

The course was “Cultures & Contexts: Brazil” at New York University. The Brazilian students were sitting together, the undergraduate business students were sitting together, and the history majors were sitting together. Texts had been assigned for the first session but a student was already deep into a disquisition on politics based on his knowledge as a Brazilian, rather than on the assignments. When we had gone around the room to introduce ourselves, a nursing student had made it plain that this class was an unwelcome distribution requirement. Many of the women in the classroom had their heads down, studying their notes, while men tried to interrupt the lone speaker. What to do? The classic format of lecture followed by free-form student-led discussion was clearly not going to promote group learning. Instead, by the end of the first class, I told the students that the following week would be structured differently. After going over themes from the lectures, I would cold-call for about half the class, with no penalty at all for “wrong” answers. Only toward the end of class would we transition into small groups or discussion.

It turned out that even the quietest students appreciated the invitation to speak, so long as they knew in advance what would be required of them. I experimented with several formats, but cold-calling proved most successful in moving the class through complicated ideas while balancing contributions from women, international students, and first-generation college students. Quieter students of whom I had asked questions, their feet wet, would then later often participate in the broader discussion. When I asked Brazilian students directly about the assigned texts, they made very valuable contributions without vague allusions to their personal experiences. I paired students from different factions for discussion exercises, and they even began to make friends across different groups, though sadly they never shifted their seating patterns.

I had expected my cold-calling technique to be unpopular since it was unfashionably teacher-led, but I was pleased to receive glowing student evaluations. Evaluations are supposed to be anonymous, but I had gotten to know my students well and could guess who had written what. A history major complimented my “wonderful way of explaining things, reflecting and expanding on ideas with clarity, depth, and subtlety.” An international student noted that I “created an extremely friendly environment. No one was afraid of asking anything because she never judged anyone and was always very helpful.” I am proud of both comments, especially because we dealt with difficult issues like the history of slavery and gender-based violence in the classroom. Our formal debate over affirmative action in Brazil became very heated, and many students commented afterwards that the debate had caused them to reconsider or change their positions on the issue.

I have found that my extensive overseas experience—having lived or studied in Germany, Mexico, Guatemala, Ireland, and Brazil—allowed me to come to the classroom without overly fixed ideas about how best to teach. What worked to promote an open, intellectually engaged classroom at New York University doesn’t necessarily work elsewhere, and vice versa. I have lectured at the Universidad de San Carlos, Guatemala City’s leading public university, where other professors informed me that students would not appreciate images or PowerPoint—which they considered childish distractions. I found that a highly structured lecture, followed by questions from the students rather than discussion, worked best in that environment. However, when I substituted for a professor in giving a lecture at New York University, I found students to be highly engaged by images and short video clips. My best teaching technique is simple: getting to know my students as whole people with a variety of interests, rather than just students in a classroom. Then I gauge what best suits the individuals and the group.