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“So What?” Speed Dating: Articulating an Argument’s Significance

Shannon Mooney

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“So What?” Speed Dating: Articulating an Argument’s Significance

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Overview

This activity is intended to help students practice articulating the larger stakes, or the “so what,” of an argumentative or analytical assignment. The activity works best after students have developed complete drafts, and it can be easily adapted for any paper that requires students to present and defend an original argument. The “speed dating” format of the activity enables students to practice communicating and refining the “so what” of their paper numerous times throughout a single class session. After a short pre-writing activity, students sit in pairs across from one another; each student has two minutes to explain their paper’s argument and its “so what” before circulating and repeating the exchange with new partners. The activity continues as long as time allows, or until all students have spoken to one another. Students are then given independent time to reflect on the activity and brainstorm ways of more effectively emphasizing their argument’s “so what” in their drafts.

This is a lively and highly engaging activity that requires active participation from all students. Whenever I assign it, students are initially hesitant because it pushes them to actively engage in ways that they may be reluctant to. But after the first couple speed dating rounds, students grow comfortable and ease into the activity; it’s always enjoyable to hear the class grow louder and more energized as students become increasingly confident in sharing their pitches and listening to those of their peers. Ultimately, through these interactions, students are exposed to peers’ ideas while also honing their rhetorical and argumentative skills.

Time Commitment

One class session; speed dating format allows for flexibility

Materials

Pen and paper or computers

Classroom space that allows for student to sit in rows facing one another

Activity Process

- Students should come to class with a complete draft of their essay.
- Prior to starting the activity, instructors should provide students with an overview of what it means to articulate an argument's importance and explain why this is a necessary skill to hone. This could come in the form of a reading (Nelson; Vieregge) or an instructor's original lesson plan. I typically share the following with students:
 - “So what” refers to the larger stakes of your argument—why it matters, why it's important, why your reader should care about it, and/or why you care about it. In other words, if someone were to ask you “so what?” in regard to your paper, this is the response you would give them.
 - Explaining an argument's importance gives your argument more weight, helps your reader understand why they should care or why they should continue reading, and pushes your argument beyond the confines of this assignment/this course
 - In the past, I have also created a “sample” argument about a shared text we read and asked students to

break down the argument's components so that they can isolate its "so what."

- Next, students should be given ten to fifteen minutes to write on the following questions (alternatively, this could be given as a homework assignment in advance of class if time is limited):
 - To the best of your ability, synthesize what you are writing about for this assignment. What is your overall argument? Try to be concise.
 - What made you decide to present this argument? What interests you about it? In other words, why do you care?
 - In what ways might your argument have applicability beyond your paper? Who should care and why should they care?
- Based on their responses, students should be given five minutes to write a 200–275-word (roughly two minute) statement or pitch that synthesizes their argument and its "so what." Explain that they will be sharing these responses with their peers, and that they should aim to make their pitches engaging and convincing.
- Next, students will sit in rows facing one another. Each student will have two minutes to share their pitch before switching roles. Offer them the following script to work from:
 - Student 1: Introduces themselves
 - Student 2: "What are you arguing in your paper?"
 - Student 1: Describe argument

- Student 2: “So what?”
- Student 1: Describe “so what”
- Set a timer for two minutes. Once time is up, tell students to switch roles so that “Student 2” is now sharing their pitch.
- Once two minutes have passed again, ask students in one of the rows to shift down one seat so that all students are facing a new partner.
- Repeat the previous steps however many times that time allows. I generally like to have students exchange pitches with at least five others.
- Finally, give students ten minutes to write and reflect on the following questions:
 - What did you learn or discover from participating in this activity? In what ways did you have to revise or reframe your responses as you shared your pitch?
 - What did you learn or discover about the “so what” or larger importance of your argument? Brainstorm a few ways you can more intentionally and explicitly communicate this in your paper.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the importance of identifying and articulating an argument’s larger significance
- Reflect on their paper’s original argument and its “so what”
- Practice communicating their ideas to an audience of their peers

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose whether to use pen and paper or laptops during this activity.
- This activity can be adapted for virtual spaces, such as Zoom or Webex, through the use of breakout rooms.

Works Cited

- Nelson, Cory Elizabeth. "Five Motivating Moves: Adding the 'So What' Factor to Your Writing." The Writing Center, 2019, University of Southern California.
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