

The Practice of Conversation in a Basic Seminar that Aims to Improve Classes

Takahiro Tajima

1. Introduction

Faculty development (FD) has become a requirement with the 2008 revision of the Standards for Establishment of Universities. Universities have many teachers observing each other's classrooms and hold a considerable number of new-hire trainings and class improvement study groups. One example of an FD initiative is the students' class evaluation questionnaire. Canvassing students' opinions and impressions using such questionnaires can provide useful information for universities and teachers seeking to improve classes. They are, therefore, administered at most universities. According to a 2017 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology survey, 764 national, public, and private universities (99.3%) use them (MEXT 2017). Moreover, at Otaru University of Commerce (hereinafter OUC), class evaluation questionnaires are administered at the end of each semester as a way to improve classes. However, the full range of students' unfiltered opinions during the four months that a class is being held cannot be captured by these alone. Furthermore, compiling questionnaire data takes time, so teachers cannot use it immediately to improve their classes; as a result, feedback to students is delayed. While many attempts have been made to use smartphones and other devices during class to collect answers to questionnaires in real time, it is not easy to elicit students' honest opinions and thoughts for several reasons, in-

cluding their reserve in front of teachers. If we had access to students' thoughts, opinions, and impressions of class content during class time, as well as unfiltered information about their true feelings, such as anxieties and experiences, immediately following enrollment, related issues could be solved during the class; this could serve as an important source of information for improving classes.

Therefore, in my first year education course "Basic Seminar," I actively engaged in conversations with students, asking them about their true opinions and thoughts, with an eye to incorporating them into the class during the semester. Students take "Basic Seminars" immediately after enrolling, which is with an aim to create a foundation for student life at university as well as support them with acquiring academic skills. Therefore, in subjects such as "active learning," a class format requiring students' active participation, higher-level thinking, reading, writing, discussions, and presentations (Bonwell and Eison 1991), are effective. In this study, I tried to engage students in conversations that aimed to improve the class, by facilitating close interactions between teachers and students, as well as between students themselves. I invited students' unfiltered opinions, to identify the most effective active learning methods. In this paper, I will report on specific practical examples of attempts to improve classes via such conversations.

2. Overview of Basic Seminars

2.1 Basic Seminars: Purpose and Placement in Curriculum

At OUC, first and second year students take general courses, consisting of basic subjects and foreign languages. Basic subjects are comprised of five categories: "Human Being and Culture," "Society and Human Being," "Nature and Environment," "Basics of Intellect," and "Health Science." There are many

“Basics of Intellect” subjects offered to students who have just graduated from high school. The “Basic Seminar” covered in this paper is a “Basics of Intellect” subject (Figure 1).

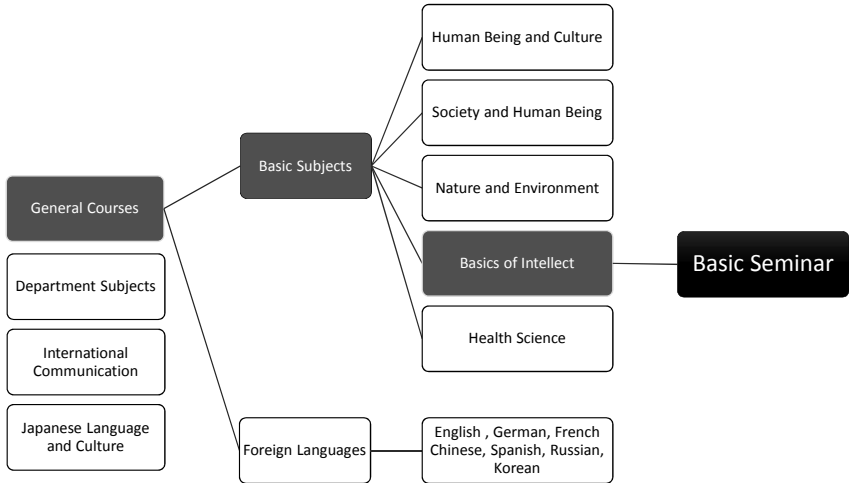


Figure 1 Undergraduate curriculum at OUC

Basic seminars have small class sizes (approximately 15 students) and aim to support students learning at university by understanding the meaning of academic study and acquiring learning skills. While they are not required, they are recommended courses for new students and are held by just under 30 faculty members every year. A shared objective of these basic seminars is the acquisition of abilities such as those listed in Table 1 (Otaru University of Commerce 2018). Additionally, a shared class goal is “having students—by interacting closely with faculty—get used to university life as well as cultivate an appetite for learning, independence, and assertiveness.” While the university’s basic seminars are based on the shared objectives listed in Table 1, often classes are designed around each faculty member’s area of expertise as the

topic. My class design focused on empirical education analysis (educational technology) based on the shared objectives in Table 1. The course's syllabus is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Basic Seminars' Shared Objectives

1.	Searching for and using sources and materials at the library
2.	Using the Information and Communications Technology Center, computers, and the internet
3.	Reading sources and listening to and understanding the content of what other people say
4.	Thinking logically about things and clearly expressing opinions in front of others
5.	Writing easily comprehensible reports and presentation summaries in an accurate way based on the teacher's designated format

Table 2. Basic Seminar (Educational Technology) Syllabus

■ Class Goals

Basic seminars are primarily for students who enroll at university immediately after high school with little life experience, with an aim to support students' engagement in academic study and acquisition of the learning skills required at the university. This basic seminar uses presentations and discussions about educational technology in a seminar style format to support students learning how to look at things logically and objectively, summarize materials, make presentations, and so on.

■ Class Sessions: Content

1. Orientation (overview of course)
2. Standards for behavior at the university
3. Academic writing (1)
4. Academic writing (2)
5. Searching for sources and materials
6. Information literacy (1): Creating documents
7. Information literacy (2): Spreadsheets, creating figures

8. Information literacy (3): Presentations

Text reading circle: Students read sources related to the empirical analysis 9–13. of education (educational technology), create presentation handouts, and give presentations. Then, everyone engages in discussions.

Presentations: Students give presentations on specified themes by using 14–15. PowerPoint slides and presentation handouts. Then, everyone participates in the question and answer sessions.

2.2 Class Overview

The first eight of fifteen class sessions primarily aimed at assisting students' acquisition of academic skills (1) and (2) in Table 1 (behavior standards and skills necessary for learning at university). Information literacy classes were hands-on, with students using computers. To ensure that students engaged in the best learning possible, they were asked to present their opinions and analyses (Fredrick 1987). I repeated the following steps during each class: (1) lecture, (2) worksheet, and (3) presentations on the worksheet content. I designed classes such that everyone could speak multiple times in each class.

From the ninth through to the thirteenth class sessions, I offered presentations on sources/literature, and students engaged in group work on educational technology. For the fourteenth and final fifteenth class, students created PowerPoint presentations on potential graduation research topics or things that they would particularly like to do as university students. Each student was given approximately 10 minutes to present and answer questions. In 2018, 13 students took the course (ten females, three males).

3. The Practice of Conversation**3.1 From the Beginning to the Middle of the Semester**

Constructing cooperative human relationships through teacher–student and

student-student interactions is important to ensure that students are motivated to participate in the class (Johnson et al. 1991). The development of relationships between people requires mutual communication; that is, conversation is necessary (Lowman 1984). One way to have effective conversations and discussions is to encourage students to ask questions (Wilén 1982). To implement this kind of student-centered class, it is important that an intellectual, psychological classroom environment is constructed, which allows students to fail (Bonwell and Eison 1991). To create an environment where students do not fear speaking up, I engaged students in conversations on topics besides those related to the class. First year students do not have a class unit, and do not belong to a department. Therefore, after enrollment, students do not interact much, and there are more students who are not at ease with university life than a few who are. At the beginning of the classes and during downtime, I would have students talk freely about their thoughts and anxieties about the class, the university clubs and groups that they had joined, and worries they had about living alone or commuting to school. I then encouraged them to ask and answer questions among themselves. Furthermore, when teachers know students' names and faces, promoting close interaction is easier and more effective (Lowman 1984); therefore, I assigned seats and distributed a seating plan to all students.

The first class session was on the meaning of learning and choosing to study at university. As an ice-breaker, I devoted a considerable amount of time to self-introductions. The worksheet that students completed during the first class session consisted of the following information (Fig.2):

- (1) Simple self-introduction (personal history, background, etc.)
- (2) Other things that you want others to know about (university clubs in which you are interested, hobbies, celebrities/music/video games you like)

- (3) Reason for advancing to university (honestly!—not a university entrance exam)
- (4) What you imagine that you will be doing five years after graduating from university

基礎ゼミナール ワークシート 2			
学生番号		氏名	
(1) 簡単な自己紹介 (出身, 経歴など)			
(2) その他, 自分のことを知ってほしいこと (例えば, サークル, 趣味, 好きな芸能人・音楽・ゲームなど)			
(3) 大学へ進学した理由 (入試面接ではないので正直に!)			
(4) 大学を卒業してから5年後, あなたは何をしているか想像してください。			

Figure 2 Example of Assignment Worksheet

Sections (1) and (2) were self-introductions, and (3) and (4) were introductory sections meant to promote students' enthusiasm for academic learning at university. I was aiming to support their understanding of "educational technology" (empirical analysis of education), which was the theme of the basic seminar, by reflecting on going to university as well as their post-university graduation path. The first simple self-introduction was a neutral presentation consisting of the name of the high school they attended, club activities they were engaged in during high school, and so on. The second introduction on university clubs they are interested in and their favorite celebrities played an "ice breaking" role. People actively interacted by exchanging opinions, with statements such as, "*I like the national pop idol XXX,*" or "*I am debating whether to go to XXX club's trial session.*" Students were able to share which specific clubs they were interested in and even suggested going to the trial sessions together. Furthermore, they talked particularly enthusiastically about the celebrities and pop idols they liked, effectively creating an amiable atmosphere.

During the following week, I had students fill out worksheets that covered class content as well as their life at university (classes, the university's atmosphere, clubs, etc.), life outside the university, and any issues that they were facing. Some of the concerns that the students raised included, "*I sleep in and am late,*" "*I get sleepy when the teacher talks the whole time—ninety minutes is long,*" and "*I can't keep up with the classes' content and am anxious about this.*" Most students agreed with these statements. It appeared that when sharing each other's opinions and thoughts about university life, students felt more at ease and developed a sense of togetherness.

The middle of the semester (around the eighth to the tenth class) is when students have become familiar with university life and are busy with club

activities. This is also the time when preparation for the university festival goes into full swing. Around this time, many students said that they were busy with the festival planning committee, club programs, and club activity meetings. However, some students said that they had begun to doubt the importance of learning at university, and many students agreed with them. For example, *“I’ve become lethargic”* and *“I can’t find any meaning in going to class.”* This slump often appears during the middle of the semester. I therefore changed the class plan and reduced the number of text reading circles by one. Instead, students engaged in group work wherein they thought about what it means to attend university. By discussing this, students were given the opportunity to think about their reasons for enrolling at university, why universities exist, and the meaning of taking classes.

In contrast, someone said, *“While I did not like talking in front of other students [in other classes], I’ve got used to it.”* Each time the basic seminar was held I ensured each person spoke multiple times, which helped students become familiar with making presentations.

3.2 Final Phase of the Semester

During the class’s final phase, in addition to having students reflect on their learning during the first semester, I had them freely present about their university life. By this time in the semester an environment is created wherein students have become less afraid of speaking, and I was able to canvas their unfiltered views and opinions. Some of their statements were as follows:

- *Tests are coming soon. Now everyone is frantically looking for last year’s question papers. Senior students are very reliable and have told me to let them know about anything I wanted. However, teachers have changed for some subjects, and I am uncomfortable with a lot of things. I don’t know how much I should do, so I am thinking to proceed for the time being just*

like I did in high school, but I kind of feel like I'm going to do too much.

- *I'm the most worried about how to overcome sleepiness. At home, I immediately fall asleep if I lie down, and I need to first do something about this. This is a problem beyond the issue of studying. It's not that I'm lacking the mindset [of a student], but just that I'm always tired. I see this as a pretty serious problem.*
- *I'm having trouble because I don't know how to look for or write down references for reports.*
- *I'm panicking because the deadlines for reports in XX class are coming up.*
- *I'm concerned if XX class' project is going to go well.*

In conversations toward the end of the class, students talked about many concerns they had with respect to their first post-university enrollment exam and end of term reports. I therefore offered advice in class and via email. Students also said the following about university life:

- *While I can make it to school fine, going home has become such a bother.*
- *When I encountered a senior student in my club, I passed them without saying hello while feeling worried if they were aware who I was.*
- *I want to start a part-time job during the summer break, but I don't know what kind of job would be good.*

These university life-related items were discussed between students who freely exchanged opinions, gave advice, exchanged information, and aimed to assist them eliminate and resolve their concerns.

4. Class Evaluation

The results of the end-of-semester class evaluation questionnaire, which is

conducted across the university, are presented in Figure 3. Responses were received from 8 of the 13 registered students.

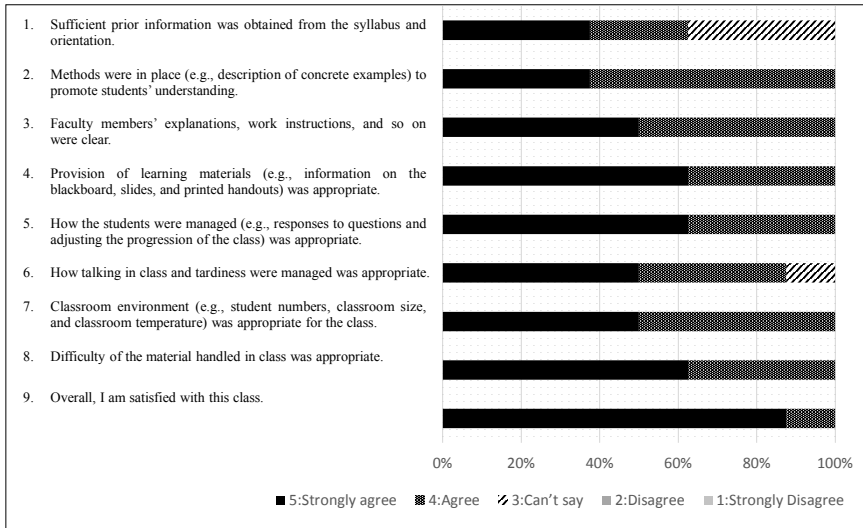


Fig. 3 Aggregate Results of the Questionnaire for Faculty Development

In the questionnaire results, all respondents chose “Strongly agree” or “Agree” for questions 2–9, while 1 respondent chose “Can’t say” for question 1. Although the classes were conducted according to the syllabus, it is possible the respondents felt there was a lot of conversation outside the course content. However, the responses exceeded the all-course average for every question, and a good rating value was obtained overall. In the free-description questions, there were no answers on “points that should be improved” for this class; “good points” and “excellent points” contained the following opinions:

- Lectures were provided in terms of being able to form a school. The course carefully taught me how to use Excel and PowerPoint; it was really good to learn how to use them, not just for class papers but for personal work,


too.

- *I was provided with thoughtful responses to each of my questions, the way I wrote papers, and my areas of dissatisfaction with the lectures. This was very helpful, and I appreciated it.*
- *Lectures were conducted to familiarize first-year students not used to presenting in public familiar with doing so; so, I was able to learn at just the right pace.*
- *Lectures were fun because each time the distance between the students shrank a little.*
- *I learned how to use computers.*
- *I learned academic skills.*
- *I was able to have fun learning the basic skills that I needed at university.*

From the answers to the free-description questions, we can say that the course achieved the goal of “developing familiarity with student life through close interaction between faculty members and students,” which is one of the course goals of the foundational seminar. Moreover, we can also say that the goal of “cultivating motivation, autonomy, and proactiveness in learning” has been achieved because all students eagerly participated in the final presentation on “what I want to do for my graduation research/what I want to do in university life” and delivered high-quality presentations. Examples of the PowerPoint slides used in the presentations are presented in Figure 4.

自己紹介

名刺：
出身：
サークル：
趣味：MARVEL作品をある
乃木坂を推す



(著作物のため略)

卒業研究で何をしたいか…?

地方農業
高齢化、小規模零細経営、後継者不足、
耕作放棄地…

地方農業が抱える課題への解決方法を、どこ
かの集落をモデルに探る!

①農業ビジネスでのアプローチ

集落営農法人化
機械の共同利用、耕作放棄地の解消、安心感、
品質の統一、ブランド商品、若い世代の育成

様々な支援を受けられる。
地方や組織に新たな活力、永続性が生まれる。

②地域資源の付加価値化

地産地消の需要の拡大
販売店の増加、給食施設と協働して産地情報の発信、
産地直字々交流、商工業者と連携して需要に合わせた
新商品の開発により地元農作物の需要拡大。

若い手を明確にした特色ある産地づくり
農作物の安心安全の確保を基本として、新規農業就
業者や女性など多様な担い手を育成、販売業者と結び
つけた産地づくり、需要に対応できる産地の育成。

自己紹介

出身校：札幌月華
サークル：

(著作物のため略)


- ☆スイートポテト作り
- ☆人生初のアルバイト
- ☆ルンズでナイターまで遊ぶ
- ☆自動車免許取る

- ☆いぬ🐕(愛犬はダックス)
- ☆タピオカジュース
- ☆履取40平手互製卒業し

卒研でやってみたいこと

小樽に商大生が経営する店をオープンさせる!

- ☆実際に経営してみることで、
マネジメントをより深く理解する
- ☆小樽の街を商大生の方で盛り上げる
- ☆地域の人のつながりを目指す



どんな店を経営するか?

タピオカ専門店を経営したい!
↓なぜタピオカ?

- ☆手に持ったまま、小樽の街を観光できる
- ☆乳通生がJFに受ける前に
小樽でお金を落としてくれるきっかけになる
- ☆手軽に買える

どんな風に経営するか?

- ☆メニューは定番7種類、季節限定3種類
→種類を少なくすることで、従業員も作りやすいうえ、
価格帯も安く設定しやすくなる
- ☆店内にイートインスペースを設ける
→観光客の滞在時間が増える
- ☆宣伝にSNSを使う
→インスタグラムやツイッターで情報を発信することで、
観光客の誘致が期待できる
- ☆多言語対応のホームページをつくる
→観光客の誘致に効果的




Fig. 4 Examples of PowerPoint Slides Used in the Final Presentations (“what I want to do for my graduation research”)

5. Conclusion

Seminar-style small class-size education primarily involves classes where conversation takes place, but in this case, a class plan was implemented that placed a particular emphasis on “close interaction between faculty members and students through conversation.” Consequently, it can be said that in the foundational seminar that I was responsible for, we were able to collect the students’ true opinions for the purpose of faculty development. Moreover, it appears that anxieties about university life were largely solved through students exchanging information with each other. On this occasion, we were seemingly able to elicit students’ true opinions during class, but there were also students who made learning inquiries individually by email, so it will be necessary to consider ways to make active use of email and office hours.

Using conversation to create an active classroom environment as a teaching method was proposed in the 1970s and 1980s, so it is not a particularly new educational approach. However, in recent years, the handling of personal information has become a problem in relation to this teaching method. More than a few university students have posted detailed personal information and exhibited antisocial behavior on social media without the slightest thought. For this reason, staff must strongly urge students that, even if the content is positive, content learned in the class must not be posted on social media or made known to those outside the university. In addition, students must be informed that they are not required to share personal information during conversation that they do not want known.

One issue for the future is how, as the university’s FD department, we make use of student’s opinions that have been obtained through conversation for faculty development in other subjects and across the university as a whole. In these conversations, we have learned of student’s wishes and anxieties in

regard to other classes, but it is not easy to propose improvements to the faculty members responsible for those other classes. Going forward, we would like to collect those real student opinions that cannot be obtained through the class evaluation questionnaire as well as attempting to give feedback as soon as possible and investigating methods of faculty development that are more effective.

< Notes >

This paper is a revised version of the content presented in Tajima (2019). I would like to thank J and N, students registered in the foundational seminar, for agreeing to the publishing of the PowerPoint slides they created in class.

< References >

- Bonwell, C.C., Eison, J.A., (1991) Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom. ASHE-ELIC Higher Education Report No.1
- Frederick, P.J., (1987) "Student Involvement: Active Learning in Large Classes", *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 32, pp. 45-56
- Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., Smith, K.A., (1991) Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom. Interaction Book Company
- Lowman, J., (1984) Mastering the Techniques of Teaching. Jossey-Bass Publishers
- MEXT (2017) The Reform of the System of Higher Education 2015 - Summary (in Japanese). Retrieved February 1, 2019, from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/daigaku/04052801/1398426.htm
- Otaru University of Commerce (2018) Course Guide 2018. (in Japanese)
- Tajima (2019) The 66th Annual Meeting of the Society for General Education in Tohoku and Hokkaido Area pp. 100-103 (in Japanese)
- Wilén, W.W., (1982) Questioning Skills, for Teachers. National Education Association