

Using News to Start Class: How Small Daily Interactions Affect Larger Classroom Interactions

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, I added an extra credit assignment to my freshmen composition classes encouraging students to bring in news stories each class period; this assignment was designed to encourage students to be more willing to participate in classroom discussions. We then spent the first few minutes of each class discussing the stories they brought. After using this assignment for a few years, I had anecdotal evidence to suggest that my students were generally more talkative in class after the first week or two of sharing news. These experiences made me want to see if I could measure some change or document how students felt about discussing the news to start class. To that end, I developed a set of surveys to quantify this data. This article discusses the results of four semesters of survey and extra credit data from students bringing news stories to start their English classes.

Keywords: student engagement, classroom management, teaching, freshman composition, SoTL, classroom discussions

INTRODUCTION

College professors often wonder how to get more students participating in small classroom discussions. As someone who teaches freshman composition, this is especially important to me since much of my semester is built on in-class discussions and student-student interactions. In 2013, I added an extra credit assignment to my freshmen composition classes encouraging students to bring in news stories each class period. After noticing that my students seemed more willing to engage with each other at an earlier point in the semester as compared to my previous courses, I received IRB approval in 2016 to study this concept more closely. I added an anonymous survey at the beginning and end of the semester to gauge students' comfort levels with talking and sharing ideas both outside and inside of class. I wanted to see if my observations about students becoming more comfortable in class could be attributed, in some way, to discussing the news. I ran this project under ethical approval for two years; however, I continue to use the extra credit assignment because I find it incredibly valuable.

I chose to use news stories as our discussion topic because it was a resource most students had access to and it did not require a lot of in-depth preparation. Students could scroll through social media, Yahoo, NPR, or some other source to see what topics were trending and interesting to them. Then they could share the stories with the class. Where possible, I helped to fill in gaps in understanding or asked the rest of the class to help flesh-out the stories. I encouraged students to stay away from alt-left and alt-right news sources to try to avoid sharing any decidedly fake news or stories that were only meant to invoke ire in the reader. (Throughout the semester, we discussed why those types of sites flourish and how they keep their readers entertained, but why the stories are not always telling us enough of the truth to be worth sharing. This gets back into looking at rhetoric in the real-world, which is part of the focus of my classes.)

While this is an extra credit assignment, I still approach it with the expectation students will participate. On mornings when just one or two people had something to share, I asked the class to pull out their phones or open Google and find out what was happening. I want my students to be aware of world events because their overall written arguments appear to become stronger. I also believe that it gives them a way to add their voices to what is already occurring and helps them to have more well-thought-out papers. I encourage students to practice critical thinking skills in as many aspects of their lives as they can. Discussing the news with a group can help them to see issues through new eyes, especially if another student uses a source that approaches the topic from a point of view differing from their own.

The stories ranged from local stories to ones about world-wide events; occasionally someone would bring in a story interesting enough for us to scrap our planned lesson and discuss that instead. For example, in 2015 we were discussing teacher pay in Oklahoma, and we ended up spending the whole class period discussing the state of education in Oklahoma, as well as what budget cuts and lower pay meant for teachers. It was one of my favorite class periods to date, because most of my students had just graduated from high school in Oklahoma and were aware of how low teacher pay and poor state investment in K-12 education had negatively impacted their own education. Students shared stories of broken desks and outdated textbooks. They were able to see how a real-world event affected them personally. The students used their own understanding to apply that back to the discussion. In this way, the classroom became similar to writing an argument paper about whether or not teachers should have a pay raise *and* how to fund that pay raise. As students voiced their sometimes starkly differing opinions about the issue, the class began to better understand the concept of using multiple points of view when writing papers and why it is important to engage those different views in "conversation" as they write. Granted, not all of our news discussions are this fascinating, but it is a wonderful day when an organic teaching moment like this one happens.

As far as student participation goes, some students participate while others tend to sit back and listen, just absorbing the information. Some students also like to jump-in on the coattails of another person's story to

help explain it. I have indicated a need to be respectful of each other and, so far, I have not had any arguments develop in class over the news stories or over how students interact during the discussions. I would like to think this is due to the generally respectful nature of my classes, since we often discuss hot-button topics, such as the Trump presidency or police brutality.

After using this assignment for a few years, I had anecdotal evidence from my own observations to suggest my students were generally more talkative in class after the first week or two of sharing news. I started hearing from students that they really liked getting to know each other through talking about the world. My students were able to see what mattered to other people and form classroom friendships with people who had similar ideas. The students also told me they wished more professors would start this way so they could get to know students in their other classes better. These comments were the starting point for the IRB-approved study discussed here.

WHY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

In the fall of 1990, Nancy Spann, the director of the Learning Assistance program at Appalachian State University, interviewed Vincent Tinto, a prominent author on student attrition and retention, about student retention. Tinto listed reasons why students do not complete college, dispelling the myth (as he sees it) of students leaving because they just were not able to do the work (Spann, 1990). Tinto discussed the ways colleges and universities could increase retention rates, noting that colleges needed to be committed to “the social and intellectual growth” of all students (Spann, 1990). While I love the idea of extra-curricular evening lectures and programs to help students engage more, not all students have the time, energy, opportunity, or interest to attend those events. Also, on our campus, most of the students are non-residential and have busy work and family lives outside of school. By moving the discussion into classes they are required to attend, we can offer the opportunities for intellectual growth to more students. We allow students to have meaningful interactions within their classes, which makes those interactions seem more normalized instead of being something they have to go and find. Tinto seems to agree, noting that classroom activities should set students up to be effective learners (Spann, 1990). A study by Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) noted that when faculty value student participation, freshmen were more engaged. Umbach and Wawrzynski also noted that effective classroom practices for student engagement lead to students perceiving “greater gains” from their education.

If we accept that students learn more when they are actively engaged in the classroom (and I do), then it benefits us to find ways to restructure our classrooms and assignments in a way that encourages active learning. Adding a daily discussion of news to the classroom gives students a place to participate in topics they might be more interested in, which, if nothing else, helps them to be more interested in coming to class in the first place.

Alexander Astin (1999) argues that colleges have some responsibility to prepare students to deal constructively with societal issues such as “race tension, crime, [and] drug abuse,” to list just a few major concerns. One of the benefits of using the news to get class started is that, aside from the “learning to engage” and relationship-building aspects, we also get to discuss issues that are important to the students. Using news to start class, instead of at a later point in the period, helps students transition from their time outside of the classroom to our time inside of the classroom. We get to practice thinking critically about difficult issues, such as Trevon Martin (police brutality and race), tax reform (US concerns over who “deserves” to receive a tax break), or government shutdowns, and stumble through our biases within the relative safety of the classroom. If students are listening closely, they can begin to understand the lenses through which their classmates view the world and, with any luck, can find some common ground to continue the discussions in a productive fashion. I will admit letting things play out takes some courage on my part, as some stories are

more emotionally charged than others. It is important for me to stay tuned-in to the conversations and help guide them when the inevitable tangents or differences of opinion occur.

METHODS

Since I teach freshmen in either “English Composition” or “Composition Research” every semester, I decided to run a survey with IRB approval in fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018 to gauge my students’ thoughts on how using news stories in the classroom affected their overall classroom participation.

For the IRB portion of this assignment, I prepared two surveys, a pre-test for the beginning of the semester and a post-test for the end of the semester. The beginning survey asked students how comfortable they were with sharing ideas inside and outside of the classroom. It was used to gauge students’ feelings about participating in classroom discussions about the required readings. The end survey was used to see if students had changed their opinions about participating in class after a semester of sharing news. The survey also asked them why they did or did not share and how they felt the classroom dynamic was affected by having people share their stories. I looked at those anonymous answers in conjunction with a chart in the survey software showing how many students shared news in class. While I was not able to correlate those two items, since the surveys were anonymous, it did give me insight into how students were potentially being impacted by the time we spent in class sharing news stories.

I used Survey Monkey for both surveys, which contained a mix of demographic and short answer questions. The beginning survey contained 10 questions and the end survey contained nine questions. (The complete survey questions are shown in Appendices A and B.) Students were given the option to complete the survey anonymously for five points of extra credit, but it was not a required assignment, which explains why not everyone participated. I asked students to submit a screenshot of the “Thank you” message at the end of the survey in order to qualify for the extra credit points.

I analyzed the answers from the beginning and end surveys as follows:

1. Tone of responses to beginning of semester surveys;
2. How comfortable students were in taking the lead in a conversation at the beginning of the semester.

For this study, the demographic information remained mostly unused. I was interested mostly in the non-demographic answers. I divided up the tone questions into “Negative”, “Neutral” and “Positive” answers based on the word-choices students used to describe how they felt about a particular topic. I divided up the other questions about comfort-level into categories that best seemed to capture the spirit of the answers.

Whether or not students were participating in the IRB portion of the assignment by completing the surveys, all of my Freshman Comp students since 2013 have had the option to participate in the extra credit portion of the bringing news to class assignment. The extra credit portion works in the following way: at the beginning of most class periods during the semester, I ask the students if they have any news stories that they are interested in sharing. The rules, as listed on the assignment sheet, are pretty simple:

1. Only five stories per day. (At the end of it all, this is still a Comp class, not a current events class.)
2. Students may share one story for credit per week.
3. Students must know enough about the story to tell the class about it. They cannot just read a headline and then sit back to see if anyone else will talk about the story.
4. Students should be polite and thoughtful in how they present their information, especially when discussing political stories.
5. Sports scores usually do not count, unless the game is in some way meaningful outside of just being a “great game”.
6. Stories must be current (within the last week or so).
7. If someone else gets your story first, find another one or go another day.

And that is it. Nothing major; no papers to be written, no presentations to be given. Just talking about the day's news.

For my data, I looked at the final number of students enrolled in each section in order to determine the possible number of students who could have participated in giving extra credit. I removed a student from participation in the extra credit portion of the study if the student did not complete the semester. However, because the surveys were anonymous, I was not able to remove the data from any students who had dropped. To that end, the number of students who could possibly have participated in the beginning survey is always higher than the number of students who could have participated in the ending survey.

RESULTS

I chose to run the anonymous surveys for four semesters in order to gather a range of responses. While I began each semester with 20 students, for a variety of reasons, I did not end any semester with my rosters intact. This has been a normal experience at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). I do not think that this study is impacted negatively by the dropout rates since there were usually only one or two students who dropped each class.

Classroom participation rates

Separate from, but related to, the survey was the data about how many students participated in sharing news stories throughout the semester. (See Table 1 for total participation by semester.) Fall 2016 was the only semester where I taught more than one section of English Composition. That semester, I had one class where half of the class was enrolled together by gender and ethnicity as part of a cohort initiative; these students tended to relate to each other in a friendship-style way since they were also involved in other events together. The other half was open to any student who registered. The other course was fully open to any student who registered. In the fall 2016 cohort class, I ended with 14 students enrolled. Only the 14 who finished were counted in the participation of news stories. One student chose not to participate at all. During a semester, we meet approximately 44 times over 16 weeks, meaning that students have up to 16 chances to participate in giving a news story. The average number of days for participation for the 14 students who completed the course was 6.0. (See Table 2 for average days of participation by semester). In the fall 2016 non-cohort class, there were 20 students enrolled throughout the entire semester, although one student never came to class and one student disappeared partway through the semester. I removed the data for the two missing students. In this class, five students chose not to participate. The average number of days for participation for the 18 students who completed the course was 5.0.

In spring 2017, I again ended the semester with 18 students. Three students chose not to participate here. The average number of days of participation for those 18 students was 4.72.

In fall 2017, I again ended with 18 students enrolled, although one student disappeared. Four students chose not to participate. The average number of days for participation for those 17 students was 4.6.

In spring 2018, another group of students enrolled who were already familiar with each other. These students made up the majority of the class members. That semester ended with 18 students enrolled. Only one student chose not to participate. The average number of days for participation for those 18 students was 6.83.

Table 1: Total number of days that students participated in the news extra credit based on class group

Students in class	Fall 2016		Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
	Cohort	Non-cohort	Many repeating ¹	Randomly assigned ²	Friendship-group ³
1	5	0	4	10	14
2	9	1	0	6	12
3	3	4	1	3	2
4	2	11	0	2	1
5	12	8	3	0	12
6	10	0	7	6	7
7	11	4	7	0	1
8	0	7	6	0	7
9	1	0	14	11	6
10	9	12	0	2	8
11	6	13	4	1	0
12	3	12	10	10	12
13	5	12	8	5	2
14	7	3	4	6	15
15	-	2	0	0	2
16	-	0	13	5	10
17	-	0	1	11	6
18	-	8	3	-	6

1. Students in this group were mostly repeat students, taking me again for their second semester.

2. Students in this group were not part of a cohort and chose my class on their own.

3. Students in this group were mostly part of the same athletic team and were already familiar with each other.

Table 2: Average number of days that students participated in the news extra credit

	Fall 2016		Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
	Cohort	Non-cohort	Many repeating	Randomly assigned	Friendship-group
Average number of days of participation	6.0	5.0	4.72	4.6	6.83

In fall 2016, the cohort students participated anywhere from 0-12 times out of 16 possible times. In the non-cohort class, the participation was only marginally higher, at 0-13 days. In spring 2017, the range was 0-14 out of the 16 times. In fall 2017, the range was 0-11 days out of 16 possible times. And in spring 2018, the range was 0-15 out of 16 possible times. While the ranges of participation were close, as Table 3 shows, the percentages of students who chose not to participate were significantly different. Only 7% of the cohort class chose not to participate in fall 2016, almost 28% of the non-cohort class did not participate in fall 2016, just over 22% of the class did not participate in spring 2017, close to 17% of the class did not participate in fall 2017, and only 5.5% of the class did not participate in spring 2018.

Table 3: Range of days of participation and percentage of class who participated

	Fall 2016		Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
	Cohort	Non-cohort	Many repeating	Randomly assigned	Friendship-group
Range of days of participation	0-12	0-13	0-14	0-11	0-15
Percent of class participation	92.9%	72.2%	77.8%	83.3%	94.5%

Survey results

This section looks at the responses to the anonymous surveys from the beginning and end of the semester. (As a note, in spring 2017, the 11 students who had taken my class in the previous semester were not eligible to take the survey again. However, they were eligible to participate in sharing news.) Table 4 shows the overall participation rates in those surveys.

Table 4: Survey numbers

	Fall 2016*	Spring 2017±	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
Beginning survey	13	0	8	16
End survey	17	0	7	19

* Included data from two classes-worth of students, so I had 40 students total here. This was the only semester where I taught two Composition classes at the same time.

± Of the nine eligible students, none chose to respond to the survey this semester.

Overall Trends

The remainder of the discussion about data for the surveys is not broken down by semester. Instead, those results are presented in aggregate for all four semesters as a way to look at overall trends.

Beginning of the Semester Survey Responses

Table 5 and Table 6 show information from the survey at the beginning of the semester, looking at the tone of the responses to both the closed- and open-ended questions (N=37). Most of the students were comfortable or neutral on the topic of participating in discussions based on their answers to Q6-8. The majority of the students who responded were generally comfortable speaking around their friends or family, even if they were not comfortable speaking in class.

Table 5: Tone of responses to beginning of semester surveys

Question	Beginning		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations among friends and family?	0	3	34
Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations with people that you do not know well or at all?	9	16	12
Do you generally feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions?	9	16	12

While a few of the students indicated that they were shy, many of them participated once the semester got moving and they felt more comfortable speaking (see Table 6). Most students were more comfortable “chiming in” after someone else started a discussion, and eight students were comfortable taking the lead in conversations in class.

Table 6: How comfortable students are in taking the lead in a conversation at the beginning of the semester

Question	Beginning				
	Lead	Chime in	Both	Not comfortable	N/A
If you answered “yes” to Question 8, are you comfortable taking the lead, or do you prefer to chime in with supporting discussion?	6	23	2	2	6

End of the Semester Survey Responses

Table 7 and Table 8 look at how students responded to the closed- and open-ended questions at the end of the semester. (N=43, although not all students responded to each question and some students gave answers that could be coded into multiple responses.) Of the 43 students who responded to the end survey, 33 of them participated in giving news at least once, nine chose to complete the survey even though they had not participated in giving news (one student did not answer), and one student was unaware that we were sharing news every day. All but three students felt that sharing the news at the beginning of class had a positive effect on their discussion behavior over the semester (see Table 7).

Table 7: Tone of responses to end of semester survey

Question	End		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Did you participate in the News extra credit this semester? Why or why not?	10	0	33
Did the news portion of the class make you more comfortable, less comfortable, or something else with speaking in class? Please explain.	1	2	40

Question 5 asked students to explain why they had or had not participated in giving news for extra credit. The 33 students who chose to participate did so for the reasons of wanting to share news, gaining extra credit, or being interested in the world around them. The 10 students who did not participate noted that they were shy or felt that their news was not good enough or interesting enough to bring to the class.

Question 6 asked students how regularly they participated. Of the 32 respondents, 17 said that they participated every week or two and 13 said that they participated randomly throughout the semester. Two students indicated that they did not participate at all.

Question 7 focused on how to get students to participate more often with bringing in their own news. I received 28 responses to this question. The most common response, with 10 responses, was “coming prepared”, followed by “overcoming shyness” with five responses. Two students noted that having assigned times would have helped them to remember. (See Table 8 for a complete list of responses.)

Table 8: Categories of responses for getting students to participate more often

Category	Number of students
coming prepared	10
not being shy	5
N/A	5
being assigned days to share	2
not enough spots	2
me reminding them	1
too tired	1
too lazy	1
not many important stories	1

Question 8 asked students about what they had gained from discussing the news as well as how sharing news impacted the classroom environment. The responses are coded into two major categories of “personal to them” and “more general about the class.” Because students were able to give more than one response, the N here is higher than for other questions (see Table 9). While many of the students responded with ways they personally gained something from sharing news, some students focused more on what the whole class gained from sharing news. Several students discussed how their classroom relationships improved in some way through discussing the news. One student indicated that through discussing the news, “We all really became friends. We talked more.” Another student indicated that they wished that all of their classes would start this way so that they could get to know their peers better.

Table 9: Responses to question 8, “What did you gain from the news presentations?”

Personal					Whole class	
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Made me look forward to class</i>	<i>Interest in the news</i>	<i>Made me feel awkward</i>	<i>Better connection to classmates</i>	<i>Encouraged critical thinking</i>
24	5	3	1	1	27	1

DISCUSSION

What started as an experiment to get students involved in the world outside of campus, morphed into a way to get students more actively involved in the classroom. I had hoped to have more students participate in the surveys, but setting it as either extra credit or nothing probably hindered the response rate some. In future studies, I will set the assignment to require either taking a survey or writing a paper, helping to ensure higher participation rates. I remain interested to know if participation-willingness levels increased with the second semester as students were feeling more comfortable with their place in school and perhaps with some of the other students in class.

Considerations Regarding Enrollment

Normally, students in the fall sections randomly assign themselves to my classes. Students in the spring sections tend to either be repeat students from my fall sections or tend to be groups of athletes who probably know each other. However, I only had two semesters that held to this: one section in fall 2016 and the section in fall 2017. The other semesters all had enrollments that were in some way different from the norm.

In fall 2016, half of the students in one of the sections were assigned to my class as part of a cohort initiative of black men. Spring 2018 was also unusual in that I had three men from the previous semester recruit seven of their teammates to come to my class. (See Table 4 for a comparison of student participation across semesters.) It is fascinating, though perhaps not unexpected, to note that the spring 2018 class had the highest participation rate in the surveys. This could be due both to the students being in their second semester, possibly increasing their comfort level with being surveyed, and having a friendship group with a high comfort level of talking to each other. Unfortunately, I do not have an answer for that, but it could be a worthwhile topic for further research. Overall, given the natures of the cohort and the friendship groups (10 men who took many classes together that semester and 10 men who took my class together, respectively), I am not surprised to see the participation rates in those two sections were higher.

Participation in the Surveys and the Extra Credit

For the most part, students seemed willing to fill out both surveys, even if they were not always eligible, as with three of the students in the spring 2018 section. However, spring 2017 was unusual because, of the nine new students in my class, none of them chose to participate in the surveys, despite multiple reminders. (The students who had taken my class the previous semester were not eligible to take the survey again because they already had an idea of the research questions.) I had not expected to see a 0% participation rate on the surveys from the eligible students and I am not sure why none of them chose to participate in either of the surveys. They were still willing to participate in the extra credit, somewhat, but they had the second lowest participation rate of the four semesters studied. I was surprised to see such a low average here, though, since 11 of the students were repeats and were already familiar with how the class was run.

I believe the higher response rate to the survey at the end of the fall 2016 semester as compared to the survey at the beginning of that semester was because by that point, the students were more comfortable with me and their classmates, and they might have been more aware of how a few points of extra credit could sway their grade. Looking at the cohort class, only one student chose not to participate in giving a news story, which seemed surprisingly low to me. I believe that probably has something to do with being in a cohort group who spent a lot of time together; they were quite comfortable with each other as a whole, which helped to spur the desire to share news. With the non-cohort class, five students chose not to participate, which is more on par with what I would expect from a group of first-semester freshmen who do not know each other. They have fewer external forces compelling them to talk in class.

Participation in the extra credit was at its highest level in spring 2018, both with number of average days of participation (6.83) and percentage of the class who participated (94.5%). I speculate that the high number of students participating may have been due to 10 of the students already knowing each other; perhaps there was some peer pressure for these students to perform. Also, the dynamic of the friendship group may have influenced others in the class to feel more comfortable with talking.

The lowest number of average days of participation in the extra credit at 4.6 days out of 16 occurred during fall 2017. I believe that is because in this class, a few students spoke a lot, perhaps dominating the discussions.

Grunspan et al. (2016) completed a study looking at academic performance based on gender in biology classrooms. They note that other authors have found that “a student whose abilities are endorsed by an influential person may experience increased performance and confidence” (p. 1). I am not convinced that my students necessarily thought of each other as “influential people.” However, receiving positive feedback (in the form of people seeming interested in their stories, adding on to their stories, or talking more to them later) from peers that they trusted or liked could have been a factor in the cohort group’s and the friendship group’s willingness to participate in the news portion of the class, as well as in the overall classroom discussions.

The results of the overall study are somewhat skewed through the inclusion of the cohort and friend groups. The overall willingness of both groups to talk in class was likely impacted by their time together outside

of class as much as by their time in class sharing news. The cohort and friendship groups were generally more talkative in all aspects of the classes as compared to what I normally observe. The results from the fall 2016 and fall 2017 non-cohort groups are closer to what I would typically expect to find (which broadly show that many students will warm up to each other more quickly in a discussion-style classroom if they have the opportunity to interact with each other in low-stakes ways). Those students were all randomly assigned to my sections and seemed to be unfamiliar to each other at the beginning of the semester. Both sections had similar ranges of participation (0-13 and 0-11, respectively) and similar average days of participation (5.0 days and 4.6 days, respectively). The willingness of the non-cohort groups to talk in regular classroom discussions was also closer to what I would typically expect. About half of the class actively spoke, while the other half of the class listened or sometimes made comments.

I found it surprising that while most of the students had smart phones in class, had social media accounts of some kind, and we were in a computer classroom, few students regularly came with a news story to share. (Yes, it was an extra credit assignment, but I was still surprised because it can become a high-value extra credit opportunity for students who participate most weeks or every week.) I also found that most of my students do not follow any news sites through Facebook, Twitter, or other social media and most of their friends are not sharing news stories that way either. When I asked about current political happenings throughout the semester, I was often met with a sea of blank stares.

Beginning of the Semester Survey Discussion

While the majority of respondents indicated at the beginning of class that they were more comfortable talking with family/friends than people they did not know (Q6-8), a majority of students also participated in the news at some point in the semester. Even though a majority of students also indicated they preferred to “chime in” rather than take the lead on discussions (Q9), students seemed to quickly warm up to participating as the lead speaker on news topics.

One unexpected result pertains to Q7 and Q8 (see Table 5), relating to questions about their comfort level with speaking to strangers and speaking in a classroom, having the exact same numbers of responses in each category. While the numbers each semester varied, the overall totals were the same. This makes me wonder if a larger sample were asked just these two questions, would this be a standard distribution of answer? Further research could examine how to get students to be more comfortable participating in classroom discussions.

Looking back at Table 6, only six of the students who responded were comfortable taking the lead. I am a bit surprised that the classroom discussion went as well as it did given the low number. However, since I had about 34 students who did not respond at all to the beginning survey (discounting the nine who were ineligible in spring 2017), there could have been more students who were comfortable taking the lead; I just did not hear from them in the surveys.

End of the Semester Survey Discussion

It was informative to look at the end of the semester survey results to see how students’ attitudes about participating in class discussions had shifted. I was surprised that the idea of “my news not being good enough” was mentioned more than once for why they did not share their ideas (in response to Q5). Currently, I am working on ways to encourage more students to feel comfortable sharing. To model expectations, I share my own news stories after the students have shared theirs as a way. While many of my stories are serious issues from that morning’s local/national news, some are a bit more lighthearted. I try to share both types of stories to help students see there is value in all stories (as long as we avoid celebrity gossip wrap-up).

Question 7 focused on getting students to participate more often with bringing in their own news

stories. The suggestion of assigning days for participation was mentioned, however, I am not sure about that route, as that takes the spontaneity and opportunity for extra credit out of the assignment. It also makes giving news a requirement rather than a low-key volunteer way to start the class.

With regard to Q8, which asked students about what they had gained from discussing the news, as well as how sharing news impacted the classroom environment, I was pleased to see many students felt they gained both knowledge and a better connection with their classmates through sharing the news. I found many of the responses insightful and often thoughtful, perhaps showing, as well, that students had grown more comfortable with me as they were also growing comfortable with each other over the course of the semester. For example, one student gave this answer to Question 5 of the end-of-semester survey:

I have told numerous people about the news we share every day and I've really enjoyed doing it I think that I would have done it even if it wasn't for bonus points because I got a lot out of it and I feel so much more engaged and informed on whats [sic] going on around me. I haven't had any other professors do this exercise but I think they should because it allows the student to be informed on the news, gives the classroom and [sic] more relaxed and comfortable feel, and encourages for a more engaged and active classroom conversation for the rest of the class period.

In response to Q9, that 40 out of 43 students felt more comfortable with the class after participating in the news in some way, overall, suggests starting class with news is a well-received way of helping students to engage more with one another over the course of the semester. These findings seem to support what Czekanski and Wolf (2013) found in their study on encouraging students to participate in classroom discussions. Once students feel comfortable "just chatting" with each other, they will also become more comfortable with really talking to each other. The one student who did not respond positively, indicated that they felt awkward and uncomfortable, preferring to keep to themselves rather than speak or participate in class.

I was not bothered by the number of students who indicated their participation for extra credit. While students might have started sharing news just for credit, many of those students still found value in the opportunity to participate in classroom discussions or in being more aware of current news stories.

CONCLUSION

Following the news was a new concept to many of the students, suggesting that this exercise is useful for them, not just to get them more engaged in classroom learning, but also to get them more engaged in their world. Overall, the results of this study showed what I had hoped to find: students who engage in low-stakes discussions over news tend to be more comfortable discussing required topics within the classroom. At the end of the day, I am pleased to have found an assignment that works to help my students become more engaged in classroom discussions.

Table 10 Continued: Results from the beginning of the semester survey

APPENDIX A

Table 10 lists the survey questions from the beginning of the semester.

Table 10: Results from the beginning of the semester survey

Questions
1. Are you male or female?
2. What is your age?
3. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?
4. Did you come straight to college from high school?
5. What level of school are you currently in?
6. Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations among friends and family? Why or why not?
7. Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations with people that you do not know well or at all? Why or why not?
8. Do you generally feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions? Why or why not?
9. If you answered “yes” to Question 8, are you comfortable taking the lead, or do you prefer to chime in with supporting discussion?
10. If you answered “no” to Question 8, what are some of the reasons why you are not comfortable participating? What might help you to feel more comfortable?

APPENDIX B

Table 11 lists the survey questions from the end of the semester.

Table 11: Results from the end of the semester survey

Questions
1. Are you male or female?
2. What is your age?
3. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?
4. Did you come straight to college from high school?
5. Did you participate in the News extra credit this semester? Why or why not? (If you did not participate, please skip to question 8.)
6. If you did participate, was it all semester long, scattered throughout, or at specific times? Please describe your participation level.
7. If you participated sometimes or did not participate, what could have helped you to participate more often?
8. Either way, what did you gain from the news presentations? How do you think that starting classes with news affected the classroom dynamic? (Did people talk more or less after giving news?)
9. Did the news portion of the class make you more comfortable, less comfortable, or something else with speaking in class? Please explain.

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