TEACHING TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

The Anonymous Notecard Question (TANQ) System:
A New Method for Promoting Student Participation and
Investment in the Classroom

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Background

As an advanced graduate student at a large Midwestern
U.S. university, I was given the opportunity to teach an
undergraduate course on close relationships, courtship, and
marriage. The course is a 200-level semester-long course, which
students may take to fulfill one of the department’s degree
requirements, and is offered only once a year. This course is one
of the most popular in the department, and many students who do
not need it to graduate (including some students who are not even
from our department) enroll in it. Because of the course cap of 44
students, there is always a long waiting list for the course.

The two times I taught this course, all of the students were
full-time residential students in their twenties. Students’ ethnic
backgrounds included White, Hispanic, African-American, and
Asian-American. About 10% of the students have been male,
which represents one of the largest male enrollments in a class in
our department. The activity shared here was highly rated by
students, as assessed by mid-semester feedback, end of the
semester formal evaluations, and spontaneous comments by
numerous students after they had completed the course.
Objectives

The use of this system will:

- Allow students to participate anonymously in class.
- Allow students to ask questions anonymously in class.
- Allow students to offer teaching advice or suggestions anonymously in class.
- Help students to see how their responses compare with those of their peers and with the published literature on the subject, thus gaining an emic perspective on research. Additionally, this encourages students to connect what they learn in class with their own lives and experiences.

Rationale for Activity

Encouraging reluctant students to participate in class is a perennial problem for educators and is frequently addressed in the pedagogical literature (Davis, 1993; McKeachie, 1999). Suggestions for encouraging participation include: using icebreaker activities, assigning roles to students, having discussions electronically through web-based discussion boards, sitting next to reluctant students, and allowing students to write answers before speaking, to name just a few. However, most of these strategies take an instructor-centered approach, attempting to get students to participate in a way that instructors can recognize or evaluate. Much less is said about how to encourage students to participate in a way that is meaningful to them, that will enable them to feel like they are contributing to the class without necessarily having to be recognized for, or evaluated on it.

As a first-time instructor, I was concerned about eliciting student participation in a way that both they as students and I as the instructor would value. My solution was to create a new
method for promoting anonymous student participation and investment in the classroom: The Anonymous Notecard Question (TANQ) System.

**Procedure**

The TANQ System differs from other strategies for encouraging student participation in that it allows for, and encourages, anonymous participation. Upon entering the classroom each day, students each pick up a blank notecard from a stack that is placed on a table near the door. On the overhead projector, a list of questions is projected onto the screen. These questions concern the topic for the next class period, and each fall into one of three categories: 1. Questions or items taken verbatim from one of the research studies they will be reading (or reading about) for the next class period. 2. Abstract or esoteric questions meant to promote thought about concepts (e.g., “What is love? Please describe.”). 3. Opinion/personal experience questions that provide me with information about how to best guide the next discussion (e.g., “In your relationships, what have been some of the sources of conflict? Why do you think that is?”).

The time before class begins, and the first several minutes of each class are allotted to answering the questions. Students are asked to write their answers on the notecard, without including any identifying information (e.g., their names), and to place the notecard in the box next to the stack of blank notecards when they leave the room. Students are also encouraged to write any questions they have about the material, or about relationships in general, on the notecards, as well as any teaching tips or suggestions they might wish to share with me. The box in which they place the notecards is closed, except for a small opening in the top through which the notecards can just fit (i.e., students cannot see into the box or see any of the notecards deposited in the box).

Students are not required to answer the questions, but all students are required to pick up and turn in a notecard. There are
two primary advantages to this requirement. First, since all students turn in a card, it creates a social norm of apparent participation, which may encourage actual participation (Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno, 1991). Second, because all students turn in notecards regardless of participation, students cannot discern who participated and who did not, which is crucial to maintaining the anonymity of the system. Participation, or lack thereof, does not affect students’ grades, and this is explicitly stated in the syllabus. Nonetheless, I usually get very few blank notecards.

After students have turned in their notecards (at the end of class), I collect the box, return to my office, and compile the results. The results are then integrated into my lecture and lesson plan for the next class period.

*Examples of Questions Asked*

In the class before we discuss the role of sex and sexuality in relationships, the TANQ questions include Sanders and Reinisch’s (1999) question about which sexual behaviors college students consider “having sex” and which behaviors they do not. Students respond which behaviors they believe are “having sex” and which are not, these results are compiled, and during the class on sex and sexuality, I compare their opinions to those reported in Sanders and Reinisch. This provides a springboard for discussion about why certain behaviors are considered “having sex” while others are not, and what the consequences of those attitudes could be (e.g., greater risk of STD transmission). Later in the semester, before the class on jealousy, I again ask students the same question, instead rephrasing it to inquire which of the behaviors would constitute “cheating.” I use these results as a springboard for discussion about how people can consider a behavior not to be “having sex” but nonetheless to be “cheating,” which is often a very heated discussion.

Students also ask questions of me on their notecards, as they are encouraged to do. These questions range from the
humorous (e.g., “How do I get my boyfriend to put the toilet seat down?”) to the more serious (e.g., “How do you know if you’re in love with someone?”), but I always try to answer all the questions they have written, and to create an open forum in the classroom to discuss them.

However, I am mindful of the ethical pitfalls of offering them blind advice. Although I always try answer their questions, I always remind them that I can (and will) only convey to them what the research on the subject recommends. While no gravely serious questions have been posed thus far, I have repeatedly encouraged students to consult counselors or other mental health professionals should the need arise (and I provide them with the number for the university health center’s mental health/counseling clinic numerous times throughout the semester).

**Potential Benefits of the TANQ System**

My students and I have found several benefits to this system. First, it allows students to participate anonymously, without being afraid of looking different from their peers or not conforming to the group norm. Second, it allows students to ask questions anonymously, which seems particularly important given the relatively even ratio of questions asked in class and those asked on the notecards. Further, most of the questions asked on notecards are of a more personal or embarrassing nature than those volunteered in class (e.g., “I’m a 20 year old virgin. Will people think I’m a freak?”), which may suggest that the notecards are the only outlet for these students to ask questions that they might otherwise be too embarrassed to ask about in class.

Third, it gives students a chance to offer me teaching tips or suggestions anonymously, something that most instructors only get on their end of the semester evaluation forms. This has been particularly helpful to me, as students have suggested specific movies, television programs, books, websites, etc., for me to use in teaching about the topics, most of which have been quite helpful
and appropriate. A number of students have also reported that they especially appreciated being able to do this, because it made them feel like a part of the class, like their opinions mattered and that I took them seriously, especially since they saw me use their suggestions later in the semester.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this system helps students to see how their opinions, beliefs, and values, expressed through their responses, compare with those of their peers as well as the published literature on the subject. In situations where the class response is similar to what is reported in the literature, we discuss what factors may make that likely, and why they seem to be in agreement with others. In situations where the class response is dissimilar to the literature, or where there is great variation in the class response, we discuss why people may have different opinions or beliefs about the subject, and what impact that might have on their relationships. This allows and encourages students to connect what they learn in class with their own lives and experiences, hopefully making the learning more meaningful, and more lasting.

**Potential Value in Other Courses and Possible Adaptations**

This activity could be used in virtually any course of any size, with proper modification. Although the course I developed it for contained many “hot topics” and controversial issues, the TANQ system may be even more well-suited for the more “mundane” classes, where student participation and interest are already at low levels, and such active participation may help get students more interested and involved in the course. Although the “front-work” in preparing the questions and integrating them into the curriculum is time intensive, it would not be affected by the size of the class (though the time required to compute the results certainly would be). In larger classes, teaching assistants could help compile the results. Finally, although I used the system daily, it could be adapted for less frequent use, which would reduce both the front work and the time needed to compile results.
References


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