

Pink Time? Harnessing Learner Agency for Engagement in a Graduate-Level Agricultural Science Course

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Introduction

Graduate-level education often relies on recurring cycles of reading, writing, and online discussion posts that can unintentionally promote surface-level engagement. Over time, students may participate out of compliance rather than curiosity, producing discussion spaces focused on task completion rather than meaningful dialogue (Kates et al., 2018; Lovett et al., 2023; Soffer & Cohen, 2019). This dynamic is especially problematic in teaching and learning courses, where reflective participation is central to professional growth. It is also salient in fields such as agricultural sciences, where educators must prepare learners for complex, globally connected industries (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2023). Addressing this challenge requires instructional approaches that intentionally cultivate engagement, curiosity, and professional relevance (Lovett et al., 2023). Daniel Pink's motivation framework argues that sustained engagement in complex cognitive work is driven primarily by intrinsic motivators of autonomy, mastery, and purpose rather than extrinsic rewards (Pink, 2011). Inspired by this proposition, *Pink Time* is a pedagogical practice designed to increase student motivation by shifting greater control of learning to students. Instead of relying solely on instructor-curated content, the practice supports student-directed exploration of teaching and learning topics aligned with individual interests, questions, and professional goals. *Pink Time* is embedded as a recurring instructional practice in EDCE 530: Teaching and Learning in Agricultural Sciences, a graduate-level teaching and learning course at the Pennsylvania State University. Across the 16-week semester, students engage in a weekly cycle of independent exploration, peer-driven dialogue, and in-person knowledge sharing. This structure supports autonomy, promotes mastery through sustained inquiry, and reinforces a shared sense of purpose centered on becoming effective, reflective educators.

How It Works

Each week, students spend 30 minutes outside of class engaging with self-selected, unassigned media related to teaching and learning. Students choose content based on their interests, questions, or professional goals and may read, watch, or listen to a wide range of sources, including books, podcasts, academic journal articles, documentaries, magazine articles, or other relevant media. There are no constraints on topic, format, or perspective, except that the chosen media must relate broadly to teaching and learning. The only expectation is that students return to the learning community prepared to share what they are discovering. Before the weekly in-person class session, students complete a structured online discussion using a 3-2-1 protocol. For each piece of media, students generate three guiding questions and an answer key they would use if they were teaching the content, identify two specific "pro tips" from the media that could impact educator success, and articulate one explicit connection to EDCE 530 content, such as an assigned reading, guest speaker, or class session. Students respond to at least three peers' discussion posts on the course management platform, allowing ideas, resources, and questions to circulate across the broader class community before meeting face-to-face. At the beginning of each in-person class session, students are placed into new small groups and engage in 30 minutes of uninterrupted *Pink Time*. During this time, students share and discuss the media they individually consumed, the insights gained from online peer discussions, and connections to the week's assigned course readings. The instructor provides limited guiding questions related to the

week's topic but otherwise takes a minimal role, allowing students to direct the conversation, challenge one another's thinking, and co-construct understanding. While engaging in discussion, students document key takeaways, emerging questions, and novel ideas in their EDCE 530 learning journals. Following the small-group discussions, each group reports out to the full class, highlighting insights, questions, or perspectives that emerged during their conversation. This reporting process ensures that learning extends beyond individual groups and reinforces a shared sense of collective inquiry. This cycle of independent exploration, peer interaction, and reflective discussion is repeated weekly throughout the semester, positioning students as active contributors to their own learning and to their peers' learning. To promote student agency and strengthen instructional impact, participants are asked at the one-third and two-thirds points of the course to recommend revisions to the *Pink Time* process. These revisions typically reduce participation specifications (e.g., fewer discussion responses, questions, or posts), often shifting from weekly to biweekly engagement.

Results and Implications

Pink Time has been an educational strategy incorporated into EDCE 530 in all five annual offerings since 2022. Eighty-seven graduate students representing 20 nationalities from 16 academic areas have actively engaged in *Pink Time*. One student in the 2024 cohort reported, "At first I thought it would just be another way to do online discussion posts like in other classes but later realized that I get to choose what I read, discuss, and share with my peers." Another student from the 2025 cohort shared, "I love seeing what my peers share in *Pink Time* online and then being able to discuss their *Pink Time* post in person. It really streamlines and connects what we learn in class with what we engage with outside of class time."

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans include maintaining student voice and choice in how *Pink Time* is implemented through structured checkpoints across the semester, with ongoing revisions informed by student feedback. Resources most frequently utilized by students will be archived to develop a centralized resource guide for future cohorts. Instructors should avoid shortchanging the explanation of why *Pink Time* matters; dedicating time during the first class session to establish class norms and build community is essential for student engagement. Finally, a summative application will be explored to challenge students to synthesize their *Pink Time* experiences and connect them to their broader scholarship of teaching and learning beyond the course.

Cost/Resources Needed

Pink Time is intentionally designed as a low-cost instructional practice that operates entirely within existing course infrastructure. There is no direct cost to students, as participants are encouraged to use free and institutionally supported resources such as the university library, online journal databases, and other open-access or digital media. The instructor also provides access to a personal collection of teaching and learning resources, and students frequently borrow or exchange media as interests emerge during *Pink Time* discussions. All written components are facilitated through the university's learning management system, requiring no additional financial investment. The only anticipated cost is a modest instructional budget of approximately \$100 to support learning collaboration consumables such as journals, sticky notes, dry-erase markers, and limited printing. Students are explicitly informed that purchasing media is not required.

References

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