Anonymous Online Polling: A 21st Century Discussion Hook

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By Maria Geiger

Teaching language arts in a technological age is timeless, particularly when we embrace the philosophy that learning depends on engagement and define technology as the application of knowledge. The writing-centric language arts classroom is the ideal place to engage students through meaningful discussion, and fortunately, we have access to web tools such as live anonymous polling (also known as student response systems) to facilitate engaging synchronous discussions.

Many free cloud-based programs, such as Poll Everywhere and Socrative, offer means to conduct anonymous online polling. No matter how complex the topic, starting out with simple questions encourages open-ended answers from a variety of viewpoints. While teacher-crafted multiple-choice response options have their merits, students thrive when offered every opportunity to think for themselves as they develop their unique voices.

With the collected anonymous answers on the overhead or white board, the focus is on actual responses rather than the individual responders (Poll Everywhere). Students have the added benefit of taking as much time as needed to read and comprehend before responding. The advantages for less verbose students are obvious; with anonymous polling, students are presented with the opportunity to contribute without perceived risks (the subtle smile of the quiet student who "starts the fire" of discussion is a beautiful sight!). After giving students the time to take in the results, teachers start the discussion by reading one response as an opener while being mindful to sound conversational with comments such as, "So, it appears that….". This practice reduces anxiety in many students who loathe "on-the-spot" questioning.

Presented with evidence of students' feelings, such discussions begin with the students' opinions, not the instructor's (relevance is important!). In some ways, an in-class discussion flip occurs, because the spoken conversation begins with answers rather than questions. In my first-year college composition classes, the subject of gender has never been a conversation starter (even though it is a timely topic for a persuasive essay). In fact, there were times initiating the conversation started off awkwardly, which is not surprising considering our volatile political climate. Students were less willing to share their views because they feared disapproval and/or social media ridicule (Stevens). For the last few semesters, I initiated the gender section with a poll asking which gender is more constricted and why. Last semester, the poll was tied, with the most common answers revealing that males have fewer socially acceptable clothing options, while females are not fully accepted in the hip-hop community. (For eighteen-year-olds, clothing and music is more immediately relevant than the topic of wage inequality). With a little help from popular musicians Kendrick Lamar and Nicki Minaj, the students engaged eagerly in the conversation. By the end of the gender section, we discussed (sans poll!) the divergent feminist views of Sheryl Sandberg and bell hooks, with Beyoncé's *Lemonade* in the middle.

While some teachers argue that students should learn to stand by their opinions in a face-to- face setting, I contend that most students will learn this same skill after witnessing that others can and will respect diverse views in a classroom where polls and informal discussions are utilized. Even if less talkative students never become the most outwardly communicative of the group, thanks to online polling, they witness how valuable their contributions are to the larger conversation. The language arts are meant to help students find purpose and power in their voices—anonymous online polling just might be the hook that makes that happen.