



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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GIVE THEM THEIR CHANCE TO SHINE!

When teaching philosophy to community college students, I have used a system of classroom participation I call “rise and shine” points. I call upon students regularly and at random to stand and address questions, define terms, and address major ideas from that day’s reading assignments. They can use their notebooks, but not their textbooks. Successful answers receive “shine points” that are recorded in the grade book. Students usually need 20 such points over the course of a semester to get full credit for that part of their participation score. Points in excess of 20 count as extra credit. This number is flexible, of course. From their brief answers I often move into more of a Socratic mode, asking the student and other class members to “put that into English” for me. Shine points quickly become springboards into meaningful conversations about ideas.

I have found this to be a great way to get my students to take notes and come to class prepared. It is also a great way for me to get to know them by name early in the semester. I routinely master the first names of all 100 or so of my students by the end of the second week of the semester. In addition, the students learn each other’s first names quickly, facilitating better classroom conversation. The slightly competitive nature of the exercise adds good energy to class participation. It also cuts down on any disparaging comments or inattentive behavior, since each knows he or she may be the next to stand.

My method is to begin lecturing on a topic. When I come to a term in my notes marked with an asterisk, I pause and call on one student to “rise and shine.” If that student cannot give a definition or explanation, I thank her and immediately call upon another until one of them “shines.” I put an asterisk next to her name on a separate page of my grade book. As soon as we have a working explanation or definition, I pause in my lecture and enter into discussion. Using shine points works well for putting natural breaks in my presentation and initiating discussion of key concepts, terms, and ideas.

There are additional “benefits” to this practice. If I begin the practice on the second day we meet, students know I am serious, that they will have to keep up with the reading for this class and take notes. Students unwilling to do so tend to switch out of class quickly, leaving me with students who will come ready to engage in discussing each day’s ideas. Another benefit is that it helps students practice, in a simple and fun way, to speak in front of an audience. I ask them to stand near their seat. They have the crutch of their notebook in hand and eventually become less afraid of speaking before their peers. It is important to thank them, even if they do not have the correct response. The courage to try counts for much.

Shine points constitute only a small percentage of all possible course points (again, there is much room for flexibility here), so students who do not keep up are not penalized. Yet surprisingly, most students take them seriously. They know that these points are tangible evidence of their participation (or lack thereof), and so they become zealous in acquiring them.

Of course, there are always a few students who, for whatever reason, refuse to take notes or participate in the shine point system. It is very important for me to continue to call on them as I would other students, but never to shame or scold them for being uninvolved. Instead, I thank them for coming to class and move on to the next student.

To record shine points I use a separate spreadsheet page, listing students’ names down column A and putting the numbers 1 through 20 along the top of columns B-U. I print first names in larger and bolded font to find them quickly when recording points. I record each time I ask a student a question, whether that student is present or absent. If the student is absent, or gives an insufficient answer, I mark the next available column beside his or her name with a circle, indicating a chance to respond. This helps me maintain a visual balance in offering shine points equally to all students. I usually get a few chuckles when I call on students who are not in class.

There are other ways to work this system. Occasionally, I offer a random shine point pop quiz. This quiz



never counts against students' grades, but successful answers can add to shine point totals. Sometimes rise-and-shine responses may be worth more than one shine point, especially when answering them successfully requires closer reading. From time to time, I check students' dictionary usage by offering three or more shine points to students who have looked up an unusual vocabulary word from the day's reading and put the definition into their notes. Also, there are times when I do not call upon students but instead yell out "Jeopardy!" The first student to slam his hand on his desk hits "the buzzer" and gets to make an attempt. I have found nothing works better to keep students on their toes in the middle of a long class period.

There are even more fun and competitive exercises to play once students have accrued enough points. For example, in economics, create some kind of marketplace using shine points as currency. Teaching ethics, have a unit on distributive justice, and offer free shine points to the class for that day. I always have in my "briefcase"

a number of "free" shine points that are not equally divisible into the number of students in the classroom. I tell them that their task is to decide who gets the points. This leads to some amazing discussions of merit, justice, wealth, poverty, and how best to distribute limited resources.

So, if you seek more active class participation, students who stay current with their reading, students who take notes well on their reading, less reliance on lecture and more on engagement, an incentive to get to know students' names quickly, and a fun and not-too-threatening way for them to get to know each other, I encourage you to ask students to "rise and shine."

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