

About Conceptual Workshops

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Summarized from *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* by Donald L. Finkel. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000. (See in particular chapter 6.)

Conceptual workshops are carefully designed worksheets that move students through particular course material in small groups. In using them, students engage with the material in deep and interesting ways. Decentering the instructor in the classroom frees students to explore the material and discuss it with one another without fear of “getting it wrong,” as the questions are designed to keep them on the right path and move through the material in a particular direction.

Questions should build upon each other, moving students through the material sequentially towards the desired end point (although you don’t always end up where you expect to!). Think of using a lecture as a blueprint, and try to find a problem to be solved to guide the workshop, moving the students through the material quickly enough that they don’t get frustrated, but in a way that is sophisticated enough to challenge them.

Average length of time: 2-3 hours (including breaks); but could be as short as 50 minutes or as long as 5 hours.

Group size may vary at the instructor’s discretion, based on what s/he wants to accomplish from the exercise. Groups of 3-6 generally work well.

Small group format is most common (groups of 4, usually). Groups work for a period of time on specific questions. This is followed by general class discussion based on the findings of the group.

The procedure begins with the instructor giving each student a worksheet. After the groups have formed, the instructor walks among the groups, listening to discussion and offering advice or information. The instructor moderates the final discussion as well, if there is one.

Use conceptual workshops on a regular basis. Students will adapt to the different “demands” placed on them on “workshop days” and will soon become aware of distinct intellectual rewards. Preparation may be time consuming, but the end results are worth it. I use them every 2-3 weeks and find them particularly useful when we move from one section of a course to another.

Grading is optional on work produced in the workshops. “Learning without consequence” is beneficial to students in some cases. The end of a section would be a more useful time to grade work.