



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

# Building Community With Attendance Questions

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Taking attendance is usually a five-minute task at the start of a class period, but in my classroom, it can sometimes take much longer. On rare occasions, taking attendance can take up an entire class period.

This happened recently when, for 75 minutes, students listened respectfully to each other. No one snuck a peek at phone messages. No one left the room for a washroom break. Not a single student looked bored. There was no technology

involved.

All I did was take attendance.

## Stretching Our Minds

It's been decades since I stumbled upon the power of what I call the **attendance question**. I asked each student in my high school English class to tell me what he or she thought the color of silence was while I took attendance. The question was meant to get them thinking metaphorically just before a poetry lesson, but I was surprised to notice the students' interest in each other's responses. Curious about this, I began to use similar open-ended questions in other classes. In social studies, I asked what was wrong with the world. In psychology, I asked about students' favorite childhood toys. In math, I'd ask, "What is the color of 2?"

The most important characteristic of my attendance questions is that there are no "right" answers. In a setting where being right is critical for success, the attendance question is abnormal enough to get students' attention.

When we trace back the meaning of *attend* through Old French (*atendre*) to its Latin root (*attendere*), we can see that when we attend, we are "stretching our mind toward" something. The attendance question gets students to pay attention through inviting them to stretch their minds toward a question which has no right answer.

When we take attendance, we are essentially asking each student, "Are you here?" But are students actually present when their minds are elsewhere? By asking the attendance question, I am indirectly asking my students, "Who are you? How are you? What matters to you?" Through their consideration of a response, I hope they stretch their minds toward presence in the classroom.

## Creating a Sense of "We"

The kind of attendance question that I ask will change over the course of the semester. At the beginning, the questions are safe and easy to answer, but toward the end of the semester, they might keep students talking long after the bell.

Questions at the beginning of the semester may be:

- What's your favorite food/movie/book/celebrity/season?
- What was the best part of the summer?
- What was the most beautiful/interesting thing that you saw this morning on your way to school?
- What's the taste of happiness/the shape of sadness/the smell of joy?

Questions like these help students to see similarities and differences among their classmates. They can begin to see a "we" in the classroom: we like pizza, we like summer, we're Vancouver Canucks fans. I love watching students who have never spoken to each other discover that they love the same things or that they see sadness in the same way.

Because learning is fundamentally a social and emotional experience, achieving this sense of we is critical before students fully engage in classroom activities. A sense of we creates safety and makes it more likely that a student will risk moving out of his or her comfort zone to try something new -- and ultimately to learn.

However, it's one thing for a teacher to know this and quite another to actually create a space where students feel safe and comfortable. Even with a plethora of how-to advice on creating community in a classroom, it can be difficult to know what will work best for any particular group of students. But whether the classroom is in Africa or Canada, taking attendance is what all teachers do everywhere, and it's through this simple act that any teacher anywhere can begin building community in his or her classroom.

The type of question that I ask is linked to how cohesive the classroom community is at the time. After those first "getting to know you" questions, I introduce this question: "How is the weather in your world?" If students are feeling stressed or tired, they may answer "stormy" or "cloudy." If they're in a good mood, it's "sunny" weather. Answers to this attendance question give me a sense of the general mood in the room, and I can then adjust my lesson in response. (Giving a test makes no sense when the general weather report includes storms with lightning and thunder!)

The attendance question that took up the entire 75 minutes recently was: "Have you ever had the experience of wishing you were the opposite gender in a particular situation?" Students will only answer this type of question authentically if they feel safe. That my students felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable in their answers was a result of months spent learning about each other through responses to attendance questions.

## Recognizing What Matters

After decades of finding different ways of asking students, "Are you here?", I'm still learning about the impacts of the attendance question in my classroom. If I forget to ask one, students remind me. And if I post one on our work schedule and then don't ask it, I get lots of complaints.

If you'd like to try this in your classroom, here's an important caveat: Never *directly* link the attendance question

to any curricular content. If you do, the question becomes a test of knowledge and not an invitation to stretch the mind. It wouldn't be an invitation to attend or be in attendance.

More often than not, I've finished taking attendance in the first five minutes of class. But on those days when that process becomes much longer, it's always worth the extra time getting to know who my students are and what matters to them.

How do you build community in your classroom?

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