

## Practicing ‘Yes, and’ in and out of the Classroom

Omar Ali and Nadja Cech

We invite colleagues to try out (play with) “Yes, and.” While we offer some tips below, what we urge here are activities that take endless creative forms given specific contexts, relationships, and people involved. We would be very interested to hear your own tips—what has worked for you in and out of the classroom. Please e-mail us at [ohali@uncg.edu](mailto:ohali@uncg.edu) and [nbcech@uncg.edu](mailto:nbcech@uncg.edu).

There are countless ways to create engaged, developmental learning environments. Below are eleven practical tips in the spirit of “Yes, and.”\*

- 1) *Actively* listening to what others say is the key to building with what others offer. This means paying close attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues. How we show that we are actively listening is through open and engaged body language, including eye contact, smiling, and nodding—ways to demonstrate our attentiveness and actually help be attentive. (Omar regularly tells his students that by pretending to be interested, one often gets interested, and when we’re interested we tend to learn better. So, “perform” interested and see what happens.)
- 2) Using words and phrases that affirm is an essential part of “Yes, anding.” Such words and phrases might include “Exactly!”, “Yes!”, “I like where you’re going with this”; “That’s a really interesting way of looking at it.” (What words and phrases do you find helpful?)
- 3) Asking students to say more when they provide an answer or offer a commentary is also helpful. Simply ask, “Can you say a little more?” or “When you say \_\_\_\_\_, what do you mean?” It’s also helpful to direct students to perform asking these kinds of questions of each other.
- 4) Reading out loud passages from a book, article, or paper together creates group cohesiveness and teaches, in a very simple way, how to build on each other. Have students read one paragraph at a time and be open and encouraging if a student stumbles a little when reading, offering “that’s a tough word” or “I always have trouble with that” in a warm and sincere way.
- 5) Play icebreakers—games, such as Zip, Zap, Zop! This icebreaker game involves getting into a large circle. One person begins by passing the “energy” across the circle by making eye-contact with another person and directing with their outstretched pointed clasped hands, saying “Zip!” Then that person looks to another person and says “Zap!” . . . and then “Zop!” Another game is the One-Word-Story, where the group creates a story by having each person in a circle, or line, say one word that builds on what the other person says before them. These games (guaranteed to make the group laugh) require being attentive and creatively building with whatever is given.

- 6) Making ourselves available to students is a vital part of the learning process. This can be best accomplished by scheduling regular meetings either one-on-one or in small groups. By meeting regularly with our students, we show them that we're invested in them. Meeting regularly also holds them accountable for a piece of work (which is another way of conveying that we take them seriously and that their work matters to us) and supports them continuing to develop.
- 7) Breaking the class into smaller groups for focused discussion can give introverted students an opportunity to participate. Provide the groups with a list of questions to talk about. Choose conceptual questions that build on the course material. While the groups talk, circulate among them and help draw out discussion, engaging with the students who tend to be *less* involved in the larger class context. After 15 minutes or so of focused discussion, bring the class back together. Specifically call on students who demonstrated good ideas in the smaller group discussions to share with the class. This sets up students who might otherwise be afraid to talk in the larger group setting to succeed in the context of the larger classroom.
- 8) Another helpful activity is to speak outside of class with students who tend to be introverted and *ask them for help* (this is a way of relating to them "a head taller"). Ask them if they can help you develop the class by speaking up more in class since (you might say) their comments are insightful and will help other students.
- 9) Creating non-assessed spaces for students is another important way to support their development. Nadja's research group and Omar's philosophy group are examples of this. Omar also regularly takes his students on field trips, which are followed by debriefings of their experience at the site. Creating non-assessed spaces is extremely helpful to engage students in meaningful conversation—i.e. they are more likely to take creative, intellectual, and emotional risks if they do not have a grade hanging over their heads.
- 10) Nadja also has her research group come up with themes (such as 'Star Wars') for her group photo, in which all get dressed up. Such bonding, playful experiences, as part of experiential learning opportunities support our students' ability to stretch and grow.
- 11) Finally, asking for students' input during the semester and afterwards, and then following up with them can help them see that they can shape what is going on in their own class and positively shape the experiences of students in future classes.

---

\*See, for instance, James R. Dawes "Ten Strategies for Effective Discussion Leading," Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/ten-strategies-effective-discussion-leading> [March 9, 2017]; or Carrie Lobman and Matthew Lundquist, *Unscripted Learning* (New York: Columbia University Teacher's College Press, 2008); Josette Luvmour and Sambhava Luvmour, *Everyone Wins: Cooperative Games and Activities* (Gabriola Island, B.C., Canada: New Society Publishers, 2007).