

2005 Excellence in Teaching Awards Submission

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Pursuing Academic and Social Integration through Highlighting Individuality

Several years ago, a senior came to me and asked if I would write a letter of recommendation for him. I hadn't seen him or talked with him since he had taken my College Algebra class as a freshman. I told him that I thought a professor in his major field might be better qualified to write a recommendation. "That's just it," he said, "I know one of my major professors would be better, but the problem is that none of them know me." I told him that was impossible. Surely, I argued, he had a personal connection with at least one of his professors. "No," he said, "no one but you has ever known me." I didn't really know him either, but I knew his name and had talked with him about his hometown, Cincinnati, a place I had lived for several years. Somehow this, along with his good academic performance in my class, had given him the idea that I knew him well enough to write a letter of recommendation. After that conversation, I was left with an unsettled feeling. I wasn't convinced that his assertion was true, but knew he believed it to be accurate. Something is wrong if a student can attend a university for four years and, right or wrong, believe that few of his professors 'know him'. This belief had somehow reduced his individuality and importance. At the time, I didn't know that the same scenario would be repeated over the years. It now fails to shock me, but it still bothers me.

In every classroom, in every discipline, I believe that highlighting individuality is crucial to good teaching. I believe this process of involving students may be most crucial in mathematics and the sciences, disciplines that do not naturally lend themselves to discussions that might highlight individuality. This practice has an important place in my classroom, because I believe that it's necessary if today's students are to remain engaged and interested both in my subject and in higher education in general.

My practice of highlighting individuality in my classroom has two major components: name-calling and interviewing. Most of my students probably believe that the name-calling and small talk I initiate is natural and unplanned. It is, however, far from naturally occurring and is part of an organized plan to make students feel integrated into the classroom and into the social life of the university. A large body of research showing their value in educational practice supports these two components. First I will introduce the research supporting this practice, then I will outline the practical ways I implement this practice in my classroom.

Rationale

Involvement in an institution's social and academic community is vital to student success (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Tinto, 2000). However, not everyone naturally becomes involved in the academic and social life of the university. Nunn (1996) points out the difficulty of being academically integrated into the typical college classroom, especially in large first-year classes.

Although they are often seen as the gateway to broader campus involvement, first-year courses are ironically structured in such a way as to discourage student contact with both peers and instructors. Within these large classes, name-calling can significantly affect classroom interaction (Horne, 1986). However, many college students insist that instructors rarely learn their names, a practice that may contribute to a sense of isolation and alienation, especially during the initial year of study. Calling students by name is a way to show respect for students as humans, rather than impersonal units. As a part of verbal teacher immediacy, behavior that serves to decrease the physical and psychological distance between teachers and students (Christenson & Menzel, 1998), calling students by name captures students' attention in large classes (Frymier, 1994) and promotes interaction among students and between students and faculty.

Procedure

Name-calling

Before a semester begins, I begin learning my students' names. First, I access the photographic class rolls on the EASY system and familiarize myself with the students' faces. I cut and paste these so that I can take a photographic roll with me to class. During the first class meeting, I take about 15 minutes to interview 5-7 students, a process explained below, and then repetitively call on these 5-7 students during class. During the second class meeting, I call on the first 5-7 students and add a few more names to my repertoire by interviewing and then name-calling. I repeat this process, adding names each class meeting at whatever pace I can handle, until I have learned all the students' names and can call on everyone by name. I try to 'overspeak' the names by using a student's name even when it's not necessary. In this way, I can eventually say every student's name at least once per class period. For example, rather than saying, "The attendance sheet is coming around," I will say, "Carlos has the attendance sheet and is passing it around." If a student raises her hand, I'll say "Yes, Charlotte" instead of just "Yes." I arrive several minutes early in order to greet a few students by name and initiate a little small talk with them before class. Thirty students make up an average class size in my discipline, but I have had as many as sixty and have used this process of name learning successfully. When I call students by name, I find that they also learn each other's names quickly. Last semester I asked a student who had been absent if he would be able to get the assignment from one of his classmates. He said "I think I can get it from Erin." I said, "Is Erin in one of your other classes?" He said, "No, I've never met her but I've seen her around the dorms." He'd never met her, but he knew her name and was willing to ask her for the assignment. I believe that hearing other students' names called in class makes students feel like others are approachable. Through contact with their peers, they begin to become part of a community that can meet together, ask for help, and study together.

Interviewing

On the first day of class, I also hand out information cards. These cards ask for personal information such as major course of study, hometown and hobbies or interests.

The students are told that the cards are voluntary and that they are not to include anything they wouldn't want announced in class. Sometimes I get a blank card back, but most often, I get a small slice of the individuality of the student. I pull out the cards of the first 5-7 names I'm going to learn and have a discussion with each student. I first ask what he would like to be called – his official first name, a nickname, or maybe a last name. I then begin a short, public interview based on the card. I might say, "Tell me about your hometown in Minnesota," or "I see you're a surfer. Where do you surf?" or "You're majoring in musical theater – will you be performing this semester?" I then ask if others are connected. I might say, "Is anyone else from Minnesota?" or "Who else has a scheduled performance this semester?" Many students have an interest that translates into a public performance, so I like to continue with the chitchatting throughout the semester by asking students to promise me that they will tell the class when they have a swim meet, recital or play we can attend.

Costs and Obstacles

Everyone may not feel as if this practice is important or necessary. Some of my colleagues say that when they were students, they would have felt uncomfortable and embarrassed by this sort of classroom climate. They say that they would have preferred to remain anonymous. In using this practice, I have found that some students want to be the center of attention and others want to remain in the background, unnoticed. Whenever I sense that a student does not want to be recognized, I limit my conversation with her to a more private approach, either before or after class. Some students do not want to share on more than an academic level. I approach these students by talking almost exclusively about their work. In any case, contact with students should always be sensitive and flexible.

This approach costs very little monetarily. A few copies of the photographic rolls and the information cards are the only costs involved. The office support staff or the office work-study students could probably help with the clerical work. The real cost of such an approach is measured in the time and effort expended to learn students' names, call on them by name and show interest in their individuality.

The photographic roll is readily available and works well for me, but others have different methods. One instructor takes a group photo of her class and writes their names right on the photo. Another instructor hands out cardstock and tells students to fold it in half and stand it on their desks as a nameplate. The students store the nameplates in their textbooks and bring them to each class.

The information cards are just a tool to illicit information about students' individuality. Other ideas might include asking students to introduce a classmate after a short interview time, or asking students to write a short biographical essay about themselves.

This student-centered approach works well for me and is a central good teaching practice in my classroom. It does take a little of my class time, but is well worth it. There is no substitute for knowing my discipline and communicating it well, but connecting with my students in this way seems to lay a path for their readiness to learn and willingness to become involved in the life of the university.

References

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