

Using a Hook Question

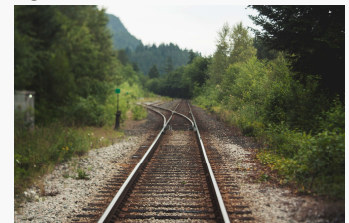
Published 9/10/2019 by [Ashley Ribbel](#)

by **Alex Venis**, Faculty of Continuing Education and Training

in the **September 2019 issue**

New beginnings can be stressful, and the start of a semester is no exception. The first class is full of unknowns from both students and faculty, and faculty may feel pressured to engage students as quickly and effectively as possible.

One particular strategy I like to use to warm up the class for the coming semester is to ask a hook question. The goal is to create a question that is enticing enough for students to forget that they're nervous. Though simple in its idea, actually finding a successful one can be difficult.



In my course, *CUL485: Movies and Morality*, I use the **Trolley Problem**. It's a hypothetical ethics experiment; one person finds themselves in a situation where five people are in immediate danger. They can save them, but the only way to do so involves taking an action that puts someone else in danger. The question is: *should they do it?*

I'd like to share a few guiding principles that I used to choose my hook question:

1. Understanding the question should require little to no background information. Students are in our courses to learn, and it is important to ask a question which does not require them to know much of the material that will be covered throughout the course.
2. The question gets at an intuition. Many people have an initial intuition about what the person in the trolley problem should do. Finding a question that has an intuitive answer helps get students involved quickly, as they tend to have an opinion when first considering the question.
3. There is no right or wrong answer. By stressing that there is no correct answer, I find students are more willing to share their opinions, as there is no fear of being wrong.

Trying to find a question that meets these criteria led me to introduce the Trolley Problem on

the first day of class. It was hugely successful, and instrumental in setting an engaging and welcoming tone for the rest of the course. I encourage other faculty to reflect on what sorts of questions or topics they could introduce to help ease students into the start of a new semester.

Image credit: Image by [Gerald Friedrich](#) from [Pixabay](#)

View the [September 2019 issue of the Academic Newsletter](#).

September 2019 issue

tags : faculty-reflections, september-2019, teaching-tip