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Contextualizing Expertise: A Strategy for Maximizing Guest Lectures

To make best use of guest expertise: prepare students ahead of time, provide support for engagement during the event, and spend time after the experience working with students to relate new knowledge and skills to course goals and learning objectives.

The Strategy

Effective use of a guest's time is important to students, instructors, and guests. In order to maximize these visits, I prepare students ahead of time, provide support for engagement during the event, and spend time after the experience working with students to relate new knowledge and skills to course goals and learning objectives.

Independent Worksheet: Brainstorm. Discuss. Refine.

I use a funnel approach to encourage students to think deeply about the value of the visit and about how guest expertise connects to their own interests and experiences. To this end, students brainstorm by independently generating a large number of ideas, then focus on the most compelling and relevant of these. Next, they discuss the ideas they have generated as a class, and refine those questions to ask the guest.

Guest Lecture: Engage. Record.

With a guest expert present, students have access to the list of questions and additional material they have prepared as a class. They will be asked to address these questions after the visit, and so pay special attention to answers and to new information which obviates some questions and lends new significance to others.

Asynchronous Reflection: Reflect. React.

After the visit, students post about their experiences on Canvas. They reflect on the questions they prepared as a class, those they asked the guest, and the answers they received. They describe insights and surprises, and identify assumptions which shaped their questions which have since been challenged.

In-class Synthesis: Discuss. Integrate.

Students discuss the value of this guest lecture toward meeting course goals and learning objectives.

Why Contextualize?

Guest lecturers contribute expertise, novel perspectives, and real-world experiences. Every semester, I ask practitioners to talk about their work. Topics range from practical applications to exploratory research, and students say that guest lectures give them a new appreciation for course material. Guest lectures are often engaging and interesting, with preparation, they can also be part of powerful teaching strategies.

Explicitly connecting guest lectures to students' **prior knowledge** and to larger **course goals** reinforces **key concepts** and helps students **retain more** from guest experts. Co-creating tools which set **concrete expectations** for engagement helps students get more out of discussions. Students who might be less confident winging it find prepared questions helpful, and are **more engaged** in discussions.



Materials, Process, and Reflection

INDIVIDUAL WORKSHEET

Guest: Andrew Donovan, Program Coordinator at Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village and expert on Meadowcroft archaeology

Foci: Discussion foci are diet and subsistence strategies employed by people living in the vicinity of the rock shelter during thousands of years of occupation.

Relevance: This context provides an opportunity to apply theory learned in the course, and to speak with methodological expert about his experience.

Before the visit:

First: Students were prompted to individually compose three questions about each of the following:

1. The folks who lived in and around the rock shelter.
2. 16th century village life near the rock shelter.
3. Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village, a Smithsonian Institution and National Historic Landmark

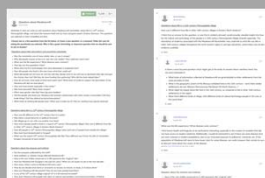
These three prompts required students to think deeply about three distinct sets of principles and contexts, and to identify relationships between these and their own experiences.

Next: Students individually chose three of the nine questions they had written. For each question, they were instructed to describe relationship to course content and the reason(s) they found the question compelling.

Finally: I collected these questions and created a comprehensive list: 50+ questions, which were made available for discussion on Canvas.

ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION

Students selected one or more questions from the comprehensive list and posted about it. This was an opportunity for the class to discuss and refine the questions they had for the guest expert. I printed the refined and annotated list of questions for students to have on hand during the guest lecture.



IN-CLASS SYNTHESIS

After the visit but before coming to class, students reflected on the visit in an assignment submitted to Canvas. In the next class meeting, students discussed their experiences: both choosing questions and topics they planned to discuss as well as learning from the guest expert. This promoted reflection on

1. Understanding of concepts before the visit
2. Engagement with, and insights gleaned from, the guest expert
3. Relationship of these insights (and guest expertise) to course goals and learning objectives

"I suggested a question about family life in the rock shelter, but now I realize that archaeological evidence can't give us direct information about family size, and that specific families moved around way more than I realized."

INSTRUCTOR'S REFLECTION

A structured approach gets students thinking about the value of guest experience and the relationship of guest expertise to course goals and learning objectives *before* a guest lecture. Preparation results in students who are more engaged during a visit, ask more focused questions, and have a clearer idea of what they can gain from the experience. After a guest lecture, preparation results in richer discussions linking guest expertise to course goals and content.

