A New Kind of “Space” for Quizzes
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Quizzes are standard in many college classrooms, and determining how to best use this learning format generates a variety of discussion and suggestions—if you regularly read the Teaching Professor you’ve seen any number published here. I, too, continue to search for ways to inspire the often dull quiz routine. In an effort to bring new strategies in the classroom and keep student engagement high, I have recently discovered a successful strategy that encourages a sense of community in class, offers students an opportunity to engage in collaborative learning, and motivates students to come to class prepared. Let me explain how it works.

First, the chalkboard or whiteboard in the classroom becomes what I call a “community space.” Two students are selected to use the space. They have three minutes at the beginning of class, before the quiz, to write anything from the materials assigned for that day on the board. I use a random process to select the students who write on the board. I allow students to decline the offer to participate, but I do not select alternates if one, or both students, decide not to write on that day.

Whatever information is put up on the board, the rest of the class may use on the quiz. The students who write on the board are allowed to talk with one another; often, they begin by quickly planning what they will place on the board and who will cover what information. The other students in the class may not talk, consult their notes or the book during the three minutes when their classmates are placing information in the community space. As the course progress, students start being able to anticipate the kind of information I will be asking for on the quiz and that’s what they write in the community space. Most pairs tend to use the last 15-30 seconds of time to check each other’s work and to add missing information.
When I first introduced this idea to the class, there were some reservations, especially about my being “fair” when selecting the students. Here’s what we decided I would do: I call on one student and ask that student to designate a number. Then I call on a second student and that student tells me “up” or “down.” Based on those responses, I go to my class roster and start with the name of the person who gave me the number and then I count up or down by that number. That’s the first student selected. From that student’s name I continuing to count up (or down) using the same number and that’s the second student.

Although students have the opportunity to decline to write, I have yet to have a student do so. Sometimes the information they provide is limited but very rarely is it inaccurate. I’ve found the expectation that they may have to share information in the community space motivates most students to closely read the assigned materials. They want to help their classmates perform well on the quizzes, and they don’t want to appear lazy or irresponsible to their peers. The three minutes allocated limits the amount of help fellow classmates receive. Consequently, students who do not prepare for class will not perform well on the quiz, even though they have access to this information. I’ve observed that using this approach encourages collaborative learning and creates a sense of community among the students. It also gets students coming to class prepared and I think it makes the quizzes a more positive and useful learning experience.