

POD —IDEA Center Notes

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IDEA Item #1: “Displayed a personal interest in students and their learning”

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Background

Several strands of research demonstrate that displaying a personal interest in students is not only effective as a way to encourage participation and engagement, but necessary for real learning. For example, research in neuroscience and the physiology of learning demonstrates the strong link between emotion and cognition (1). In the absence of the strong, positive emotions engendered by caring, deep engagement, motivation, and interest, little real learning occurs. Similarly negative emotions such as fear and shame, all too common in the college classroom, retard learning, due to “choking,” the shutting down of higher-order thinking, and the activation of more primitive areas of the brain associated with the fight-or-flight syndrome.

Classic research in communication studies also highlights the positive benefits of supportive environments (that is, those characterized by description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, provisionalism) versus defensive environments (that is, those focused on evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, certainty) (2). Further, classroom-based studies and extensive interviews with students affirm the findings of the more theoretical studies cited above. Research on large classes demonstrates the positive effects of personalizing the large class with respect to enhancing student attendance and motivation to learn (3, 4). As well, undergraduate students repeatedly mention the importance of one-to-one interaction with instructors in supervised projects and the closer interactions with other students and instructors in small classes as important factors in their learning (5).

These threads point to the importance of engagement and a sense of community as critical to college success and the major reviews of research (6) have found just this connection. Finally champions of a restoration of caring,

*community, and heart in the college classroom such as Parker Palmer (7) and Jane Tompkins (8) have met with widespread sympathy in higher education circles...for a reason. It is no wonder that one of the most widely used new instruments for assessing the outcomes of college is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). *Displaying a personal interest in students is the first step toward demonstrating that community exists within the classroom and across the campus.**

Helpful Hints

A variety of strategies, most quite easy to implement, even in large classes, convey to students that instructors take a personal interest in them and their learning: Learn students' names and use them when addressing students. Easy to implement in small classes, in large classes learning students' names poses a greater challenge. Assigned seats and taking (digital) photos of students, labeling them, and then rehearsing them at odd moments are strategies that have worked for many instructors.

Be available to students in ways that you judge are not too invasive of your personal boundaries. If your class is too large for individual conferences early on (or at some point) in the semester, other, less intensive strategies will also work. Arrive early to class and stay a little later and encourage students to seek you out at these times. Maintain regular office hours and encourage students to use them: some instructors require students to stop by during office hours once during the first few weeks of classes; particularly for reserved students, even the briefest visit breaks down psychological barriers, opening up the possibility for greater interaction during the rest of the semester. Encourage and respond to email.

Solicit and respond to student feedback. The simple, but effective, one-minute paper (9) lets students know that you care about their understanding and learning and

establishes a vehicle for communication between you and your students. Mid-semester evaluations that you create and use to fine-tune instruction midstream also convey to students that you care what they think and about their learning.

Create opportunities for students to engage actively in the classroom. Pedagogically sound because intentional engagement leads to more effective learning, creating opportunities for students to engage with each other and you during class time also creates a more personal classroom environment that helps everyone get to know one another better. During discussions and other interactions with students, really listen to them, striving to hear what students are really saying; not what we want to hear and/or assume students are saying (10).

Connect classroom material to students' experience. Ausubel, the noted educational psychologist, said that the most crucial element in learning was what students already know, that is, what was within their experience. But making connections between academic material and students' personal experience also conveys an interest in students and their learning.

Assessment Issues

Various assessment approaches may help determine the extent to which you display a personal interest in students. Perhaps the first place to start in assessing how effectively you display a personal interest in students is by examining your own views about teaching. Various typologies of teaching whether as in-class activities or out-of-class assignments, reveal approaches to teaching that are more content-oriented and those that are more student-oriented. Displaying a personal interest in students may be more consistent with the latter than the former. Asking a colleague to observe you in the classroom may also be helpful. Like any enlightened peer review process, meet with the colleague before the actual observation and discuss your concerns and the strategies that you are trying to implement to display a personal interest in students. After the observation, meet with the colleague again, perhaps over coffee or some other relaxed setting, and compare notes. Finally, solicit feedback directly from students themselves. Targeting the extent to which you display a personal interest in students and their learning in a mid-semester evaluation is one possible approach. Another is using a technique often referred to as Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) (11). Performed by a third-party such as a trained staff person at a teaching and learning center, the approach eliminates the disturbing outliers (i.e., "You remind me of my mother, and I can't stand her") that monopolize our attention, blinding us to more common reactions to our

teaching. Since the extent to which we display personal interest in students is a very personal, and potentially, sensitive matter, an approach that produces and communicates a more impersonal consensus may be a better approach.

References and Resources

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IDEA Paper No. 39: [Establishing Rapport: Personal Interaction and Learning](#), Fleming

IDEA Paper No. 15: [Improving Discussions](#), Cashin and McKnight

IDEA Paper No. 1: [Motivating Students](#), Cashin