Engaging Students in the Basic Course By Asking Big Questions

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Research Article

Engaging Students in the Basic Course By Asking Big Questions

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Abstract

This paper advocates for the inclusion of big questions into the basic course curriculum. It begins by exploring the nature of big questions as those that engage pressing and perennial civic and global issues, and details their effectiveness in encouraging students and faculty to think about interpersonal responsibility and social space as dynamically interfacing and mutually reflexive, thus challenging us to negotiate the civic call of engaging in democratic processes. The basic course, whether public speaking or hybrid, offers a crucial opportunity for big questions to emerge because it brings people together to critically question and produce messages about the social and civic contexts in which we all engage as students, faculty, employees, family, and citizens. Thus, the article includes examples from several basic course instructors and administrators of how big questions can be incorporated into the curriculum to enhance the learning outcomes of students, while at the same time situating the basic course as more deeply embedded into the stated mission and requirements of our departments, colleges, and general education programs.

Keywords: big questions, the basic course, class discussions, civic engagement, general education
Across campuses, advocates of the basic course have many of the same concerns: Our programs could get cut, jobs may disappear, administrators will reduce sections offered and increase class size, and our institutions and general education programs may lose sight of the importance of communication skills at the expense of emphasizing STEM disciplines and knowledges (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). However, reviewing the literature on the basic course, albeit by those invested in it, the mission stands strong that the basic course: (a) is the “front porch” of the discipline (Beebe, 2013), (b) is embedded into general education curricula, and (c) imparts skills to students that are in high demand across a wide variety of industries, thus making such courses essential to all students, irrespective of their disciplines or majors (Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Morreale, Valenzano, & Bauer, 2017; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017). Instead of fearing the potential irrelevance of the basic course to our disciplines or institutions, we should prove its relevance by focusing on how to make the basic course most relevant to the lived experiences and intellectual development of our students. In this way, students and administrators will appreciate the skills and knowledge acquired in the basic course as requisite to success in all realms of life, from the personal to the professional. Hence, part of the value of the basic course may be instrumental, but its significance is far greater than the mere development of communication skills; its true worth lies in producing a breeding ground for exercising critical thinking skills and developing the kind of future leaders our institutions are poised to graduate.

By engaging students as critical, systemic thinkers and facilitating classroom experiences focused on developing fully engaged learners, basic course instructors are well-positioned to impart the terminal value of the basic course (Bain, 2004). As we will show, the basic course is proving ground for fresh thinking, experimental activities, value exploration, clashing ideologies, and open conversation, all of which challenge students to take ownership of their intellectual development and exploration of personal values. In so doing, we are following and extending the work of researchers and instructors who have created and shared activities for enhancing experiential outcomes within foundational courses (Frederick, 2003; Marshall, 1970; Roehling, Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2010). As they have suggested, the basic course is a site for generating deep learning through varied communication practices that foster profound intellectual engagement by posing critical questions that are subject to philosophical and value-oriented conversations (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970; Morreale et al., 2017).
In furthering this line of thinking and research, we approach the basic course as a prime site for engaging students and argue that this engagement happens best by introducing *big questions* into the curriculum. Defined here as conversation prompts that are timely, relevant, and exploratory in nature, big questions push students to consider local, national, and global issues in new and often challenging and exciting ways. The most productive big questions are the ones that generate additional ones and that contribute to a larger, broader conversation, offering students the opportunity for a thoughtful sense of civic engagement with one’s campus, community, and beyond. In fact, organizations such as *Ask Big Questions* are already working on college and university campuses to engage students on a wide range of topics through informal group settings (Ask Big Questions, 2017). Valenzano, Wallace, and Morreale (2014) point out, however, that the basic course is best positioned to teach students “to speak to a group as well as speak as [members] of a group” (p. 359). The basic course gives students the structured space necessary to engage one another and to safely “agree to disagree” with their classmates (Dedmon, 1965, p. 123). Big questions encourage this effort while keeping conversations fresh and relevant to students, drawing from local conversations, current affairs, and contemporary political attitudes to debate issues of local and global significance.

To the extent that big questions draw on and from political attitudes and issues, big questions facilitate familiarity and engagement with democratic processes by encouraging students and faculty to think about the development of dialogue as collaborative. The basic course, whether public speaking or hybrid, offers a fruitful site for big questions because it brings people together in a uniquely safe and instructive discursive space. In this space, students can critically question and produce messages about the social and civic contexts in which we all interact as students, faculty, employees, family, and citizens. The exploratory environment of the basic course also supports development of democratic forms of deliberation that help students engage in the classroom and in other arenas of life. In the sections that follow, we elaborate on the value of the basic course and argue for the inclusion of big questions as a critical component of the curriculum. To that end, we offer several examples of how big questions can be incorporated into the curriculum, along with advice on proper planning and effective implementation of big-question discussions. The goal is to present big questions as enhancements to the learning outcomes for students, while simultaneously situating the basic course more deeply into the stated mission and requirements of general education programs and our majors.
The Value of the Basic Course

For decades, the basic course has undergone review of its value to general education at colleges and universities across the United States (Gibson et al., 1970; Morreale et al., 2017; Valenzano et al., 2014). More recently, Morreale, Myers, Backlund, and Simonds (2016) offered three reasons why the basic course should remain a significant contributor to the discipline’s profile as framed through its contributions to higher education, future employment, and civic engagement. First, educators in both K-12 and postsecondary institutions are implementing changes that embrace teaching communication skills and practices, oral, written, and electronic. Morreale et al. (2016) note that such changes actively encourage basic course faculty and administrators to be “proactively involved in their campus’ general education programs” (p. 352), and emphasize the contributions of the basic course to the overall intellectual climate on campus. Increasing institutional involvement from basic course instructors helps to refine and address the needs of institutions, departments, and students (Hess, 2012).

Second, the basic course plays a critical role in preparing graduates for careers across a wide variety of industries. Morreale et al. (2016) argue that the basic course responds to the expectations and needs of employers who view effective communication skills as necessary for success in “profit and nonprofit sectors, often in multinational organizations” (p. 352). Emphasizing communication skill development is at the heart of the basic course. To improve how the basic course is responding to the employment needs of “the global and technologically-mediated 21st century” (Morreale et al., 2016, p. 353); however, we need collaborative learning objectives that extend the tenets of the basic course outward across the university and beyond (Wallace, 2014). Introducing big questions into the basic course is one avenue through which this goal can be achieved.

In doing so, we also contribute to the third point Morreale et al. (2016) make, elaborating on the relevance of the basic course as a training ground for civic engagement. In fact, the role of communication practices garnered from the basic course helps to shape the democratic process, encouraging civic participation, and fostering a diverse worldview (Hooker & Simonds, 2015; Morreale et al., 2016). Therefore, the basic course is ripe for exploring serious issues through effective and appropriate use of communication and critical thinking skills. As Morreale et al. (2016) emphasize, “These are precisely the skills college graduates need in order to speak publicly and competently on behalf of important issues in society, and to
contribute significantly to the greater social good” (p. 353). Incorporating big questions into the basic course enhances and improves the basic course’s three-pronged mission as stated above: enhancing education, preparing for employment, and promoting civic engagement.

**The Purpose of Using Big Questions in the Basic Course**

Using big questions in the classroom is a way to increase class participation and thoughtful engagement from all students. A brief review of the literature on pedagogy or a quick perusal of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* will show that instructors are fraught with concern over how to get students to discuss content and engage one another intelligently. The struggle to get more than the typical five-to-eight students, no matter how small or large the class, to yield and share the conversation with their peers is a perennial concern of many instructors (Howard & Baird; 2000; Karp & Yoels, 1976). Educators struggle to find ways to get all of their students engaged and comfortable sharing their thoughts, but too often such issues shut quieter students out, limiting conversation to homogenous arguments and viewpoints. When students do speak, they too-readily fall into the classroom norm of offering solutions long before tackling the issue on its own. For example, “should” statements often shut down discussion and the contested thought processes that otherwise may open discussion for exploration, finding connections, and allowing for a deeper understanding of the social issues affecting their peers and the greater social world. Nevertheless, when class discussion is wanting in participation, instructors welcome any form of discourse, even if it is limited. Howard and Baird (2000), however, suggest instructors should “begin redefining our classrooms for our students and ourselves” (p. 719). That means opening a space for all participants in class discussions to share their thoughts, experiences, and reasoning.

In-class discussions are influenced by the mental schemas and frameworks, ideologies and biases, and prejudices and paradigms students bring to them. Yet, those very elements are what often prevent students from learning (Bain, 2004). Big questions are an effective tool for disrupting those elements and promoting classroom dialogue that is self-reflexive and impactful. Such breakthroughs are necessary for advanced, sustained engagement and moving beyond the surface issues to tackle strategic learning objectives. When all students actively participate in class discussions, they have the opportunity to witness an experience that is co-constructed and dialogic. Big questions do not have ready answers; they are an invitation to engage and explore, to think critically, to question more, and to
appreciate the complexity of viewpoints and controversial issues. They also help students understand that the learning process can and should be collaborative (Bain, 2004; Fredrick, 2008). In the following section we offer specific and diverse suggestions for how this approach to big questions can unfold in the basic course curriculum.

Learned Experiences Using Big Questions in the Classroom

Engaging Students in Discussions About Pressing, Global Issues

One of the tenets of this approach stipulates that the basic course presents students with important opportunities to address complex problems through a variety of perspectives. From informative and persuasive speeches students deliver, to debates and dialogues they engage, the basic course is a unique venue for introducing students to an interdisciplinary approach to learning about public controversies and pressing issues that concern our local and global communities. When we envision the basic course as a means to address pressing matters of local and global significance, then we position students at the intersection of disciplinary conversations and encourage them to think critically about the multiple approaches and knowledges required to solve complex problems.

During a pilot program at a large, public university in the Northeast, faculty and administrators set out to develop a series of Grand Challenge courses intended to encourage early career students to think big about matters of great significance in the world today, from global warming and environmental sustainability to space exploration and income tax reform. While the content and concepts embedded in these courses are significant, the innovative nature of the Grand Challenge program lies in the pairing of these classes with a section of the basic course. The guiding philosophy behind these course clusters is to encourage instructors in both courses to collaborate on curriculum design, syllabi, and assignments to complement and reinforce the cross-disciplinary nature of the overarching problems and questions they address.

For example, a Grand Challenge course on environmental sustainability raises big questions about the best ways to engage the public in an awareness campaign that will ultimately alter behaviors and practices that negatively affect our environment. What is a healthy environment? Are humans responsible for global warming? How can we convince people in our communities to recycle more often if they do not believe recycling is key to environmental sustainability? Or, to lower the heat in their
houses, so as to burn fewer fossil fuels? To answer these questions well, and to solve
the problems at hand, students learn they need to know more than just persuasive
strategies. They need to address the psychological and behavioral nature of the
problem, the scientific evidence being presented, and the epistemic obstacles to the
public’s incredulity to these findings, among many other perspectives that enter into
the equation. These, of course, are big questions that have no easy answer.

While the nature of these discussions and the knowledge they produce are
explored in the Grand Challenge course, the basic course affords students the
opportunity to write, speak, and debate about these questions, to take sides, to
counter evidence, to weigh priorities, and determine best practices. There is an
overarching conceptual structure to these course clusters, but each course offers
different types of assignments and produces different kinds of skills needed to
address the complexity of big questions and controversial issues.

Building Classroom Norms by Focusing on Community

In the previous example, students may seek out particular Grand Challenge
courses, but it is common to find that many students enrolled in the basic course are
required to take the class before they can move onto studies they may be more
interested in pursuing. The challenge for instructors, then, is to convince students of
the importance and relevance of the class to their everyday lives, diverse majors,
academic interests, and career trajectories. The first step in this process is building a
sense of community in the classroom, trust in their peers and instructor, and respect
for the content of the course. Building classroom community early in the semester
produces comfortable space for students to explore and share with each other—a
prerequisite for tackling big questions.

The basic course is a key venue for this sense of inclusion and connection to
occur, as students are challenged to connect task-driven exercises with discussions of
the larger, overarching questions that those activities generate. For example, a unique
assignment we call Gifts of Gratitude (GOGs) is a simple exercise that can enhance
cohesion among students and build community early in the semester. More
specifically, the GOGs activity requires students to spread positive messages by
writing thoughtful notes on the sidewalk around campus using washable chalk.
Students are then asked to take photos of the messages they write and bring them
back to class to share and discuss. Students are sent out in groups of four or five for
this activity and they will remain in those groups throughout the semester. This
activity not only gets students out of the classroom and working together, but it asks them to engage with the larger community of learners on campus, and has the potential to lead to a discussion of big questions as a reflective tool.

Pedagogically, this activity affords students opportunities to open up to one another and work as a team, which establishes a sense of comfort and community in the classroom that becomes crucial for tackling big questions later in the semester. The activity also generates a series of smaller questions (e.g., How did this exercise make you feel?) that can be parlayed into bigger questions (e.g., What is community?). The use of community-building activities as a tangible catalyst for big questions ties students to the discussion and offers the opportunity to immediately reflect on a task that points to a larger issue such as the nature of gratitude.

Using Current Events to Help Students Ask Big Questions

Some of the big questions that emerge from assignments like Gifts of Gratitude can transform into a focus on current events, which in turn provide ample subject material for speeches and debates and the opportunity for students to ask each other big questions about what matters to them. One exercise that engages students in this manner requires them to report to the class on a current event they locate in a daily news source and write up an analysis of the event. Students then share their analysis with the class and facilitate a short discussion about the event. To ensure the discussion is expansive and engaging to as many students as possible, the instructor looks over the analysis and discussion question before class, offering suggestions to the student on how it can best be structured. Often students pose questions that remain in the prescriptive (should statements) realm or preclude potential discussion with yes/no questions that fall flat and negate critical and exploratory thinking. Reviewing students’ questions before they pose them helps students write and ask questions that are open-ended and relatable to their classmates. When discussion goes well, the student feels a sense of accomplishment, for students certainly understand that effective class discussions can be hard to come by. They, too, dread classroom silence; it is therefore incumbent upon us to help them exercise their own agency to engage others and activate conversations about substantial and meaningful ideas and issues (Dedmon, 1965; Valenzano et al., 2014).
Big Questions in a Hybrid Course

Activities like these remind students and instructors how the basic course is a site where we can deal with issues of substance that impact our daily lives. This often occurs, however, in a space filled with strikingly different perspectives and histories (Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl, & McBride, 2013). Even in such an environment, rarely are all those diverse voices heard over the range of several strong opinions. Therefore, it is important to guide, encourage, and facilitate the discussion of difficult, complex questions (Hosek & Soliz, 2016; Sprague, 1992). This collective engagement can be more than a listed outcome of a particular course; it can be the process through which the course material (e.g., speaking, listening, writing, critical thinking, and debate) is actually explored. Thus, creating a space in the classroom that both allows for and encourages thoughtful interaction among students is a way to meet course requirements while at the same time deepening the scope of classroom discourse.

In a hybrid course at a large, public, Midwestern university, faculty have been experimenting with big, philosophical questions to stimulate thoughtful discussion. They use questions that are open-ended yet rooted in current social, cultural, and political affairs, and students are required to familiarize themselves with various news sites and stories before coming to class. As an example, for decades, institutions around the country have conversations about freedom of speech. Discussing the limits to freedom of speech or how laws can or should be used to protect it are all great avenues for discussion, but they are not big questions. Instead, the class can be asked, what is the nature of freedom? What does it mean to be free? Asking such broad questions is tricky because instructors must be ready to facilitate, direct, and even push back when necessary. As another example, students can be asked to define freedom, which can lead to empty stares and extended silence because to many students this question seems obvious: the U.S. was founded on the value of freedom; hence, freedom is something we all share in common, at least on the surface it may seem. And yet, with a bit of prodding, students can start to engage with the complexity of this question and the value systems it aims to explore. For instance, we can direct the discussion with prepositions: freedom to and freedom from. The conversation turns to freedom to marry the one you love, freedom to keep your property as you wish, freedom to speak, freedom from invasion of privacy, freedom from external harms, freedom from hate speech. Suddenly, freedom is not so easily hemmed in nor understood as something we all share or understand in the same way.
Such pedagogical prodding requires practice and skill. It is difficult to direct complex discussions that engage students meaningfully without creating tensions that could lead to psychological harm. Ostensibly, bringing forth the question about freedom seems harmless at first; however, discussions of freedom to can morph into issues such as the right to bear arms, and freedom from can move into matters of police brutality, both of which are important, but can pit some students against one another, creating tension in the classroom. Hence, instructors need to take special care as they design big-question discussions. Going into the classroom with lofty questions but unprepared to handle tense and charged exchanges can undermine the purpose of big-question discussions.

Training Teachers to Use Big Questions in the Classroom

Along with inculcating undergraduate students into the academic fold, the basic course can also be a site for instructor training. Weeklong orientations can introduce new teachers to the curriculum, course, and professional expectations, and impart effective pedagogical methods for handling big-question discussions. Such trainings do well to include sessions on running class discussions, and grounding that training in big questions can teach us all how to navigate difficult and controversial issues and perspectives. For instance, we may ask our teachers to reflect on what makes for a good teacher or a bad teacher. Notice how the question here is broad and open ended, allowing for participants to frame their own answers as they wish, by personal experience for example. Sharing their thoughts and experiences generates further discussion about pedagogy and classroom conduct. In trainings and in staff meetings, we can practice running effective discussions and brainstorm ways to engage all students without causing harm or unnecessary divisions. We can acknowledge the need for give and take, the flow of disparate ideas and thoughts. Together in our meetings we can ask, and then discuss, what should we do when a student speaks inappropriately? How do we prevent shaming for views outside of the class norm? How do we include everyone in the conversation and make them feel as though their ideas are important and respected?

Orientations and professional development workshops can help guide instructors in responding to all students with respect and care. They can be asked to listen, to teach others to listen, to foreground the need for dialogue, and to promote collaborative engagement. For instance, when a student is disruptive or disrespectful of others in the classroom, instructors can be trained to push back, gently, by taking
pause, letting silence assert its power. Or, other students can be asked to thoughtfully respond to the student indirectly, to the comment and not the student. If the expression demands discipline, we might apply it by asking the student to explain the comment and if necessary apologize to the class. If we need to ask the student to leave the classroom, the instructor can later contact the student for a follow-up meeting to clarify the problem. However, such disruptions are rare. Pushing back does not have to be punitive, it can be and should be challenging; a challenge to the status quo, to stereotyping, to rudeness. Although there is no right answer to big questions, the goal is to get students thinking about and articulating their thoughts in a collegial way, then challenging them to continue that process even when they leave the classroom. The collaboration during our discussions often leads to more questions students could then explore further in their writing and speaking assignments in this class and in others. For big questions to foster engagement, however, we do at times need to take risks, but we can do so thoughtfully and be prepared for the unexpected.

**Conclusion**

As we have shown, the basic course is a curriculum in which instructors have the privilege of helping students explore the world and engage their personal values and commitments on their path to becoming deeper thinkers and democratically informed, active learners (Bain, 2004). This paper offered one instructional tool for creating an environment in which those elements can be pursued in tandem: asking big questions. Engaging students with big questions is effective in facilitating classroom experiences that are community focused, value driven, and discussion oriented. Questions like, “Why bother?” or “What is freedom?” stimulate provocative deliberations and push conversations to places that are challenging; places where individuals may not naturally be inclined to go without sufficient prompting.

Higher education is a place for exploration. Thoughtful investigations of difficult questions should not be limited to upper-level courses or faculty, but rather should begin in introductory courses, the basic course being the prime site for such inquiry. If the process of learning how to challenge various stereotypes or ideologies begins in the basic course, universities will produce thoughtful scholars who ask challenging research questions, as well as confront difficult civic issues in an intentional and productive manner. Most universities claim to produce “future leaders,” but not enough emphasize or appreciate the basic course as a breeding ground for the critical
inquiry and intellectual skills that are endemic to leadership. Asking big questions in the classroom is an essential exercise that helps students develop into the leaders our universities are designed to create—no matter what discipline or career path they may be pursuing.

Faculty should be asking big questions as well. Creating an engaging environment where students are guided through difficult discussions means we need to be ready with big questions to initiate those conversations in the classroom. Training is often required to do so effectively, but if done well, the basic course becomes an incubator where big questions can actively engage students, develop thoughtful faculty, and facilitate civic engagement at all levels.

The basic course, then, is a breeding ground for intellectual inquiry, and a training ground for inculcating students into the kind of intellectual inquiry and critical thinking required of democratically engaged citizens. Furthermore, irrespective of discipline or major, all students benefit from the professional skills they develop in the basic course, from speaking and writing to debating and deliberating. The basic course is fundamental to the professional success of all students. Yet, while the basic course proves instrumental in preparing students with the communication skills that are essential for pursuing rewarding personal and professional lives, at the same time it has a higher purpose too; teaching students to tackle big, challenging, perennial questions that plague our society and culture. Engaging students with big questions hones their ability to develop critical thinking skills and value positions that are informed by diverse viewpoints and a multitude of perspectives. If we spend time producing the kind of atmosphere in the basic course that is conducive to sharing and personal disclosure, then it can become a critical site for personal and intellectual reflection and development, and a main avenue through which we nurture and raise the future leaders of tomorrow. Big questions make the basic course much more than an introductory communication skills curriculum; big questions challenge us all to negotiate the civic call of engaging in democratic processes.

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