

## Displayed a personal interest in students and their learning

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### Why this Teaching Method Matters

Several strands of research demonstrate that displaying a personal interest in students is not only nice, but necessary for real learning. Research in neuroscience and the physiology of learning demonstrates the strong link between emotion and cognition; in the absence of the strong, positive emotions engendered by caring, deep engagement, motivation and interest, little real learning occurs. Similarly negative emotions such as fear and shame, all too common in the college classroom, retard learning due to “choking,” the shutting down of higher-order thinking, and the activation of more primitive areas of the brain associated with the fight-or-flight syndrome (1, 2). Classic research in communication studies (3) also highlights the positive benefits of supportive environments that are descriptive, problem oriented, spontaneous, empathetic, and egalitarian versus defensive

environments that are evaluative, controlling, strategic, neutral, superior, and certain. Further, classroom-based studies and extensive interviews with students affirm the findings of the more theoretical studies cited above. Research on large classes demonstrates the positive effects of personalizing the large class on student attendance and motivation to learn (4, 5, 6). Undergraduate students repeatedly mention the importance of one-to-one interaction with instructors in supervised projects and the closer interactions with other students and instructors in small classes as important factors in their learning (7). Finally champions of a restoration of caring, community, and heart in the college classroom such as Parker Palmer (8) and Jane Tompkins (9) have met with widespread sympathy in higher education circles...for a reason.

### Applying this Teaching Method in the Classroom

A variety of strategies, most quite easy to implement, even in large classes, convey to students that instructors take a personal interest in them and their learning:

1. Learn students' names and use them when addressing students. Easy to implement in small classes, but in large classes, learning students' names poses a greater challenge. Assigned seats and taking (digital) photos of students, labeling them, and then rehearsing them at odd moments are strategies that have worked for many instructors.
2. Be available to students in ways that you judge are not too invasive of your personal boundaries. If your class is too large for individual conferences early on (or at some point) in the semester, other, less intensive strategies will also work. Arrive early to class and stay a little later and encourage students to seek you out at these times. Maintain regular office hours and encourage students to use them: some instructors require students to stop by during office hours once
3. Solicit and respond to student feedback. The simple, but effective, one-minute paper (10) lets students know that you care about their understanding and learning, and establishes a vehicle for communication between you and your students. Mid-semester evaluations that you create and use to fine-tune instruction midstream also convey to students that you care what they think and about their learning.
4. Create opportunities for students to engage actively in the classroom. Pedagogically sound because intentional engagement leads to more effective learning, creating opportunities for students to engage with each other and you during class time also creates a more personal classroom environment that helps everyone get to know one another better during the first few weeks of classes; particularly for reserved students, even the briefest visit breaks down psychological barriers, opening up the possibility for greater interaction during the rest of the semester. Encourage and respond to e-mail.

ter. During discussions and other interactions with students, really listen to them, striving to hear what students are really saying, not what we want to hear and/or assume students are saying (11).

5. Connect classroom material to students' experience. David Ausubel, the noted educational psychologist, said that the most crucial element in learning was what students already know, that is, what was within their experience (12). But making connections between academic material and students' personal experience also conveys an interest in students and their learning.

## Applying this Teaching Method Online

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Many of the recommendations above apply to the online environment, but while the principles apply, the mechanisms can be different. For example, maintaining interaction in the online environment requires the use of available technologies either embedded in utilities like course-management systems or in other mechanisms such as Wikis, blogs, or social networks. Also, don't forget old technologies like the telephone. A personal call (or more likely now, an exchange of text messages), can establish a dialogue that supports ongoing communication. You can also assess students' progress frequently and send status or other reports that provide feedback and keep students aware of their performance levels. Maintaining e-mail contact, setting a positive, open, and constructive tone from the start, and establishing reasonable expectations for the immediacy of communication (e.g., Do you really want to be available "24-7"?) will help as well.

At the start of on-line classes, ask students to share brief introductions of themselves with other members of the class through the use of webcam or cell phone videos. Photos and written introductions can suffice if video introductions are too technically challenging. Some online platforms provide students with customizable profile pages. Encourage students to complete their profiles so you can get to know them better. If the online platform is inviting enough, some students will enjoy the opportunity to design their own "space" on the platform. Be sure to insure the security of the system and tell students that submission of the information is requested, not required.

If a class is large (hopefully, on-line classes will be restricted in size) organize the class into small groups to facilitate more interaction. To get to know students better, you could monitor or periodically join in small group

discussions, rotating throughout the semester. Periodic Skype/video conference meetings will work well too, if these are possible. Integrating different types of discussion boards into the class also promotes interaction. You can establish open areas for everyone's participation, private group areas for working teams, and even individual spaces for one-to-one communication with students. Ask a trusted student to be a liaison between you and your students. This person is someone to whom other students can send opinions, questions, or comments which s/he can then transmit to you anonymously. Having this mechanism reduces the anxiety many students have about raising questions or problems and further demonstrates your interest in students' progress.

Another approach is to ask students to find websites, news stories, and other online resources of relevance to the course, using some kind of social bookmarking service (13). Encourage students to look for connections between course material and their personal and professional interests. This, too, will help you learn more about your students and their interests.

It is very important to respect students' personal boundaries in online environments. It's easy to send a student a "friend request" on a social networking site, but that student might not want you, their instructor, to see their personal profile on that site. Worse, they might feel uncomfortable declining your friend request since are the instructor. Don't put your students in this position.

## Assessing this Teaching Method

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Various assessment approaches may help determine the extent to which you display a personal interest in students. Perhaps the first place to start in assessing how effectively you display a personal interest in students is by examining your own views about teaching. Various typologies of teaching [see, for example, Anthony Grasha (14), Daniel Pratt (15), Thomas Angelo and Pat Cross (16), and David Kember (17)] reveal approaches to teaching that are more content-oriented and those that are more student-oriented. Displaying a personal interest in students may be more consistent with the latter than the former. Asking a colleague to observe you in the classroom may also be helpful. Like any enlightened peer review process, meet with the colleague before the actual observation and discuss your concerns and the strategies that you are trying to implement to display a personal interest in students. After the observation, meet with the colleague again, perhaps over coffee or some other relaxed setting, and compare notes.

Include a mix of objective assessments of knowledge

or skills and other assessments that requires more personal responses from students. Doing this will allow you to know more about students, especially in on-line or distance courses. And as noted above, creating a student liaison position lets you hear from students who might otherwise be hesitant to express opinions or ask questions.

Finally, solicit feedback directly from students themselves. Targeting the extent to which you display a personal interest in students and their learning in a mid-semester evaluation is one possible approach. Another is using techniques often referred to as Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID, 18) or a newer iteration

titled Quick Course Diagnosis (QCD, 19, 20). Performed by a third-party such as a trained staff person at a teaching and learning center, the approaches eliminate the disturbing outliers sometimes found in student ratings comments (e.g., “You remind me of my mother, and I can’t stand her”) that monopolize our attention, blinding us to more common reactions to our teaching. Since the extent to which we display personal interest in students is indeed a very personal, and potentially a sensitive matter, an approach that produces and communicates a more objective consensus may be a better way to determine how effective you are at establishing rapport that encourages interaction while maintaining appropriate teacher-student relationships.

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