Importance of Visuals in Class Discussions

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Introduction

Instructors value classroom discussions because these conversations are essential for students to learn, reflect on what they learn, and develop critical-thinking skills. Previous research demonstrates that students learn better when they actively engage with the material, the instructor, and their classmates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And, one of the best ways for student engagement is class discussion. Research shows that discussions are active learning tools, and help students to 1) clarify their questions for a deeper understanding of the material; 2) develop better analysis and interpretation skills; 3) have a better understanding of how they could apply what they learn to real world situations; 4) remember the material better; 5) feel more connected to the content and other participants; and 6) develop better communication skills (Gray & Madson, 2007; Jones, 2010;

(Dillon, 1995.)

Even though classroom discussions are essential for a more substantial learning environment, instructors find it challenging to make the discussions attractive for every student, as well as to make most students participate. One of the suggestions by researchers for creating fruitful classroom discussions in which everyone would participate is 'good preparation' of the material and crafting good, provocative questions. Yet, no matter how much preparation they do, instructors sometimes still find engaging every student in a meaningful way to be challenging. Students may remain silent, their responses may be misleading or incorrect, or, their comments may be offensive (Roehling et al. , 2011).

Most college students today are Gen Y, also known as millennials, and some are Generation Z. One of the most important characteristics of students from both generations is that they are visually oriented. This visual orientation has many implications when it comes to their learning, including their contribution to classroom discussions. Previous research demonstrates that they expect and need visuals rather than verbal text content in their learning. It discusses how students perceive the role of visuals in their learning and in classroom discussions, student preferences for the types of visuals can be utilized in these stages, and the advantages and disadvantages to a visual oriented strategy in classroom discussions.

Understanding Today's Millennial and Gen Z Students

One of the paths in creating a positive discussion environment with the correct tools is to know the students well. Today, Millenials and Gen Z students constitute a significant percentage of college students. Students belonging to these generations have unique traits, wants, expectations, and ways of doing things. Some main characteristics of these students that affect their perception of education are that they 1) are easily bored, 2) expect variety, 3) have short attention-spans, 4) are self-directed, 5) have high levels of self-esteem, 6) are driven by instant gratification, 7) like informal and stimulating environments, 8) prefer casual and friendly relationships with teachers, and 9) prefer interactive, experiential, and collaborative

Rainie, 2006; Prensky, 2001; Twenge, 2006).

Furthermore, both generations are inquisitive. Students who belong to these generations have high self-esteem, value thinking for themselves and coming to their own conclusions, and do not like it when any authority figures such as professors tell them what to think and impose ideas on them (Roehling et al., 2011; Twenge, 2006).

Today's students have different communication preferences and expectations in the classroom based on these traits. Based on the research TechSmith Research published in May 2018 (https://www.techsmith.com/blog/research-reveals-millennials-communication-needs/), millennial workers are much more likely to use visual content to communicate on their own time, prefer professional communications that include visual content, and understand and perform better and faster when visuals are involved, especially for complex ideas.

Pilot Study on How Students Perceive Visuals

This pilot study focuses on approximately one hundred anonymous essays that students in three sections of the 'Marketing Principles' course wrote about the unstructured question of what they think about visuals, and what the reasons for their liking or disliking visuals are. It also involves analysis of informal chats with business faculty members from various state and private schools. Below is an analysis of this data.

Students Believe That Their Learning Is All About the Visuals

Almost all students in the pilot study have described themselves as 'visual learners' who "need to see things" to learn. They claim that they learn and discuss better when visuals are involved in the class material. They explain the role of visuals as tools that "bring another way to hear/see the information", "provide a different perspective on the topic, or even "another explanation of the idea/topic", "add a

show the phenomenon, but the processes and tactics behind", "make everything specific and clear", and further "bring it all together". Students further emphasize that, especially for new topics, concepts, visuals are "necessary."

Most of the students further claim that they understand "faster" when the visuals are involved. They say that reading about a topic may take really long, but, visuals "actually show" how these topics work in a faster manner. Even further, they claim that visuals get them to "really understand the material" because they feel more focused and pay more attention to the details when visuals are used as the teaching material. Such a focus allows the students "to follow directions easily, allow for organization" as most students perceive visuals as an essential tool of "simplifying information overload" they have to deal with.

Another reason as to why students say they prefer visuals is that visuals do not only facilitate learning, but they make the process of remembering the material, or at least going back to the content more accessible. Since visuals make learning and remembering smoother, most students believe that visual examples in the classroom can help them "further explain the topic," and "identify similarities and differences easily." New generations of students also emphasize how they appreciate that visuals in their statements such as "visuals create a bridge between the professors words and my perception of the lesson as a whole," or "visuals can allow us to think for ourselves about some of the ideas brought up to us."

Another significant reason as to why students prefer visuals as the best learning tools is that they find them to be "eye catching," or "satisfying the eye." For a visual oriented generation, this means that the visuals are more exciting and attractive so that the students feel that they learn the material better. Most students emphasize how they prefer visuals for their learning by mentioning that visuals give the "most information even when they are related to the subject somehow and are not explaining the subject directly." Moreover, students perceive the the classroom as more "interactive and lively" when visuals are involved in delivering the content. They believe that "visuals allow for more participation by more people in the class when discussions are based off of these visuals."

Even though almost all students expect and want visuals as the primary content delivery and discussion tool in the classroom, they have specific preferences for the types of visuals and how visuals should be utilized.

Most of the students mention videos as the primary visual tools they like. Other visuals that they mention to be necessary, in order, are pictures, graphs, charts, PowerPoint slides with bullet points, and memes. Overall, they value any visuals that help them grasp and clarify the concepts and questions better, and stimulate their thinking and creativity.

Students also have specific expectations from how visuals should be utilized in the classroom for better learning and better participation. The first characteristic they expect in the use of visuals is multimodality, as is expressed in student statements like "I like when we watch videos to break up the power points"; or, "Different types of visuals are better because not everyone learns the same way. I think that keeps students awake, so they can participate." They find different types of visuals mixed up better for their learning and participation in discussions, as multimodality helps with "not getting bored," "connecting the current material with other materials", and offers multiple "perspectives on the topic." Yet, most students expect that not only visuals are mixed with each other, but also with the different content, as presented in statements like "visuals should not repeat the same topic, otherwise they are waste of time."

The second characteristic students expect in visuals is that they are highly stimulating. The primary meaning of stimulating visuals for most students is that they are "funny" and "interesting." Students find such visuals to be the best conversation starters as such visuals "help with participation because it gives you something to work off of, especially for content that might be more abstract." Yet, they prefer "a lot of short clips" instead of long videos that make them "bored."

The third characteristic is that the visuals should be up-to-date. Students expect that the visuals are relevant to their everyday life, and linked to current evenst and businesses. Students respect the expertise of the professor more, when the professor

themselves.″

The only complaint some students have about the use of visuals in the classroom is that ″when visuals are not shown to students who are not mature enough to know that visuals are to help them, not an excuse to fall asleep / go on your phone / not pay attention.″ Yet, the instructors mention how most students start paying attention to the class content when they add visuals to their teaching.

Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study reveals that today's students appreciate and expect visuals in the classroom. Visuals have a very important role in making students participate in classroom discussions in a more involved and meaningful manner. Visuals serve better the expectations and learning style of today's visual entertainment focused, multi-tasking Millenial, and Gen Z students who have shorter attention spans. Some more specific reasons as to why visuals are more effective are that they 1) pull students to the topic; 2) boost student confidence by communicating and clarifying the material, and the discussion objectives, questions, and directions even when they do not involve all the content, and have the potential to make student to be more interested in the topic, and do more research on the topic; 3) lead to an informal and more relaxed discussion environment, and create a more positive attitude among students and in professors, especially when humorous ones are involved; and 4) lead to less professor domination by helping professors not impose their ideas, but show students different perspectives that they can analyze to draw their conclusion. Visuals are effective in encouraging students to participate in discussion, as they are engaging them not only at cognitive level, but also at an emotional level.

Overall, creating discussions around multi-modal, relevant, and stimulating videos, pictures, slides, memes are becoming more critical for encouraging new generations of students to create and partake in meaningful and engaging conversations. Further research needs to investigate how different types of visuals that work better in encouraging students to participate in classroom discussions, as well as developing

text based materials.

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