

ePistle

Working for Excellence the Teacher Resource Initiative(WE-TRI)

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November 2018

Editor's Comments

Jim Dunphy



Greetings and welcome to the 5th edition of the ePistle.

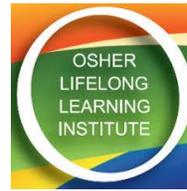
In this edition, we will look at the issue of Questions in class. Alice Clark has reported that at a Town Hall meeting in Reston, some students raised concerns with classroom management, particularly with instructors allowing other students to “hijack” the class. This ePistle provides some suggestions as to what to do under these circumstances – and we hope to hear other suggestions. Another issue is making sure that students understand both the question and the answer, so again some suggestions in that regard

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Questions 1



One of the great things about OLLI is the expertise and experiences of the student body. When I did a class on the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, it turned out one of the students had a brother who sailed on the ship the year before the wreck and knew most of the crewmen who died. In another class on worst baseball promotions, centering on Disco Demolition Night in Chicago and ten cent beer night in Cleveland, one of the students had actually attended one of them.

However, one of the worst things about OLLI is the expertise and experiences of the student body. In a recent Town Hall meeting, students expressed concerns with other students hijacking the class with questions. I would like to discuss some ways to deal with this situation, and hope many of you can respond with your own ideas on how you handle this tricky spot.

First, it goes without saying that whatever solution you use, the cure cannot be worse than the disease. That is, if in cutting off a persistent questioner, you do it in such a way that discourages others from participating, that is definitely not a good thing. So consider not only what you say, but the tone in which you say it.

Second, most classes do not have an independent liaison – in many cases, the instructor has taken on those duties. So while in the past the liaison could have been a third party enforcer, not likely this is the case today.

As always, we have a Calendar of Events, which among other things notes that the Course Proposals for the summer term are due on a chilly February 8. Why are they needed more than 4 months in advance? Well, with an assist from the timeline Jennifer and Alice have provided, an answer to that question. And speaking about Course Proposals, some thoughts on how and why these Course Proposals have to be succinct.

In each of these articles, we are hoping for thoughts from other instructors on these issues along with any other thoughts you may have that will be of assistance to other instructors. Unfortunately, this issue was put together without such input, and I certainly think a variety of outlooks makes for a more interesting newsletter.

Until the December issue!

Alice and Jen's Corner

Greetings from Alice and Jen's Corner,

As you begin to plan for the summer term (yes, that's right, summer!), we want to draw your attention to two important changes:

1. In order to end the summer session before the beginning of August, summer term will be **five weeks** this year. The term dates will include June 24 – July 26. If you are planning a full term course, please remember to only plan for five sessions.
2. To allow for more flexibility with scheduling, we have made further revisions to the course proposal form (<https://olli.gmu.edu/olli-course-proposal-form/>). The form now asks you to check all of the times that you are available to teach (instead of selecting three). If you have no restrictions, you need not check anything, simply leave a note in the *Any scheduling conflicts?* box that says "No conflicts." Additionally, if you plan to be away, please specify the dates that you are not available in the *Any scheduling conflicts?* box.

One last reminder: Course proposals for the summer 2019 term are due February 8. **Please use the course proposal form for your submission**, as this is the best way to secure your preferred time and to make sure that your

proposal is not lost in the shuffle!

As always, we appreciate all of your efforts to bring outstanding programming to OLLI!

Alice and Jen

Questions #2

We have already discussed how to handle questions from students in such a way to continue the class going (and we look forward to your input on this issue). Now I would like to turn to a particular pet peeve of mine as a student, and make sure the OLLI instructor cadre is not filling it.

As an old artilleryman, my hearing is not what it should be. So on more than one occasion, I have heard the question as "mumble, mumble, mumble," followed by the instructor replying "Yes."

What? What was the question being asked? Extremely frustrating!

So how do we get around that? One way that instructors use is to pass a microphone to the questioner and ask them to use it. I have found this to be not effective. First, since many of us instructors serve as our own liaison, we don't have a second person to be able to do this, so the responsibility of getting and retrieving the mike falls to us. Second, the whole process of finding the person, passing them in the mike (particularly in classrooms like TA1 with long rows) and getting it back takes time – time that comes out of the 85 minutes for class.

I prefer some method of using the question in the answer. So if in my Yogi Berra class, someone asked "Did Yogi land at Normandy on DDay?" I see two ways of responding. (continued on Page 3)

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

SPECIAL EVENT

PLACE OLLI CAMPUSES

TIME JANUARY 22

Winter semester starts

SPECIAL EVENT

PLACE OLLI

TIME FEBRUARY 8

Summer 2019 Course Proposals Due

SPECIAL EVENT

PLACE RESTON

TIME MARCH 19

Spring Teacher Welcome

SPECIAL EVENT

PLACE OLLI

TIME APRIL 12

FALL 2019 COURSE PROPOSALS DUE

Questions #2 (cont)

The first is to repeat the question – say “The question was, did Yogi land at Normandy on DDay?” Then give the answer – “No, he was in a rocket boat off shore supporting the operation. If this sounds too awkward, consider incorporating the question in the answer – “No, Yogi did not land at Normandy on DDay. He was actually in a rocket boat off shore supporting the landings.”

Making sure that the students understand both the question and the answer is a great way of improving dialogue in your classes. As always, we would appreciate any thoughts you have on this issue.

So what should you do when a student, perhaps to show off his or her expertise on the subject you are teaching, begins a long and meandering presentation where you wait in vain for a question mark? Here are a couple of suggestions I have used, and as always, I hope you will send in your suggestions to improve the dialogue.

First, I have a mental clock going on, and if the person does not reach the question mark part of the question in a minute, I try to intervene. (If that sounds harsh, try an experiment – set a timer for a minute, and see how long in a vacuum that takes). Some of the ways you can do this is to say something along the lines of “Thank you – that really enriches the class. Was there something specific you wanted to ask about (whatever I was discussing at the time).

Another method I have employed I call “invent a question.” As I listen to a person speaking, I latch on to something that might be construed as a question and answer that. If the person continues, then I say as in the song Eastbound and Down, “we’ve got a long way to go, and a short time to get there.”

If the person persists, I would then say I will be available after class and would love to discuss this further with them. I might also encourage them to consider, based on their expertise, to teach an OLLI class on that subject – I know I would sign up for it (whether I would or not is an entirely different subject!)

This brings us to another issue – when questions are asked. I personally prefer to take questions during the class, since I am better able to control the time and the speed up or slow down as needed. However, I am also aware that many folks prefer the method of holding questions to the end. Only two pieces of advice – one, make sure you mention which method at the beginning, and two, stick to it – nothing would frustrate a student more than holding her question to the end only for you to answer another student’s question during the class itself.

As mentioned, the issue of questions and time was a concern raised in a Town Hall meeting, which is the kind of feedback we as instructors should value. Look forward to your ideas and experiences on this issue.

Catalogue thoughts

The good news for OLLI members is the number of classes provided each term is exploding. The bad news for OLLI members is that the number of classes provided each term is exploding.

Huh? Well, one of the main expenses for OLLI is providing a catalogue to members four times a year. Many of you are in organizations that have publications, and you know how they are priced. Generally, there is a fixed cost for a certain number of pages. If the publication exceeds that number, then the cost is on a page by page basis and the dollar amount shoots skyward.

If you have recently submitted a course proposal, there is a new form. In course description, you are asked to keep this under 1,000 characters, and for the bio, under 300 characters. Another way of looking at it is keep the description under 150 words and the bio under 50.

It is a truism that it is more difficult to write 150 words than it is to write 1,000. But by keeping the course descriptions and bios short, the catalogue will be leaner and therefore cheaper. This requires ruthless editing before you submit the description and bio.

THOUGHTS

IF THIS ePISTLE SEEMS BLAND, IT IS BECAUSE ALL HAS BEEN WRITTEN BY YOUR TRUSTY EDITOR

I LOOK FORWARD TO DRAW FROM THE WIDEST POSSIBLE ARRAY OF EXPERIENCES TO PROVIDE INSTRUCTORS WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF SUGGESTIONS. HOW DO YOU HANDLE QUESTIONS FROM STUDENTS? WHAT ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS TO TIGHTEN LANGUAGE IN COURSE DESCRIPTIONS?

SO THINK ABOUT ONE OF YOUR MOST SUCCESSFUL TECHNIQUES IN THESE AREAS, OR ANYTHING ELSE YOU THINK WILL BE HELPFUL TO INSTRUCTORS SEND ALL TO THE EDITOR AT DUNPHYJJ@AOL.COM AND WE WILL MAKE SURE TO SHARE IT WITH OTHER INSTRUCTORS.

IN THE WORDS OF THE LATE, LAMENTED STAN LEE, EXCELSIOR!

Closing Thoughts

We have received a number of questions with regard to the timetable for getting classes ready. Alice Clark, from OLLI staff, was kind enough to share with me the calendar OLLI staff uses to prepare for a semester.

Using the **Summer 2019** semester as an example, as noted in this ePistle, course proposals are due on **February 8**. By **February 15**, OLLI staff has scheduled classes – a difficult jigsaw puzzle due to teacher unavailability (I'm talking about you, ePistle editor!) and other factors. With final course descriptions due on **March 15**, a mockup of the catalogue is prepared for editor review by **March 21**.

The catalogue goes through a number of review processes before it is ready to be sent to the printer on **April 9**, and after final publication, mailed out to students. Registration begins on **May 21** and ends on **May 29**. A lottery is run on **June 6**, where if there are classes that are oversubscribed, decisions will be made who is in the class and who is on the waiting list (another article, perhaps, but shows how important prioritizing your classes are). Shortly after the lottery, the class lists will be finalized and available on the instructor portion of the website for you to contact your students. Finally, on **June 24**, the term begins.

So if you are wondering why course proposals are due more than 4 months prior to the start of class, now you know.

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