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## Teaching Tips January/February 2017

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## Teaching tips January/February 2017

This edition Teaching Tips accommodates BOTH our goals: how to facilitate a supportive environment for learning AND the logistics of teaching. When you do this one effectively, you actively engage participants by offering them opportunities to express their ideas and articulate questions *and* you ensure a deeper understanding of course content for all! So here goes...

The value of **questions** ... and waiting 1.....2.....3.....before selecting responses

*What do you all think about that?*

*Can someone explain (what I said, what we will do, what's coming up) in their own words?*

*Can you say more about that? (This is one of my favorites!)*

If you have been in one my classes, you will have no doubt heard me ask all of the above and more questions – often! Knowing when and what questions to ask students can make the difference between an engaged and active class and an audience on the verge of a nap.

Why do we ask questions in class? There are multiple answers to this and each will guide your approach. For example, do you want to find out if students understood what you explained? (I hope so!) or do you want to understand why a student seems to be upset or disengaged? (I know you do!) The best way to address these and so many other issues is by asking questions.

For all of us, and especially for newer teachers, it is hard to know when to pause and ask questions. It's a delicate balance. Bring content to share but also ask questions about it. You might feel like, 'I am the teacher! I should know!' We live in a society that reinforces that idea but don't buy into it. If you do, you will miss many opportunities to support your participants in self-generated learning, which will last a lot longer than memorizing anything you have to say.

**NOTE:** Questions do not replace content! They supplement and extend it. You still need to prep — bring art history, technique, mindfulness practices, engaging projects, art from around the world, new ideas. Share and then — ask questions and listen. This is where learning happens!

**Okay, so how do we do this? Here are three tricks to remember:**

- 1) Pause after any discussion or lecture in which you have been talking more than 10 minutes and check in. What are participants getting from what you are sharing? Are there any questions? Can one of them say it back in their own words?

- 2) After you ask a question, pause, count silently to three in your head, and then call on someone. There will likely be two or three hands up by now so call on someone that hasn't spoken yet that day if possible. If for some reason no one responds, then ask the question in another way. Or ask, *Can someone please reframe the question?*
- 3) This might sound obvious, but when someone responds, listen! Then you can: ask for clarification, offer feedback, thank the person, or respond in another authentic way.

**There are three reasons why asking questions and listening and responding are important.**

- First of all, you will get valuable firsthand knowledge of what participants are hearing (and not!) and be able to modulate the next phase of your discussion accordingly.
- In addition, perhaps even more importantly, you will gradually and subtly demonstrate to participants that their ideas, questions, and voice are valued.
- Last of all, and most practically, you will keep things interesting. Give your participants a chance to be actively involved in creating knowledge and asking questions.

This is always a good policy and is integral to CBA but it is nowhere more important than in a prison, where participants are often conditioned not to use or trust their voice. The PAC is dedicated to creative transformation, on paper and canvas, yes, but also in individuals and communities. We strive to create safe spaces for growth and expression. Offering participants opportunities to engage is an important part of that process and asking questions and listening to and responding to their answers in dialogue is key to supporting growing understandings.

Finally, there is one other aspect to asking questions: **how to find out what is happening when someone seems to be stuck or disengaged.** This is a little trickier but it's also a shorter answer. **Just ask.**

*Are you okay?*

*How are you doing?*

*Can I help you with something?*

*Is there something you don't understand?*

As a new teacher, or even as an experienced teacher, seeing someone that seems unhappy or appears as if they don't understand a lesson can be challenging. Our first response might be to be defensive. That's okay, but don't respond from there. Breathe through it and move on to ask and to listen. I cannot tell you how many times I have been surprised by the answers! I might think that someone isn't listening or is distracted. But when I check in, it turns out that the person can't read, or just got very bad news, or something else unrelated to what I thought. Don't pry. But if you can gain a sense about what is going on, you can better support learning.

I hope these tips help! Please email me if you have any comments, questions, or ideas for next time. Thank you so much for your dedication and care to our participants and program!

With all best wishes,

Annie 😊