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Building Positive Student-Instructor Interactions: Engaging Students through Caring Leadership in the Classroom

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Abstract

When instructing and managing classrooms in university settings, instructors face numerous challenges such as student disengagement and managing course expectations. In this article, we offer new and revised techniques and strategies to engage students through the art of caring leadership. We accomplish this through three defining characteristics: knowing students' names, managing course expectations, and the use of technology. These intentional strategies create positive student-instructor interactions in both small and large classrooms which in turn enhances student learning and engagement.

Introduction

Several years ago, we began researching positive student-instructor interactions by asking students if their instructors engaged in activities intended to foster mutual respect, valued students' opinions, and connected the course material to them on a personal level. We wanted to know if our intentional

teaching practices were in fact purposeful and meaningful to students. What we found was that today's students are engaged in the classroom through caring leadership. Students feel welcomed and cared for when instructors know their name. Further, when instructors share stories related to the course content, students are more likely to be engaged and make a connection with the material.

How, then, do we define engagement and understand its implications for students in higher education? For this article, we use the definition by Axelson and Flick (2011) which defines student engagement as "how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other" (p.38). The delivery of clear expectations, captivating instruction, and classroom management tactics along with an effort to build solid relationships with students are all key traits among effective educators (MacSuga-Gage, Simonsen, & Briere, 2012). As instructors in higher education, our challenge is to embrace these issues and deliver a practical model for understanding what our students need.

The purpose of this article is to describe how we address this challenge by highlighting three defining characteristics of caring leadership: knowing students' names, managing course expectations, and the use of technology. These strategies create positive student-instructor interactions in small and large classrooms alike. In addition, this article presents anecdotal evidence supported by qualitative data we collected from undergraduate students in three consumer studies courses at the end of spring 2015 and fall 2015 semesters.

Rethinking Caring Leadership

Students want and need caring leadership from their instructors. So, what does it mean to be a caring leader? Amidst complex interactions with students, caring instructors are respectful of others and have a work ethic that demonstrates a passion for students and the profession. Because an effective classroom environment is built upon motivation and respect, the instructor's caring attitude promotes and encourages a higher level of commitment from students. Thus, the art of caring leadership is a proven way to enhance the

classroom experience for students. Paolini (2015) emphasized that effective instructors stimulate student learning by displaying care and concern for students' academic and personal growth. Bain (2004) further suggested that students can relate to an empathetic and sensitive instructor, especially if a student is going through a difficult academic or personal situation.

Establishing positive student-instructor interactions cultivates a more productive classroom environment (Weimer, 2010). Students are more likely to achieve higher levels of motivation and confidence in their academic performance when they believe that their instructors are respectful and available. One example of being available is having an open-door policy, which gives students access to their instructors. Another option is an instructor's availability to interact with students before or after class (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). Interactions outside of the classroom often humanize instructors in the eyes of students. For instance, a simple: "Hello!" or "How are you?" or "Did you have a good weekend?" will increase the likelihood of developing positive interactions with students. This communication could exchange right outside the classroom door, in the hallway, or on the sidewalk. Jaasma and Koper (1999) reported an instructor's efforts to communicate with students outside of class, led to greater student motivation and trust in the instructor. At minimum, a smile can open up the lines of communication between students and instructors. Ultimately, this communication directly before or after class has the potential to develop mutual respect and trust. Chickering and Gamson (1987) supports student-instructor contact in and out of classes as a way for instructors to motivate students. After interacting with each other outside of class, instructors can gain more confidence connecting with students in class as well.

When employing strategies of caring leadership, we create a positive learning environment. We don't just say we care, we do care about students and our content. We do this by facilitating interactive lectures, differentiating our instruction, and understanding student-learning preferences. According to Palmer (1998) engaging students requires that we as instructors be engaged in the learning process as well. Instructors who have the ability to maintain student

interest with interactive lectures and activities through a variety of instructional methods are more likely to help students reach intended learning outcomes.

Methods

Three consumer studies classes at a large eastern university were surveyed at the end of spring 2015 (two courses) and fall 2015 (one course). A total of 357 students were surveyed about their perceptions of positive student-instructor interactions in large classes. At the conclusion of each semester, students were invited, via email, to participate in a voluntary, anonymous, and confidential online questionnaire. Of the 107 (30%) student respondents, 103 fully completed the questionnaire. Twenty (19%) of the 103 respondents were male and 83 (81%) were female, which was consistent with the enrollment in all three classes. The majority of the undergraduate students were sophomores (39%) and juniors (37%) followed by seniors (14%) and the smallest group were freshman (10%).

Respondents answered one qualitative question pertaining to their perceptions of strategies that build positive student-instructor interactions in large classes. The question was, "what comments do you have pertaining to strategies and/or activities that the instructor used in order to create positive student-instructor interactions in this large class?" The researchers conducted a thematic analysis to determine themes from student responses. The synthesis of data included three coinciding stages: the free line-by-line coding; the organization of related codes into descriptive themes; and the development of analytical themes (Harden & Thomas, 2005). The primary themes identified were: the instructor knowing students' names, managing course expectations, and the use of technology.

Knowing Students' Names

The bond between instructors and students can be strengthened if instructors make a concerted effort to address students by their first name in all interactions. Students feel welcomed and cared for when instructors know their

name. According to Tanner (2013), instructors making the effort to get to know students' names sends the message to students about the importance of students in the course. This drive for interpersonal connections is ubiquitous amongst us all. One way to learn students' names is to approach them before class begins, confirm their name, and ask a simple question related to the course. Some students appreciate and respond to the comfort of knowing that their instructor is approachable, knows who they are, and is genuinely interested in them. This uncomplicated but powerful exchange engages students, encourages participation, and establishes connections with students in the classroom. This initiative to engage one student immediately sends several direct and indirect messages to the entire class: that we care enough to interact with each individual student; that we know students' names and will refer to them by their name; and that each student should be prepared to answer questions and participate in class discussion. Example quotes from students about this strategy:

> *"I believe that all instructors teaching relatively large classes should try to learn all of the students' names to show the students that they are in-fact, more than a number."*

Another student stated:

> *"All teachers need to make an effort to relate to their students and learn their names. That way the students know that the teacher cares about them and their success in the class."*

Another method we use to connect with students and learn their names is through a two-fold strategy that we call "All About Me." On the first day of class, we ask each student to stand, introduce themselves and share something interesting about themselves. We follow up with a personal statement or indexing. A personal statement is a one-page statement designed for the instructor to receive additional information about students. Tanner (2011) posits instructors benefit from collecting information about their students through activities or assignments at the beginning and throughout the course. Typically, students will complete the assignment during the first few weeks of

class. Instructors might ask students to share their academic major, hobbies, course goals, a specific question about the course, or a topic within the scope of the course. For example, an instructor teaching a personal finance course might ask students: "What are your short and long term financial goals?" or "Which two financial topics are you most excited to learn about this semester?" Either of these two questions will give the instructor a glimpse of students' goals or what course content students are most excited about. Indexing is simply asking students to complete an index card with their name, hometown, major, year of study, and something interesting about themselves. The information we gather from either source is then used throughout the semester to bridge the gap between our students' experiences and the content. By doing this, we further validate our interest and efforts in getting to know our students. Index cards serve two purposes: assists instructors with learning students' names and provides instructors with information (card set) to randomly call on students to share over the course of the semester (Tanner, 2011). The personal statements and indexing also reveal additional talking points instructors can refer to in class or during one-on-one interactions with students. The more we know about our students, the better equipped we are to interact with them, foster an engaging learning environment, and bring relevance to the course.

Exemplar quotes from students are provided to better describe the importance of knowing students' names and making efforts to connect with them. One student said:

> *"The instructor made more effort than any other instructor I've ever had to actually learn the names of students. The instructor would remember details from assignments or just things that students said on the first day of class."*

The other student stated:

> *"The instructor really made an effort to connect to students and I thought it was great. The instructor was very open so all students could feel comfortable going to him about things having to do with class or other questions involving finances."*

Likewise, another student said:

> *"Sharing personal stories that related to the course material and allowing us to share our own stories helped to obtain a better understanding of the material."*

Addressing students by their first name and knowing something about them exemplifies caring leadership and makes an instructor more approachable. This encouraging classroom atmosphere enhances student participation, attendance, and comprehension of course content (Williams, Childers, & Kemp, 2013). Respectfully addressing students by their first name will most likely motivate and encourage student engagement. As a result, students are more attentive when instructors know their name. The key; however, is to call on all students, preferably, a different group of students each class period. To summarize, one student said:

> *"I think that two strategies were very effective in the large class and those two were the instructor trying his best to know students' names and telling stories during lecture. When the instructor demonstrated that he knew your name, he became even more approachable to the students. And I think telling stories not only helped students understand course concepts better, but also made the instructor more engaging and relatable to the students."*

Managing Course Expectations

It makes sense to consider the impact of positive student-instructor interactions when managing your course. Caring instructors understand that student learning is affected by negative student attitudes and disruptive behavior; therefore, they set the tone for the class early in the semester. With a clear vision for course expectations, course management, and curriculum delivery, an instructor who demonstrates caring leadership will nurture a positive learning environment that boosts student engagement and thus reduces negativity and disruptions. Creating a positive classroom environment can stimulate learning and minimize troubling issues and disruptive students.

Students are less likely to be a distraction if they are engaged and feel comfortable around the instructor.

Time and effort in planning and conveying course expectations will pay dividends for positive student-instructor interactions. According to Bain (2004), an instructor's ability to clearly convey course expectations plays a vital role in student success. Aside from conveying the course expectations via the course syllabus, instructors should consistently reinforce them throughout the course. Likewise, the syllabus serves as a blueprint outlining both instructor and student expectations. For example, an instructor's expectations may address the responsibility of responding to student emails and questions in a respectful and timely manner. As for students, they are expected to actively participate, answer questions in class, participate in collaborative activities, and share stories or experiences related to course topics. When students have a clear outline and understanding of course expectations, they are more likely to participate in class and have a positive attitude about the course. Transparency and clear course expectations minimize time spent replying to emails. For instance, the instructor can refer students to specific areas in the syllabus or course management system.

The importance of managing course expectations is explained by three students:

> *"The way AHRM 2304 is planned out and taught is hands down the best way to teach a class of that size. When I walked into the classroom, I felt like I was known by people instead of just sneaking into my seat each day."*

> *"I really enjoyed the class because of the instructor mainly. The instructor really knew her information and was very dedicated to teaching it. The instructor knew me by name and graded things quickly, responded to emails quickly, and gave enough resources to do good on the tests and assignments."*

> *"Awesome class! I walked away from the class actually learning something not just memorizing stuff I believe because the way the professor acted in classes and really cared!"*

As for classroom management, asking and encouraging questions is one technique to use during an interactive lecture. Questions can initiate and stimulate student-instructor and peer-to-peer interactions. When students respond to questions, the instructor should provide positive reinforcement. This will help create a positive environment and encourage other students to actively participate in the discussion. Further, the instructor can explicitly express how students can be successful in the course and how students can apply the information to their own life. For many students, this is an affirmation that the instructor cares about the well-being and future of each individual— above and beyond the course grades and fulfilling degree requirements.

We all feel good when we achieve something. We likewise feel good when we are recognized and appreciated for our achievements. Specific recognition boosts student engagement which in turn cultivates a ripple effect in the classroom. As instructors, our recognition shows students that we care about creating an environment where individuals are appreciated for their contributions and accomplishments. "That was a good point, Jason!" or "Thank you for solving that difficult equation, Melissa" are statements that provide students with opportunities to be engaged and celebrated for tasks. Two students said:

> *"The instructor was always very personable. In fact, the positive student-instructor interactions that were created help to develop a sense of trust with the instructor in this class. It was easy to remain attentive, but understanding the content was not a piece of cake by any means. His strategies created a welcoming yet challenging atmosphere, which is what I believe to be the most effective learning environment that an instructor can build."*

> *"I think that engaging the large class in active discussion was very helpful. Really going over the material slowly and encouraging questions makes the students feel comfortable and accepted in the classroom environment. I really enjoy when the instructor uses personal experiences and stories that relate to the information being learned. I think that by sharing these experiences it draws*

the students in as well as lets them know that the instructor is passionate and cares about the information they're teaching."

Communicating the benefits of learning the course material and completing assignments is another effective and realistic way to exemplify caring leadership. Although students know that they will be graded against course requirements, they can be motivated beyond the simple completion of assignments. When instructors outline the practical and applicable benefits of the course, students are more likely to be connected to the material. We found that when we share stories related to the course content, students were more likely to engage and connect with the material. The link between the content and students is not superficial. Further, we found that timely and personable feedback rather than numerical grades gave students formative guidance and extended the dialogue. Specific feedback such as "the analysis of your findings align well with ABC" guides students rather than vague feedback such as "good job." This feedback can be offered formally or informally, individually or to the entire class. The more instructors encourage and motivate students to succeed, the more likely students will be connected to the material and the course (Paolini, 2015). The significance of timely feedback is clarified by one student:

> *"I was very impressed with my instructor's effort to learn the names of students-even when they didn't constantly interact. I also liked how the instructor gave personalized feedback on assignments and replied to emails ON TIME."*

The Use of Technology

The digital landscape has changed rapidly in the last 10 to 15 years—and even more so in the past five years. College students from the Millennial generation are using electronic devices more than ever for personal, social, and academic purposes. In many classroom settings, the use of cell phones, tablets, and laptops causes distractions for instructors and even other students. While many students use their devices as learning tools and resources during class, some students are prone to use devices inappropriately in class. As a result, instructors are pressed to enforce policies restricting the use of electronic

devices in the classroom. One of the most important lessons in managing classrooms is to choose battles wisely. Instead of preventing the use of technology, we suggest searching for opportunities to pose critical-thinking questions and then allow students to use their technological devices to identify possible solutions. Technology can be used as another tool to engage students and further build a supportive classroom climate, which repeatedly has been shown to increase class participation. For example, incorporating mobile devices or clickers as an engagement tool will allow instructors to check for understanding of course material or topics discussed in class (Carnaghan, Edmonds, Lechner, & Olds, 2011; Terrion & Aceti, 2012).

According to Palmer (1998), a sense of connectedness can be generated through technology. Technology can be used to enhance student engagement both in and out of the classroom. One way to connect with students is to use new technological approaches to deliver course content such as narrated video lectures. These types of videos can be short and concise, ranging from one to five minutes in length or a thorough, detailed video of 30 to 60 minutes. This type of communication can easily be embedded in the course management site, on the instructor's website or on a private course YouTube page managed by the instructor. These videos can further be used to make announcements, highlight material not covered in class, or to elaborate on complex or important topics. This strategy allows the instructor to virtually engage with students outside of the classroom and students have the opportunity to access the videos at any time, day or night. As stated by one student:

> *"…when the professor engages with us is also helpful. I also found the videos very interesting and helpful for the class as well. It made the class and information seem more realistic and relatable."*

Another student commented:

> *"…the use of I-Clicker to keep everyone in the class engaged and participating."*

Furthermore, one student highlighted the importance of technology in large classes:

> *"I think that videos and visual aids are very important in large classes. I know that I personally am a visual learner so if there is something that the professor can use to supplement their lecture that benefits me greatly. It helps to trigger the information and even some facts when taking quizzes or tests. Additionally, encouraging class discussion after the visual aid is helpful in creating a comfortable and open environment for discussing topics and asking more in-depth questions."*

The undeniable reality is that technology has already changed the learning experience of college students and the way instructors deliver course content. Considering these aspects, instructors have a prime opportunity to incorporate multiple forms of technology to stimulate learning to further provide students with vibrant and innovative instructional methods.

Conclusion

The feedback we received from students is very promising. Our intentional teaching practices and activities are meaningful to students when it comes to fostering mutual respect, valuing students' opinions, and connecting the course material on a personal level. Instructors interested in building positive student-instructor interactions need to focus on caring leadership by knowing students' names, managing course expectations, and the use of technology.

Instructors in college classrooms across the nation are facing a plethora of challenges to engage students. As instructors, we strategize to support students with their academic responsibilities, encourage critical thinking, provide an active and collaborative learning environment, build positive student-instructor interactions, and enrich our students' educational experiences. Albeit these ideas are not revolutionary, we often fail to meet these expectations for our students. However, when we make an intentional effort to implement instructional

strategies on a consistent basis throughout the academic semester, students recognize that we are interested and care about their overall academic, personal, and future professional experience. Thusly, we have the opportunity to build positive interactions with our students in and out of the classroom. We can choose each day to empower and engage students with our teaching and course management style, our passion for the content, creative use of technology, and overall caring leadership in the classroom.

As with any research, limitations exist. One major limitation here is that the course instructors were also the researchers. Another limitation is no control group to compare if these pedagogical strategies are better than others. Nonetheless, the strategies described here serves as a foundation, which can be enhanced or expanded. Future research should focus on using control groups to compare if these pedagogical strategies are better than other strategies. Future studies could also examine our pedagogical strategies with course learning objectives, competencies, and academic achievement.

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