

Drop It in the Bucket: Engaging Students in Discussions Without Words

Students enter classrooms with varying levels of academic preparation and individual academic mindsets. Academic mindset includes self-efficacy, motivation, and a sense of belonging. Students with a positive academic mindset are likely to have improved academic performance (Farruggia et al., 2018). Instructors may positively or negatively influence student academic mindset based on classroom experiences. Some students enter classroom settings with no prior knowledge of the content while others are well-versed in the content. Some students believe they can excel in anything they attempt and others are unsure if they are capable of performing at a high level. Students may be highly motivated with a strong sense of belonging or may have little motivation and feel like a fraud in a classroom setting. A common activity used to assess academic preparation and academic mindset is classroom discussions. When students share facts, opinions, or pose questions during a discussion, it helps an instructor identify which concepts the students fully grasp and those that are murky. What happens if the students are shy or do not feel compelled to verbally participate in discussions? How can the students' level of understanding be assessed if they do not speak during discussions? A simple activity that assesses academic preparation and positively influences academic mindset is a discussion without words.

Implementing a Discussion Without Words

A classroom discussion is only effective if students actively participate in the activity. If students are uncertain of the answer to a discussion question, they may try to hide behind other students or avoid eye contact with the instructor. Using a discussion without words in place of a traditional discussion engages students without requiring them to verbally participate in the discussion. Although students are not required to speak during the discussion, all students are required to participate in the activity. To ensure participation, points should be assigned to the activity. The discussion without words may be used as an introductory activity during the first week of class or may be used throughout a course as an assessment tool.

Procedure

To implement a discussion without words, index cards and buckets are needed. The number of buckets will vary based on the size of the classroom, number of students enrolled, and furniture arrangement in the classroom. The goal is to strategically place buckets on tables or desks in a manner that allows students to access the buckets with organized movement throughout the classroom. An index card is passed out to each student and they write their names at the top of the card. Pose a question and ask the students to write their responses on the card. After writing

a response, students will drop the card into the bucket closest to them. Alternatively, instructors may walk around the classroom collecting cards in a bucket.

After all cards are collected, place them in one bucket. Pick a card from the bucket and read the response without revealing the student's name on the card. Ask the students if they agree or disagree with what is written on the card. Students may choose to verbally share their thoughts about the response or may remain silent. If no students choose to respond, the instructor should expound on the response by explaining how it aligns with the course content. The instructor's response should also correct any inaccuracies and include at least one question to offer another opportunity for students to share their thoughts.

Assessment and Impact

The discussion without words activity helps instructors assess students' current understanding of course topics. A review of the index cards may show patterns in thinking or gaps in knowledge. Data from the review of responses can be used in instructional planning. In addition to identifying the academic needs, the activity has the potential to positively influence the academic mindset of individual students. Placing a response in a bucket offers a safe way for students to engage in discussions without feeling embarrassed if they do not know the answer. Students are free to participate orally in discussions but there is no pressure to speak. Learning the course content without fear of being called on to answer questions provides an opportunity for students to process the content at their own pace.

The discussion without words activity was introduced to students in two courses in Fall 2023. The students were surveyed to determine the impact of a variety of instructional strategies implemented during the semester. Responses indicated that the discussion without words activity made students feel comfortable in the classroom setting. Writing responses on index cards allowed students to maintain their dignity because their classmates did not know if their responses were on target or completely unrelated to the topic. Some students were motivated by their peers who elected to orally participate in discussions. The students wanted to demonstrate their knowledge of the discussion topics in the same way as their peers. After the first discussion without words activity, the quality of written responses increased as well as the number of students verbally participating in the discussions.

In a third course, taught in Fall 2024, students were given a survey that asked them to rate the impact of the discussion without words activity on sense of belonging and academic success. The rating scale was from 1 to 5, with a rating of 1 indicating there was no impact and a rating of 5 indicating there was a strong positive impact. The discussion without words activity had a positive impact on both sense of belonging and academic success, with mean ratings of 4.31 and 4.21 respectively. Open-ended responses on the survey highlighted the impact of discussions within the course. The responses mentioned being comfortable during discussions, having discussions without being judged, and loving the bucket assignment because it is nice to hear the perspectives of others.

References

Farruggia, S., Han, C. W., Watson, L., Moss, T. P., & Bottoms, B. L. (2018). Noncognitive factors and college student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, 20(3), 308-327. DOI: 10.1177/1521025116666539

Submitted by:

Natasha Spellman

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

North Carolina, USA