

DID YOU DO ANYTHING IN CLASS TODAY?

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The question posed by the title we've heard many times before. Frequent also is its future counterpart, that is, "Are you going to do anything in class tomorrow?" The student who makes the inquiry is likely, though subconsciously, saying something to the thoughtful listener. Teachers, in occasional but trying tests of their enthusiasm, are apt to answer facetiously, "No, not much."

Why are such questions asked? Several possibilities come to mind. In the casual words of the student these possibilities include:

1. "Missing a single day of class can't hurt."
2. "You can't do that much in one session."
3. "It's easy to make up missed course work."
4. "The textbook covers what the teacher did anyway."
5. "I get so little out of class when I do go."
6. "Others miss class and survive. So can I."
7. "I can pass the course without doing all the assigned work."

All of these responses are negative in tone. In fairness, it must be noted that many learners are conscientious about their course work. They simply make a poor word choice in asking the question, "Did you do anything in class today?" Such students may really be asking, "Did I miss a test or some other urgent learning activity for which I am immediately accountable?" The more tactful and diplomatic question does not always find expression.

Adding "Zeros" and Getting Something

A limited perception still persists to the effect that the classroom routine is not eventful nor of long term impact. In this assessment of things, highlights such as major tests or presentations deviate from the routine and thus count for "having done something in class." Beyond these, student comments as the value of a given class session may be filled with mixed and confusing signals.

I've occasionally asked students, "What did you learn today?" More often than I wanted to hear, the reply was, "Nothing at all." Nevertheless, all these zeros of achievement, ultimately when added together, yielded something positive. He or she had become a better reader or a more capable solver of mathematics problems. The student had paradoxically moved to a higher plateau of achievement. A perceived nothing had culminated in something.