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TEACHING TACTIC

The One Question that Will Transform Your Classes

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The context

Many of us long for deeper, transformative moments in our classrooms, but do not know how to cultivate such spaces with ease. Over the past few years, I created and have used a program called Ascend and Transcend, designed to acknowledge the sacred work of teaching and learning across all formats. The program follows the five steps of the Arc of Transcendence. Although Ascend and Transcend has been successful, not every instructor can commit to an entire program. However, many of the benefits, such as greater awareness, presence, and engagement, can be accomplished by focusing on one key question of the program,

The pedagogical purpose

This simple activity creates moments of awareness and presence for what we are doing in the classroom as both teachers and students. Learning, and by extension, teaching, are never easy, but they become next to impossible when we are not present enough to learn or teach. By answering this question, we provide the recognition of why we have come to class and what we are seeking from our classroom experience. Sharing my own insights about what brought me to class on any given day has helped my students' engagement and focus. As they answer the question themselves, it provides them an opportunity to reflect upon their state of presence and their expectations in the learning environment, things that often go unrecognized.

Description of the strategy

In Ascend and Transcend, we begin each class by asking, "What has brought you here—to this moment?" The instructor and students can handle the question in a way that best serves the class. Instructors can ask students to write a personal response, sit quietly and think of their answers, or discuss answers as a class. It is important that the instructor shares his or her answer with the class.

Why it is effective

Considering "What has brought you here—to this moment?" is effective, because in the most immediate and gentle of ways, it guides one into a state of engagement. Teaching and learning do not evolve from our passivity or lack of presence. Teaching and learning manifest as the result of our conscious decision to "show up" for this sacred work. To succeed, we must be able to reflect on the choices we have made and the outcomes we are seeking.

This simple question has transformed the teaching and learning experience for my students and for myself. My students gain a window into what has brought me into the learning environment on any given day. Likewise, I have gained insight into what is motivating my students. Why do they show up for class? What are they hoping to gain? Students have told me that this question has helped them to raise their grades and become better students.

Try it. Ask yourself and your students, "What has brought you here—to this moment?" and be brave enough and present enough to answer authentically.