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THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

A MODEL FOR PULLING WISDOM FROM GROUP DISCUSSION

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Students enter their first year of college with variety of experiences, needs, and challenges. First-year seminars (FYS) give these students the opportunity to learn from one another while reflecting on course content and their experiences. Classroom discussions represent one of the most engaging and effective aspects of an FYS. Kuh et al. (2005) noted that students learn more from class discussion than from simply listening to a lecture:

> Teaching and learning do not go hand in hand in that teaching does not necessarily lead to learning. Indeed, over the past two decades a discernible shift from a focus on teaching to an emphasis on student learning has taken place in many corners. (p. 71)

Facilitating meaningful discussion requires the transition from information distribution to pulling wisdom from the group.

There are three main problems with information distribution as a teaching method in an FYS, particularly if the course focuses on individual growth and development. First, it assumes there is only one right answer: Students have different lived experiences, and solutions to problems are not one-size-fits-all. Second, students may tune out if they regard the information as redundant, common sense, or something they already know. Third, it incorrectly assumes instructors have a full enough understanding of students' lives to know what solutions will work for them.

In this issue of *The Toolbox*, we share one discussion model that helps instructors pull wisdom from the group (see Figure 1). This model leads students to identify the problem, brainstorm solutions, analyze options, commit to a solution, and receive a follow-up from their instructor. It was inspired by various helping skills and problem-solving models. Problem-solving models have been used in a variety of fields ranging from experimental psychology to counseling to education and aim to help participants take ownership of their challenges and solutions (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). In a classroom setting, problem-solving models also harness the power of peers learning from one another.

> "Let's stop discussing about who a wise person is and start learning to become wise persons. Begin acquiring knowledge at the very moment you discover that there is something called "knowledge!"
>
> **— Israelmore Ayivor, Author (*The Great Hand Book of Quotes*)**

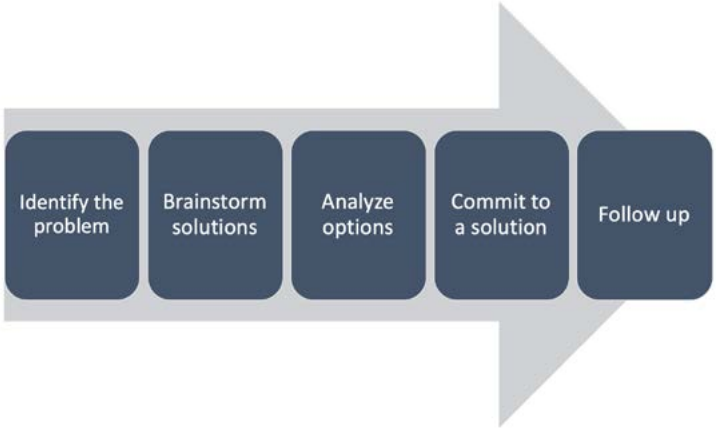

Figure 1. Problem-solving model

The components of this model are as follows:

- **Identify the problem:** Start by identifying a problem. Let's say it becomes apparent to an instructor that their students are struggling with time management (e.g., they are spending too much time watching Netflix). At this point, they could take a moment to ask what the students are watching and to discuss it. This is also an opportunity for the instructor to create connection points to help the students discover what they have in common. Now the question becomes how to get them to turn off Netflix and start studying.
- **Brainstorm solutions:** There is not one answer we can or should give them. It would be easy to start giving students advice about how to structure their time, but it is more effective to coach them to come up with their own solutions. As will be discussed later, giving advice can be harmful and lead to a loss of trust. They may also be less likely to act on advice when it is given to them versus coming up with the solution on their own. The more solutions the class can think of the better. Brainstorming can be challenging, so instructors should intentionally affirm students' suggestions. One strategy is to get students into groups of three to four and have them come up with the top three solutions for turning Netflix off. If ideas are missing, the instructor can offer them up for consideration during this phase.
- **Analyze options:** At this point, students should think through the feasibility of the options. What will work? What won't work? In what situation will a solution work for some but not for others? This is where the instructor has the chance to share their own wisdom and life experiences. If there are solutions that are not listed already, the instructor can add them. They also should consider asking students good questions that help them think more critically about the feasibility of the options.
- **Commit:** In this step, the instructor asks students to commit to one of the solutions that have been discussed by writing it on an index card, sending the instructor a text or an e-mail, or posting it in the GroupMe or discussion board if a public declaration is appropriate.

UPCOMING EVENTS

ONLINE COURSES

Creating a Comprehensive, Connected, and Coordinated First-Year Experience

Instructor: *Jennifer Keup*
Sept. 28-Oct. 23, 2020
Registration Deadline: Sept. 18, 2020

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Instructor: *Amy Baldwin*
Nov. 9-Dec. 4, 2020
Registration Deadline: Nov. 3, 2020

CONFERENCES

27th National Conference on Students in Transition

Virtual Conference
Oct. 13-16, 2020
Early Registration Deadline: Sept. 10, 2020

40th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience

Seattle, Washington
Feb. 13-16, 2021
Proposal Window: Oct. 14-28, 2020

» **Follow up:** In the final step, students are encouraged to reflect on the comitment. An appropriate amount of time later, the instructor should follow up with students to see how their strategy is working for them. If the strategy was not successful, they can send students a list of the other options discussed and have them try something else.

This method represents a customized approach to helping each student solve their problems and promote meaningful discussion in class. An additional benefit is students who are not currently experiencing the identified problem get to be experts for the day, rather than sitting in class and being told what to do. This model can be used in a class setting but is also effective in one-on-one meetings. It is especially useful in a situation where students are expressing a problem in a class that the instructor did not anticipate discussing at that moment.

To help students problem solve, the role of faculty must shift from that of an instructor to a coach and a mentor. The goal is to not give advice but to guide students through problem solving by honoring the wisdom that they bring to the group. Giving advice is not only detrimental to learning but can also lead to a loss of trust and credibility. For instance, imagine a discussion with instructors focusing on how to balance teaching with other commitments like a job or family. In a poorly designed discussion, the "expert" teacher would offer wisdom about how to overcome this challenge. Perhaps the suggestion was to arrive to work an hour early to maximize productive hours. This may work for some, but working parents who have to get kids ready for school might balk at the idea and feel the "expert" teacher does not understand their lives or situations. When instructors offer advice that makes people feel like their lived experiences are misunderstood, they risk losing credibility and the students' trust. Also, giving advice that students already know may lead them to think the discussion is a waste of time.

There is not one right answer to any of the challenges that we or our students face. This discussion model prioritizes the wisdom and lived experiences of students over the instructor's need to give advice, and it serves as an effective way for each student to walk away from class feeling valued and with new strategies to navigate their challenges.

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Submission Guidelines for *The Toolbox*

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/

Audience: *Toolbox* readers include full-time and adjunct faculty; academic advisors; and administrators focused on faculty development, teaching and learning, academic success, and the first college year.

Style: Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to standard set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.).

Length: Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

Submit your article online by using our submission form.

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About *The Toolbox*

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