An Eloquent, Insightful Teaching Philosophy Statement

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Ed.'s note: From time to time we publish teaching philosophy statements. Some not only articulately capture beliefs about teaching, they do so eloquently and with an uncommon level of insight. Here’s an example from Barbara Licklider, who teaches education and leadership courses.

I believe a good teacher, first, has a powerful faith in the future. Like the forester planting an oak seedling knowing he or she will never see the tree in all its glory, I know I may never see the fruits of my labors as teacher. My calling is to plant and nurture seeds that will grow and shape tomorrow.

The good teacher knows and understands students, how they develop and learn. I know that students actively construct and transform their own knowledge based on past experiences and prior learning. I know that students do not all learn in the same way or at the same rate. I believe it is my responsibility as a teacher to be an effective diagnostician of students’ interests, abilities, and prior knowledge. I must then plan learning experiences that will both challenge and allow every student to think and grow.

I believe a good teacher must also understand motivation and the effects of peer interactions on learning. I want all my students to achieve at high levels, so I avoid sorting them and setting them up to compete with each other. I know most learning happens through social interaction; therefore, I structure learning so that students productively collaborate and cooperate with each other the vast majority of class time.

The good teacher must know her subjects and how to help students learn those subjects. I know the good teacher must have a deep appreciation of how knowledge is created in the discipline, how it is organized and how it is linked to other disciplines. I use my knowledge of the discipline to expose my students to modes of critical thinking, encouraging them to analyze, apply, synthesize, and evaluate all they read and hear. I love the subjects I teach, and I know how to make them come alive for my students.

A good teacher cannot begin or continue to inspire learning without being a learner. The good teacher must constantly learn what is new in the discipline. In fact, the good teacher often helps to create new knowledge. To live this belief, I must continuously examine my teaching methods and find new ones.

To remain connected to my students, their lives and the schools in which they will practice their professions, I must be a student of society and the constantly changing worlds in which students live. I eagerly and willingly learn from my students as they learn with me.

I believe a teacher is the most powerful role model. I am ever aware of the awesome obligation I have to “walk my talk” with my students. If I ask them to live their values and beliefs, I must do the same. I expect the best — of myself and others — and, therefore, I usually get the best. I try to treat all people with dignity and respect, and I expect my students to do so also.

Despite writing a teaching philosophy, I really prefer to think about learning and helping others learn as opposed to teaching. I believe many of us have come to accept a working definition that teaching means giving information, which I believe is only the beginning of teaching and certainly only a small part of learning. When one gives information, it is so easy to equate learning with the memorization of that information. Memorization is not always learning because learning requires thinking. I am beginning to understand that the teacher’s greatest gift to the learner is helping the learner be motivated to think, and then to want to learn more.

I believe in the power of questions and questioning strategies to cause thinking. I constantly try to ask questions for which there are no “right” answers. I constantly work to become a better “questioner” for the effective use of questions is the most powerful strategy a teacher has to help students learn.

Finally, I believe a teacher lives to serve. A teacher is dedicated to learning, to his or her discipline, to his or her students, and to making the future the best possible place for all of us to live. These are the challenges I accepted when I chose to be a teacher. I remain committed to them.
Respect and Disrespect in Class

When students feel respected, they are more motivated, committed to the course, and likely to learn. And most faculty aspire to treat students with respect. The rub revolves around how respect (and its counterpart disrespect) ends up being defined behaviorally. What do faculty do that conveys that they value students, and what do they do that communicates disrespect?

E. Holly Buttner asked 228 undergraduate students to respond to these two, open-ended questions: “Tell us about a time when an instructor behaved toward you or another student in a way that you thought showed respect. What did the instructor do?” “Now tell us about a time when an instructor behaved toward you or another student in a way that you thought was disrespectful. What did the instructor do?”

Using a qualitative approach involving a systematic content analysis of responses, Buttner identified seven categories of respectful behaviors and six categories of disrespectful behavior. They are listed below along with the percentage of responses for the category.

Behaviors that show respect

- Recognition of student perspectives (29.6 percent) — asking for students’ opinions and taking their responses into account when making decisions, getting to know students individually
- Treatment of students (23 percent) — demonstrating kindness and concern
- Failure to recognize student concerns (19.6 percent) — asking for students’ perspectives and failing to learn names
- Recognition of student perspectives including making exceptions for students at the beginning of the semester
- Affirmation of students (10.2 percent) — confirming the value of students’ contributions to class discussions and other class activities; how instructors respond to incorrect answers
- Nondefensiveness (7 percent) — responding nondefensively to questions and challenges
- Class integrity (4.4 percent) — being honest and truthful with students, demonstrating trust in students, fair and impartial treatment.

Behaviors that show disrespect

- Insensitive treatment (53 percent) — instructor rudeness, arrogance, ridiculing, and putting students down in front of classmates
- Lack of help (16.3 percent) — ignoring students’ requests, refusal to provide assistance with assignments or missed class work
- Defensiveness (11.4 percent) — reacting angrily to student questions
- Failure to recognize student concerns (6.9 percent) — ignoring students’ perspectives and failing to learn names
- Classroom integrity (6.9 percent) — being treated unfairly, lack of truthfulness, lack of justification for instructional decisions
- Failure to respond to students (5.4 percent) — not responding to class concerns including making exceptions and altering assignments.

Buttner found that when students feel they and other students are being disrespected in class, they don’t come to class, don’t make an effort to participate, and often return the disrespect.

Clearly disrespect doesn’t just go in one direction. Students can and do act toward professors in ways that are disrespectful. Someone needs to ask faculty these same questions and similarly analyze their results. Buttner suggests that it might “be useful for instructors to collaboratively develop ground rules with the students at the beginning of the semester about respectful behavior for all members of the learning process, the instructor and students.” (p. 332)

Should We Require Attendance?

I’ve been thinking a lot about attendance lately. What got me started was a group of students attending a poetry reading sponsored by our local Literary Arts Series. It’s a wonderful series that brings to campus lots of different poets — some famous; some not so — who share a range of material. I’m a regular. The readings sustain my soul and feed my secret longing to one day write poetry.

In addition to us regulars there are always a few students at the readings, but most are there for points, not for poetry. They get extra credit for writing a reaction paper. I watched one such young attendee out of the corner of my eye. She yawned openly six times during one long, admittedly hard poem. When the poet announced that he’d read just a couple more, she looked at her friend and rolled her eyes.

There was nothing about her behavior all that unexpected, and I would be the last one to criticize my colleagues for requiring or otherwise extrinsically motivating participation in wonderful events like this. After all, college is supposed to be about new academic experiences, including artistic ones. And I know very well that a miniscule number of students would show up at a poetry reading on their own.

But it’s been bugging me nonetheless. Besides the points, did that student get anything from the experience? Did she learn that she might love poetry? Will she be back when it’s not required?

All of this is but a stone’s throw from those mandatory attendance policies that fill our courses with students who are there because they have to be. I know those attendance policies protect many students from academic disaster. My thinking on the topic has been informed and further troubled by a very comprehensive and well-organized summary of research on the topic. (See reference below.)

This article contains all sorts of evidence documenting the details of why and how attendance policies do and don’t work, as well as some interesting facts about why students don’t come to class.

Let me just list some of many items from various studies, all thoroughly discussed and referenced in this article.

• Several studies found that students reported that they were more likely not to attend a class if the teacher was poor or the class was boring, they didn’t feel as though they were learning, they knew the material already, or if they had work due in another course.

• A regression model found that students most likely to attend class were those whose instructors ranked them as most motivated and those who were paying for their education themselves.

• Another study found that across a collection of courses, attendance increased by approximately 13 percent when it was a course requirement.

• Sophomores miss more classes than freshmen, juniors, or seniors.

• Eighty-four percent responded on a survey that getting extra credit affected their decision to attend or not attend a class.

• Another comprehensive analysis of variables documented that number of absences alone accounted for 56 percent of the variance in grades.

• In a study that looked at the relationship between attendance and grades across multiple courses, the correlations ranged from $r = .29$ to $r = .73$

• In studies that compare student performance in courses where attendance is mandatory and those where it is not, performance is better when attendance is mandatory.

Any number of interesting questions emerge out of a collection of results like these, but there’s a bottom line difficult to dispute: for the vast majority of students, being in class makes a difference. I know it’s true for students in the courses I teach. I’m still worried that making them attend creates dependency on the policy. Students need to discover for themselves that being there makes a difference — to those grades that matter most to them at the moment and in their larger and more lifelong pursuit of knowledge. I don’t know if mandatory attendance policies teach that lesson. If they did, why do we still need those policies in upper-division courses?

Mandatory attendance policies excuse (is that too strong a word?) professors from the challenging job of selling course content and making students see that being there makes a difference. Other research has documented that students fail to see the relevance of much of what we teach them. That doesn’t mean we’re teaching irrelevant content, but we may not establish its relevance as clearly, consistently, and convincingly as we need to. From the front of the room things look different; we deal with content we know and love. We can’t imagine how it might look boring to someone else. And so we require them to be there. Do they fall in love with our disciplines? Do they experience the joy of learning? Some do, but many more do not. And on dark days I wonder if requiring attendance isn’t more related to problems than solutions.

So how do we get students to class and poetry readings? I wish I had the answer. I go back and forth. Currently I’m not requiring attendance but working on designing my courses so that students have early and personal confrontations with the consequences of not being in class. Students write a paper about a group activity completed in class. If they’re not in class, they can’t write the paper, and there are no substitute assignments. And this week, I’ve decided to invite five or six students who I think might enjoy poetry to attend the upcoming reading with me. I’m taking them out for dessert after. No points, but a personal invitation. And I’ll be watching how they listen out of the corner of my eye.

Online Lecture Notes Can Aid Student Learning

By Ryan J. Zerr, University of North Dakota
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Thinking back on my days as a student, I can recall classes where it was all I could do to get the day’s information down on paper. I was so busy transcribing the lecture that there was no time to think about what was being said or participate in any meaningful way. After class I would work to decipher what had been said, and then there would be the questions I wished I had thought of in class. Once I started teaching, I worried that some of my students might be falling into this same trap.

This concern motivated me to begin typing my lecture notes and putting them online one or two days in advance so that students could bring them to class. I was hoping that if students had much of the information that would be presented in class already written down, they would be able to think about the material as it was presented and become active participants in class. Having now taught a number of classes in this way, I would like to offer some of my insights on this approach.

So far, student comments on the online lecture notes have been universally positive. Since use of the notes is optional, students who benefit from bringing them to class use them, but those students who have a different learning style don’t. Many students who take their own notes during class will still obtain the online lecture notes and use them to fill-in or supplement their notes. My observation has been that not only do students appreciate having access to the lecture notes, the notes serve the intended purpose. Students are having an easier time keeping up with the ideas as they are presented in class. Additionally, they seem able to identify difficult concepts earlier in the course. Because they can keep up with the material, they are able to ask thoughtful questions during lecture.

Granted, this move to online lecture notes has raised some concerns for me. With a detailed set of my notes in front of them, I have found that it becomes very difficult to ask leading questions in order to elicit thoughtful discussions. Most of the answers to those questions are in the notes right in front of them. But, providing only a skeleton outline with too few details defeats my purpose. Consequently, I have learned that I must balance between providing too little information, rendering the notes useless, and providing too much information, making productive in-class discussions nearly impossible. When I get the balance right, students ask and answer questions that go beyond my prepared notes. In my experience so far, I am not finding that having complete notes available is negatively affecting attendance in class. I do not have more students absent than I did in previous courses where online notes were not available.

Ultimately I have found the online lecture notes to be a positive addition to my classes. Whether students bring them to class as intended or use them to verify their notes after class, I feel that students do benefit. Knowing that they have access to the notes alleviates the pressure of being recorders and allows them the freedom to be thinkers.

Problem-Based Learning: One Set of Lessons Learned

Because problem-based learning has come to mean so many different things, it is best to begin with a description. Rather than starting with content, PBL begins with a problem. Rather than posing problems with clear-cut, right answers, PBL presents students with less well-structured problems to which there are no single solutions. It is a learner-centered, not content or instructor-centered approach. It challenges learners to become increasingly responsible for their own learning.

Tim O. Peterson offers advice on successfully implementing PBL based on his 13 years of experience using it in various management courses, although he does not recommend it for all courses. He has found that three critical factors contribute much to the success of PBL: orienting the students, picking the problem, and forming the team.

Orienting the Students — “The first semester that I used PBL taught me two very important lessons. The first is that I had to become a problem-based learner myself. The second was that the new instructional strategy made the students anxious.” (And Peterson started using it with graduate students.) To alleviate student anxiety, he devotes the first two periods to exploring the strategy in detail. He provides handouts and discusses the educational philosophy behind the approach. He encourages questions and answers them carefully.

Picking the Problem — Good problems are not easy to define or to find. Peterson offers this advice: “You need to develop a problem that is ill structured, complex and ambiguous. The more the problem satisfies these three criteria, the more uncomfortable you will be with the problem. That’s all right. Do it anyway.” (p. 645) He opts for problems that mirror real problems or have roots in current events.

Peterson recommends having students complete a “scope statement” to define the problem for their team. These statements “identify what you are going to do (in this case the deliverable), for whom, why and by when. It provides both the students and the instructor with a clear statement of the outcomes of the PBL activity.” (pp. 638-9) In his experience he has found that having
Economic metaphors abound in higher education. And we’ve dealt with our share in the newsletter. The discussion of students as customers, as clients and education as a product has occurred in these columns more than once. Your editor felt that this was one of those topics we’d exhausted; she was wrong (again).

An article in the comparatively new pedagogical journal, Academy of Management Learning and Education, begins by explaining why metaphors are so important. “Metaphors are more than a matter of linguistics. They are cognitive structures that we use as a heuristic for sense making, to make abstract concepts more concrete. … Like mental models, metaphors imply a way of thinking and a way of seeing. Laden with rich symbolism, they illuminate particular aspects of an object, simultaneously casting other dimensions into their shadows. Entrenched metaphors eventually become invisible and taken-for-granted, limiting our ability to adopt alternative frames. When this happens, metaphors become barriers to change.” (pp. 187-88)

Economic metaphors are the focus of the article, particularly the metaphor of money and grades. Once the author lays out all the connections, the failure to see them illustrates the point that metaphors become invisible, assumed, taken-for-granted and detrimental.

Start by thinking about currency: it’s the medium through which goods and services are exchanged. “The beauty of currency is that it functions as a token of exchange that allows us to transfer value between unrelated markets. … Similarly grades are tokens of exchange that are ‘earned’ like currency.” (p. 188) Students do the work, and in exchange professors give them grades. Yes, they have earned another economic term) those grades, but they aren’t allowed to give themselves those tokens. The syllabus functions like a contract — it outlines the work to be done and specifies how the grade will be calculated for work completed. Most grading systems are outlined in detail: points replace letter grades, making the system seem more quantitative, more “objective.” Before this article, I never noticed an economic metaphor that has appeared more than once in my work: “elaborate point systems make classrooms token economies where you can get students to do anything for a point.”

Use of letter grades is almost universal. And a student’s collection of individual grades are added and averaged into a single numeric figure: the grade point average or GPA as it is widely known. “The GPA serves as an index that allows performance to be condensed into a single statistic. … The main purpose of the GPA is to provide a universally understood statistic that compares students across all contexts.” (p. 188)

And students can “cash in” with those GPAs. They are more likely to get into grad school, med school, or law school, and more likely to land lucrative first job than students with lower GPAs.

If grades are to be “meaningful indicators of excellence, their supply must be carefully rationed.” (p. 189) And so students are graded on a curve with only a small proportion getting A’s even though every one may have performed exceptionally. Enter another economic comparison. It’s tough to implement strict grading on a curve, and so we are now faced with this problem called grade “inflation.” Students are getting higher grades than their work merits, or so some argue.

And why is everyone so enamored of grades? Well, like money they are assumed to be value-neutral, standardized, and objective. And then there’s the assumption that money reflects real differences in value. “You get what you pay for.” And with grades, it’s the assumption that they measure real differences in performance. A student with a 3.98 GPA is assumed to be better (smarter, more skilled, more knowledgeable) than one with a 3.75. Most of us who have been grading students for any amount of time understand firsthand that their subjectivity and inability to measure many aspects of performance and potential.

In the rest of this carefully reasoned and well-documented article, the author ties many of the well-known and widespread problems with grades back to this economic way of thinking about them. Students are too grade oriented — the grade matters more than the learning. In fact, students have been known not to care (certainly to not complain) if they don’t get any learning so long as they get the grade. It is the grades-as-money orientation that feeds into and builds on the student as customer or client. Faculty rightly object. Our relationships with students are multi-dimensional. We also function as coaches, advisers, partners in the learning process, and sometimes even as friends.

The author recognizes that grades are entrenched in ways and to a level beyond the reach of individual faculty members. Single-handedly, even collectively at our institutions, we will not likely change the system. But she still challenges individual faculty members: “We should reflexively consider our underlying assumptions about grading and identify our implicit metaphors about the process. What messages do your grading practices convey about learning? As the granters of grades, the way we perceive grades, apparent in our course design, our interactions with students, and our grading practices, all influence our students perceptions of grades. The assumptions we make about grades condition the way learning takes place.”

This is a rich, rich article, filled with interesting insights and well-documented conclusions. It’s one of those pieces that merits individual review, but begs to be discussed as well!

Using Online Discussion Forums for Minute Papers

By Debra Vredenburg, Millersville University, PA
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Most of us are familiar with the informal assessment tool called the minute paper. Students write a short narrative about what they have learned about a particular topic covered in class. Many faculty use the minute paper at the end of a class period in order to gauge student understanding of the material. But there have been many successful modifications of the basic strategy. A number of them are reported in the well-known book Classroom Assessment Techniques by Tom Angelo and Pat Cross, who first proposed the technique.

I have used the minute-paper strategy previously and found it a useful assessment tool. Recently, I decided to change the format and make the minute paper online and interactive. In my courses, I upload documents to the university’s Blackboard website, a virtual learning environment that makes course materials available to students via the web. One of the features of Blackboard is the communication link, which allows instructors to create online discussion boards where students can post comments and reply to other students’ remarks. This feature presents the perfect opportunity to assess student learning via technology.

In a psychology research methods course, I used the minute paper during the last 15 minutes of a lab period. The lab portion of the course was held in a computer lab, which made Blackboard easily assessable to the students. At the completion of a lecture on identifying variables, I showed a video about the nonverbal signs of attraction during dating, a topic of interest to most college students. After the video and class discussion, students were required to post a comment on the discussion board and reply to a fellow classmate’s remarks. I gave them the following instructions: 1) describe what you learned today either from the video or class discussion; 2) describe one thing that you found fascinating about human behavior; and 3) reply to one of your classmate’s comments.

As the class was busily typing away, one student raised her hand. When I addressed her, she said, “This is weird.” Not sure I understood, I paused for a moment and then asked for clarification. “This is weird because we are having a conversation with each other without even speaking.” It struck me that she was right. Students who were shy and unlikely to speak during class were now communicating with others who were less inhibited about speaking in public. To my pleasant surprise, students were so occupied with this exchange with their peers that I had to remind them that the period was about to end. I learned that an online minute paper not only serves as an assessment tool for student learning, it can be an effective means for stimulating classroom participation. The experience has renewed my respect for this simple but valuable feedback tool.

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

FROM PAGE 4

students prepare these statements accomplishes several goals, among them reducing student stress levels by giving them a clear outcome to work toward and allowing them to engage in a “sense making” activity, an opportunity to create their own frame of reference for the problem.

Forming the Team — Unhappy with experiences that occurred when students were allowed to form their own teams, Peterson opted for a method that assembles teams based on students’ problem-solving preferences. He introduces students to work of Basadur, who sees four approaches to problem-solving. Students write reflection papers and form teams of heterogeneous problem solvers.

In sum of these lessons Peterson writes, “First, you must orient the students to this new learning paradigm. Don’t be surprised if the best students are the most anxious. You are taking away from them their security blanket and asking them to venture into the learning jungle unarmed. … Second, identifying the problem is critical. … Your role here is both lawgiver and coach. We are responsible for providing the students with feedback about whether they are on the right track. … Third, a method for assessing the students’ problem-solving preferences is essential. … Our role is to facilitate this process and lead our students to discover for themselves the excitement of solving real and relevant problems while thinking about their own thinking.” (pp. 644-5)


A couple of statistics worth pondering…

A recently released government report called “Trends in International Mathematics and Science” video taped eighth grade math classrooms in seven different countries. They found that on average teachers did 90 percent of the work on those classrooms. In the U.S., the ratio between teacher talk and student talk was 8:1.

Obviously, these are not college faculty or college classrooms, but would you bet on our statistics being all that different?

Assessing the ABCs: Online Tools
By Laima Rastenis, Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago
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In my classes I consider assessment in three areas, each relevant at a different time in the life of that class. At the beginning of a new class, a major area of concern for most teachers is attitude: Do the students like, hate, or don’t care about the subject? About a third of the way into the class, another question arises: Are the students using the textbook in a way that reinforces the material presented in class — are they even using the textbook at all? And lastly, how does the teacher demonstrate to students that grades have been compiled in a fair and equitable way. I call these areas my ABCs: Attitude, Book, and Compilation of grades.

At the beginning of class, I have the students fill out an Attitude Survey Sheet. Since the subject I teach is writing, I call my survey the “My Life as a Writer” questionnaire. A helpful online resource in composing a questionnaire for any discipline is: www.flaguide.org/cat/attitude/attitude1.php. How students answer my survey influences how I focus the course. For example, if a lot of my students really hate writing and don’t see its relevance to their chosen field of study, I will work extra hard in every class session to establish its relevance.

The second area is the textbook. Incorporating it in a meaningful way can be challenging. Many students are convinced that textbooks are expensive and unnecessary. I make the book an integral part of the course. However, I want to make sure I’m not believing what I want to believe. I want to make sure that my students are using the book. The best way to find this out and encourage a discussion on the matter is by having them fill out an anonymous survey. The website www.textrev.com will provide a letter via e-mail to students and compile a questionnaire for them. It will also analyze the results. The information I have received has helped me increase the effectiveness of texts in my courses tremendously. Sometimes I made adjustments during the course. Sometimes I’ve selected a new text for the next semester, and sometimes I’ve completely changed the approach I was using with the text.

The third area is assessing student work and compiling grades. This is probably the most difficult area. Students want a clear, fair assessment of their work. Probably the most important assessment tool teachers can use to guide their evaluation efforts is the rubric. Setting up a rubric to reflect all areas to be evaluated can be a daunting task. Fortunately, technology can help us once again. There is a free website for teachers: http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php. It helps teachers develop rubrics for a variety of disciplines by providing them with templates that can be customized.

It is difficult to cover all assessment needs in the course of a semester, but if teachers stick to the ABCs, they should get enough information to improve their teaching and be able to provide clear feedback to students, enabling them to understand their grades and learning better.

Engaging Students in the Learning Process: What Faculty Can Do?

Ed’s note: In the pedagogical literature, one regularly finds lists that seek to sum and distill the essence of successful teaching, to offer all the advice teachers need in a few over-arching principles. The objective is noble and difficult to achieve. Can all the complexities and vaguarities of teaching be so compressed? Can lists based on the experience of one be representative of the experiences of all? But still the lists are helpful. They return us to the basics and call us to confront the details of our own teaching. Here are condensed and abbreviated versions of two such lists. Tomkovich offers advice to those who teach principles of marketing, but marketing is not unlike many first courses in a major when it comes to involving students in the learning process, and Mann offers tips to new teachers drawn from her experience learning to teach in a nursing program, not unlike many professional programs in which teachers learn their craft.

Faculty cannot learn for students. Learning in the classroom (and out of it) is something students must do for themselves. But faculty can definitely make learning a more likely outcome of a classroom experience. They can do it with points and grades, carrots, and sharp sticks. But they can also influence the course of events by how they teach. Here is a list that not only identifies what you can do; it includes concrete ideas as to how you go about realizing some of these abstract ideals. There are many more concrete ideas in the article than we have room to list here.

Care
Tomkovich (reference below) uses a quote from former NFL quarterback and Congressman Jack Kemp to make the point: “People don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” Do it by offering to meet individually with students at the beginning of a course. If you’ve got too many students, maybe it’s something less time consuming like an individual e-mail welcoming them to class.

Be real
Be real by recognizing this hard, cold fact: many students would rather socialize, sleep, or exercise than study or attend class. A sizeable challenge confronts us in the classroom. Teachers have to work to make the content relevant — its value is not easily, obviously apparent to students. Teachers also have to work to connect with students. Do it by getting to class early and interacting informally with students here and there around the classroom.
ENGAGING STUDENTS  
FROM PAGE 7

Be prepared

Know what the current best teaching practices are. Keep up with new developments in your field. And be prepared to learn from students. Do it by creating plans for individual class sessions that include a variety of activities.

Find a classroom style that works for you

“If you don’t want to be in your own class, just think of how your students must feel. You need to love your class and love being in your class.” (p. 111) Do it by supporting your efforts with technology that works for you.

Laughter is good

It creates climates more ripe for learning. Do it by using self-deprecating humor. Make fun of your graying hair, flat feet, or widening girth. If that’s uncomfortable, start class with music playing in the background or share a favorite cartoon.

Have high standards

Have them for both your students and yourself. Do it by explaining the rationale behind assignments that work students hard. Do it by having a specific aspect of your instruction that you seek to improve every semester.

Teach with passion, evaluate with compassion

Instructor enthusiasm has been linked to learning by a variety of different research. “Is your shirt or blouse bone dry after class, perhaps your delivery was as well?” (p. 112) Compassion will “always allow a graceful exit from the stage.” (p. 112) Do it by allowing extra credit now and then, under some conditions.

Be humble

All knowledge does not emanate from the podium. “Openly admit to shortcomings and actively seek improvement.” (p. 113) Do it by “fessing up” when you honestly don’t know the answer to a question. (p. 113)

There is a time and place for everything

Instructors are busy but so are students. “The pace of our classes and the space in between our assignments are things within our control.” Do it by providing hints for studying for exams well before the exams. Add extra office hours before an exam or answer emails until 11 p.m. the night before the exam.

Go straight

“Trust is built by delivering on promises made.” Being straight also means helping students with decisions about their future and exploring the ethical responsibility. Do it by doing what you say you’re going to do (an apologizing when you don’t) and by regularly challenging the ethical aspects of decision-making processes.


Some Tips for New College Teachers

“Were I to make recommendations to a new university teacher, particularly in nursing, I would note these teaching truths.” (p. 389)

Do not use a red pen to correct

“It was only when I heard I was being called ‘Bloody Mary’ that I understood the implications of using a red pen for correction.” (p. 389) Colors other than red help to neutralize critical comments.

Set boundaries

If you teach in a curriculum where you see students in multiple classes, you come to know them well, too well. When all the difficult circumstances of a student’s life are known, it is hard to be objective and make professional decisions. “I keep a list of appropriate referral sources handy so that, when a student’s performance, or lack thereof, in class is the result of personal concerns, I can steer the student to help, and I can remain a teacher.” (p. 390)

If it isn’t written down, it didn’t happen

“As I listened to a student ask me, ‘Where does it say that I get 20 points off if the assignment is late?’ I was reminded of the phrase I had heard in nursing for years: if it isn’t written down, it didn’t happen.” (p. 390) Students cannot fairly be held responsible, if teachers have failed to put the rule in writing.

Attend every inservice on teaching you can

Yes, you will learn by trial and error in the classroom, but why not learn from and with others who have already been there?

Prepare for a new year, each year

“Every year is a new beginning with new students, new perspectives, new texts, new information, and probably new subjects to teach. And there you sit, with the same furniture arrangement, colors, pictures, memories and dust …. Take time before the new academic year begins to throw out, file and rearrange. My mantra as I put up a new abstract or move my diplomas to another spot is: ‘new year, new challenges, new look.’ But I still have the same motto on the door, although this time it is on lime green paper, and in calligraphy: ‘I am here to help you succeed.’”


A Thought on Motivation...

An article that explores how faculty can positively impact student motivation includes the following quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

“If you want to build a ship, don’t herd people together to gather wood, and don’t assign them tasks and work; but rather, teach them to yearn for the endless immensity of the sea.”

From Focus on Faculty, published for faculty at Brigham Young University, Spring, 2004.