items so that all students are challenged and all find some questions relatively easy. When you distribute the items, emphasize that the answers will not be graded but that they are rather a way to begin to explore the essence of the course. Note that the students should be able to explain why they answered as they did.

After the students finish (in about five minutes), have each pair with another student to discuss their answers; they need to reach consensus on at least eight items. Allow about five minutes for this activity and circulate among the pairs, noting which questions raise the most and least debate. Continue the process

for about ten minutes more with each pair working with another pair toward consensus on at least seven items.

With the class as a whole, read each item and ask for volunteers to answer. Students who have advocated their position with their peers are usually eager to argue before the entire class; if your items are well written, they should elicit disagreements and debate. After students have stated their positions, give the correct answer and, if appropriate, situate the information in the course. Some answers may, of course, lead to additional discussion.

Follow with a brief evaluation of the exercise. Dennick-Brecht has found this activity to be valuable in several ways:

- Students comment that they appreciate learning others' thoughts and opinions. They respect their peers and value their collaboration.
- Many students note that a group can reach better decisions and analyze problems better than an individual.
- The exercise helps the instructor begin to learn about students' knowledge and ignorance of course content.
- Students actively participate in an introduction to the course.

Dennick-Brecht contends that students are encouraged to learn more because "they leave the experience with a sense of pride in the relevant information that they bring with them to the course." As she says, "What more could we ask of an exercise?"

