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AdJUNCT
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**gathering together [Latin]*

NEWSLETTER FOR LEWIS & CLARK LAW SCHOOL ADJUNCTS

This issue of our adjunct newsletter addresses how to develop and strengthen a learning relationship with your students. It offers the following three short articles.

- *Practical Tips for Cultivating a Learning Relationship with Students* by John Orlando -- this article covers the basics of relationship building with your class
- *Classroom Discussions: How to Apply the Right Amount of Structure* by Maryellen Weimer – this article discusses building relationships through classroom structure
- *Supporting Transgender Students in the Classroom* by Sherry Zane -- this article offers specifics on building relationships with gender diverse students

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR CULTIVATING A LEARNING RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENTS

by John Orlando, Ph.D.

Take a moment right now to ask yourself who your best teachers were growing up. Now list the qualities that made them your best teachers.

Looking at your list, you will probably notice something interesting. When I have faculty do this, they invariably list qualities such as “cared for my learning” or “cared for me as a person.” They do not list qualities such as “the most knowledgeable person in their field.” In other words, they list relationship qualities as the factors that make for a great teacher, not knowledge qualities.

This priority is also borne out in research. When 17,000 students were asked to list the qualities of an effective teacher, “respectful” and “responsive” came out on top, not “knowledgeable” (Smyth, 2011).

Unfortunately, everything we hear about teacher/student relationships is in the form of warnings—something to be avoided. The result is that we rarely think about the relationships we form with our students. We focus on the content that we want to push to them, but not the very qualities that made for the best teachers in our own experience.

The most important point to remember is that we don't teach subjects, we teach students.

Here are a few practical tips for cultivating a learning relationship with your students.

Focus on Feedback

Studies show that students are starved for feedback on their work (Turnitin, 2013). Instead of getting real feedback that helps them understand their problems and how to improve, they get a laundry list of margin comments like “grammar” that tells them next to nothing and are merely intended to justify the grade. Some faculty circle grammar errors and write “grammar” in the margin thinking that it will force the student look up the problem themselves. But few students will go to this effort. You have the student’s attention right there, so explain what the grammar error is, and how to correct it. You could also include a link to the appropriate location on a writing website such as Purdue’s OWL that will allow them to learn more if they still have questions.

The most important point to remember is that we don’t teach subjects, we teach students. Feedback needs to be to the student, not the work, since it is the student who must improve in order for the work to improve. What must the student need to know and do in order to improve their skills? For example, a garbled account of a reading could be the result of a student not knowing how to read academic articles, not due to lack of effort. In this case, merely telling them that their account is wrong is unhelpful. They need to learn how to read academic work. As faculty members, we might talk with this student about how we read academic work, what we look for, how we take notes, how we ask questions while we read, etc. Detailed feedback that is directed toward helping the student improve, not simply justifying the grade, resonates with students as demonstrating concern for them as people, and lays the foundation for a healthy student/teacher relationship.

The Why as Well as the How

Many faculty often fail to explain the value of the tasks in our courses, and assume that “it will be on the test” is motivation enough. But it’s not. Motivation is generated by seeing value in a task beyond the stick of a grade. Faculty should always preface any task or teaching content with a description of why it is important.

I once had an instructor who began each lecture from whatever point he let off at the prior lecture, talking through the next 50 minutes of content. He would pace across the stage like a machine unspooling a recording of information. It was clear that he was going through the motions without concern for our learning.

If he had just prefaced his classes with an explanation of why the content was important to us, it would have shown that he cared and respected us. Providing some context to the day’s activities also would have motivated us to listen and engage. Similarly, he could have explained that our papers were not simply busy work to ensure that we did the reading, but meant to help us develop a persuasive way of writing that will serve us well throughout our lives. Explaining the value of activities in terms of student learning and future needs will improve attention, retention, and the quality of the learning relationship.

The Check-in

Finally, one of the best teaching practices I've adopted is to periodically ask students how the class is going for them. I have them write me a paragraph about how they think they are doing, whether they are learning, and where they are struggling. Students who feel that they are adrift will appreciate the interest you're showing in them and may even come in for help.

Moreover, the question also gets students to be reflective about their own learning and skills, and self-evaluation of one's own learning trajectory has been shown to be one of the most powerful mechanisms for learning. A simple check-in two or three times during a course will not only improve student attitudes and motivation, but also get them to take control of their learning. Of course, students will also see the gesture as a demonstration of the instructor's interest in the student's learning.

If you haven't asked yourself about the qualities that made for the best teachers in your own experience, do it now. The answer may surprise you. If there is a discrepancy between what you do and what your best teachers did, then it is time to evaluate your teaching practice. This exercise can be the first step to transforming how you teach.

Resources:

Meyers, S.A. (2009). Do Your Students Care Whether You Care About Them? *College Teaching*, 57 (4), 205-210.

Smyth, E. (2011). What Students Want: Characteristics of Effective Teachers from the Students' Perspective. *Faculty Focus*, April 18, 2011.

Turnitin (2013). Office hours: Students share successful feedback tips. Webcast.

John Orlando is the associate director of training at Northcentral University and was recently named editor of Online Classroom.

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CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS: HOW TO APPLY THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF STRUCTURE

by Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.

While preparing for a Teaching Professor Conference session on facilitating classroom discussions (much of which applies to online exchanges), I've been reminded yet again of the complexity involved in leading a discussion with students new to the content and unfamiliar with academic discourse.

One of the most vexing complexities involves finding the balance between structure and the lack of it—between controlling the content and opening it up for exploration. Without structure, discussions tend to wander off in different directions, and what should have been talked about isn't discussed. A single comment can take the discussion off track, and once it's headed in the wrong direction, it's tough to get it back. Open-ended explorations are potentially productive, but too often the wandering doesn't go anywhere and little learning results.

Of course, the solution to these meandering discussions is to structure the exchange. Teachers can keep the discussion on track by identifying beforehand exactly what topics will be discussed. Off-topic comments can be ignored or politely set aside.

But it's easy to make discussions too structured. That's one of the lessons we're learning about online interactions. When they're tightly scripted (make a comment, respond to someone else's comment, and then follow-up if someone comments on your comment) they aren't all that interesting and don't engage students all that effectively. Students will follow the script for their online exchanges but there's none of the spontaneity that breathes life into a discussion.

Discussion has two features that make it a powerful teaching tool. If different voices, different perspectives, and a range of experiences are shared, they can lead the discussion to new places. Ideas emerge that participants (including the teacher) haven't considered before. The comments flow, circle each other, and connect unexpectedly. Participants are engaged—with the content and each other. In a good discussion, you can feel the learning happening!

Secondly, discussions have power derived from their uniqueness. The combination of comments, questions, ideas, and insights shared in a discussion become a knowledge base created by that group. No other group has talked about this set of issues in exactly this way. What the group creates may not contain much, if any, new knowledge, but the group owns it. It's related to how constructivists describe knowledge creation. When a group makes meaning, it does so in ways that are meaningful to its members.

Overly structured discussions rarely accrue either of these powerful benefits. The tough challenge for teachers is figuring out how much structure is enough, but not too much, so that we can move the discussion where it needs to go while still allowing it to go elsewhere.

How does one prepare for these unstructured structured discussions? Maybe it starts with having a general sense of discussion possibilities, identifying some of the priorities, but being open to unexpected outcomes. What actions does this general orientation entail? Most of us launch discussions with questions, but we also head into the discussion having good answers to those questions. We take seriously our role as defenders of what the discipline has discovered or come to believe. However, knowing the answers can limit how we respond to what students offer. Perhaps our perspective on content needs to be less fixed, more open to other ways of considering how it looks and feels when it's first encountered.

Maybe we ought to track with an idea a bit further before concluding it's a dead end. So, the comment sounds off target, irrelevant, potentially misleading, but we might just need to hear

more. Maybe we've missed something in the student's thinking. Maybe it makes lots of sense to everyone else. Maybe it does it lead somewhere.

Lastly, one place that deserves strong structure, but often doesn't get it, is the end of the discussion. Discussion shouldn't just peter out or end when the class session does. Every discussion should conclude with time devoted to summary, integration, and new question generation. Interesting ideas can lay around for a while in a discussion, we need to reinforce learning by doing something with these ideas in the conclusion or letting students see if they can put them together in a sensible way.

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SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

by Sherry Zane, Ph.D.

As the higher education community continues to work to create a more inclusive learning environment, the needs of our gender-variant students are too often overlooked. This article outlines a few ways faculty can create an atmosphere that supports trans-identified and gender-nonconforming students.

Title IX protections

Our comfort zone as academics, regardless of discipline, is often built on basic academic assumptions and research that adhere to a male-female binary, which silences and invalidates transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and intersex individuals. Recent interpretations of Title IX legislation by federal and state institutions now require us to think and act beyond our comfort zones so we can protect our students' rights.

Title IX is part of the Federal Education Amendments of 1972, and all educational institutions (K-12 and postsecondary) must comply with this law. Many people are familiar with Title IX protections against sexual harassment and sexual violence, but few people are aware that Title IX also prohibits gender-based harassment "including acts of verbal, nonverbal, or physical aggression, intimidation, or hostility based on sex or sex stereotyping, even if those acts do not involve conduct of a sexual nature" (Office of Civil Rights, 2011).

Gender diversity

As educators it is our responsibility to reflect on and challenge our gender assumptions so we can create more gender-inclusive spaces where all students are free to be who they are. As a student reminded me last semester, "We must learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable" to create change.

Below is a list of strategies I use in my classrooms to support gender diversity. I hope they can help you shape more gender-inclusive spaces where you teach.

Set the tone

Create guidelines in your syllabus and communicate them on the first day of class:

- Syllabus: Write your name and what pronouns you use.

WGSS 1105 Gender and Sexuality in Everyday Life

Dr. Sherry Zane

She/her/hers

- In class: Introduce yourself and state what pronouns you use.

“My name is Dr. Sherry Zane, and I use “she, her, hers.”

- Syllabus: Include your school’s community mission and principles and connect those to written requests that students practice civility and inclusion of all perspectives, which includes students’ names and correct pronouns. All students should be referred to by the names and pronouns they use (e.g., she, he, they, ze).
- Request that students contact you if they have names that differ from the roster: “If you have a name that differs from the one that appears on the roster, please inform me before the second class period so that I can use your correct name and pronouns.”
- Find out where the gender-neutral bathrooms are in your building. List them in the syllabus and point out their locations during the first class.

Model desired behavior

To support our gender-variant students, we need to rethink roll call, become familiar with the importance of names and pronouns, and be willing to be advocates:

- Avoid taking attendance aloud until you have given students a chance to contact you with their correct names in case different names appear on the roster. Instead, pass out index cards, handouts, or a seating chart and ask the students to fill out name and pronoun information. You can also provide a form on your Learning Management System electronically if you do not want to do it in person.

Name on the roster:

Name you use:

Pronouns you use:

What are some of your favorite activities?

- If you have to take attendance verbally on the first day, use last names. Avoid making assumptions based on what the roster indicates or a student’s appearance. Oftentimes, a student who uses a name that differs from the roster will contact you via email or in person to let you know. The student will not want to experience any uncomfortable situations such as being “outed” in the classroom or misgendered by the instructor or peers.

- When facilitating a group discussion, ask everyone to identify their names and pronouns when they introduce themselves. If students do not wish to use pronouns, they can simply request that people use their names in place of pronouns.
- There will be times when you hear people make name/pronoun mistakes. Please correct them in a polite manner, even if the person being referring to is not present. For example, “I believe Sam uses ‘they, them, their’ pronouns.”

Preserve confidentiality

A student might have revealed a previous name and/or pronouns to you before changing it, or you might know what it is because you saw it on the roster. Do not reveal it to others. Comments such as “I knew Lisa when she was Dan” can be damaging to the student and also make the student vulnerable to possible ridicule.

- It is never appropriate to disclose to anyone the gender identity or sexual orientation of another person without the explicit permission of that person. If you do, it can be considered a violation of Title IX.
- Refrain from asking transgender students any questions you would not ask anyone else. For instance, you would never ask seemingly cisgender persons (people whose gender identity matches their biologically determined sex) personal questions about their anatomy.

Adopt more inclusive language

Incorporate new, more inclusive phrases to your vocabulary:

- Instead of using references to “men” and “women,” try “individuals of all gender identities” or simply “people.”
- Use “partner” or “significant other” instead of “boyfriend/girlfriend” or “husband/wife.”
- Avoid titles such as “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” and “Ms.”
- Instead of calling the class “guys,” use “folks,” “everyone,” “you all,” or “you.”
- Acknowledge the limits of the texts and research you use: “This study only focuses on cisgender heterosexual men and women” or “This study only focuses on cisgender women.”

Finally, if students talk to you about their gender identities, listen in a respectful and nonjudgmental way. Try not to show skepticism and/or disapproval. Instead, support the students by listening to what they have to say, especially when they may be offering constructive feedback for your classroom. It can be challenging to train ourselves to use new names and pronouns, but it is important to make a concerted effort and even make mistakes. Let students see you make mistakes, and then apologize and correct yourself. If students see that you are comfortable with being uncomfortable, they will learn to be, too!

This past year I worked with several transgender and gender non-conforming students to create an educational video meant for university instructors, administrators, and staff. It’s titled “Transcending Difference: Recognizing and Understanding Gender Diversity in the Classroom.”

References:

Dear Colleague Letter from Office of the Assistance Secretary for the Office of Civil Rights.
U.S. Department of Education – April 4, 2011.

http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104_pg3.html

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