

Student Engagement and Connection: Two Important Factors Often Not Emphasized In Teaching At The University Level

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Abstract

The search for teaching excellence extends beyond basic cognitive issues to address non-cognitive needs. The affective tenor of the classroom literally contributes to or detracts from student learning. Some common teacher behaviours may cause negative student feelings, interfere with student motivation, and stymie learning. The paper makes a case for the role of student engagement and connection as the most important factors for successful teaching since individuals' affective reactions are the basis for cognitive shifts. Successful teaching must develop the whole student rather than solely deal with cognitive skill deficits. This has underlined the need for caring teachers.

Key words: Student engagement, Connection, Feelings

Introduction

All decisions we take in life largely depend on our feelings but we like to think that our decisions are based only on facts. Even when we think of the choice of our friends, where we live and the jobs we do, they are based on our feelings. Often times we may support our choices with strong and logical arguments but all of it will anchor finally on our feelings which are our emotions and instincts. In teaching, there is a strong belief that when the teacher is properly trained he or she is equipped with the knowhow to deliver excellently well in the classroom. This assumption unfortunately is not always true. Even though this might be a necessary condition but it is not a sufficient one to deliver good teaching. What augment the knowhow are the feelings of the teacher. In our daily life we are drawn to people who treat us with respect and those that value us. In fact we expect courtesy as we meet people all the time. We expect to be treated as valued customers in any transaction whether it is teaching or other encounters. Even among colleagues we expect the same treatment. Why is this so? It is because all human beings need ego massage and this is true of the teaching situation. Feelings help the teacher to appreciate that they care about meeting the needs of their students.

In the business world every company tries its best to please its customers. Unfortunately, in the teaching profession this is far from the case. Teachers' behaviour towards the students is that of masters to servants or superiors to subordinates. Respect is not mutual between the two parties. The teachers expect courtesy and respect from their students but oftentimes do not give same back. The teachers have forgotten that their students have feelings that must be assuaged before learning can really take place. The teacher student relationship is very important for students. Students spend approximately 5 to 7 hours a day with a teacher for almost 9 months in a year. We ask ourselves, what is considered a good teacher? All of us have gone through schooling, and if fortunate had a favourite teacher. A positive relationship between the student and the teacher is difficult to establish, but can be found for both individuals at either end.

The qualities for a positive relationship can vary to set a learning experience approachable and inviting the students to learn. A teacher and student who have the qualities of good communications, respect in a classroom, and show interest in teaching from the point of view of the teacher and learning from a student will establish a positive relationship in the classroom.

Students have different strategies for learning and achieving their goals. A few students in a classroom will grasp and learn quickly, but at the same time there will be those who have to be repeatedly taught using different techniques for the student to be able to understand the teaching. On the other hand, there are those students who fool around and use school as entertainment. Teaching then becomes difficult, especially if there is no proper communication. Yet, teachers, creating a positive relationship with their students, will not necessarily have control of all the disruptive students. The teacher must create a learning environment approachable for students in the universities. Student disruptions will occur frequently in classes that are poorly organised and managed where students are not provided with appropriate and interesting instructional tasks".

The key is, teachers need to continuously monitor the student in order for him or her to be aware of any difficulties the student is having. Understanding the students' problem, fear, or confusion will give the teacher a better understanding the students' learning difficulties. Once the teacher becomes aware of the problems, he or she will have more patience with the student, thus making the student feel secure or less confused when learning is taking place in the classroom.

The communication between the student and the teacher serves as a connection between the two, which provides a better atmosphere for a classroom environment. Of course a teacher is not going to understand every problem for every student in his or her classroom, but will acquire enough information for those students who are struggling with specific tasks. A significant body of research indicates that academic achievement and student behaviour are influenced by the quality of the teacher and student relationship. The more the teacher connects or communicates with his or her

students, the more likely they will be able to help students learn at a high level and accomplish quickly.

The Theory of Engagement focuses attention on student motivation and the strategies needed to increase the prospect that schools and teachers will be positioned to increase the presence of engaging tasks and activities in the routine life of the school. The student sees the activity as personally meaningful, the student's level of interest is sufficiently high that he persists in the face of difficulty. He or she finds the task sufficiently challenging that he/she believes he/she will accomplish something of worth by doing it. The student's emphasis is on optimum performance and on "getting it right."

The feelings of the students count

Teaching is viewed as routine and boring. In this teachers need to consider the feelings of their students. For the students contact with the teacher may not be routine. They have expectations built into their feelings. Unfortunately, in teaching we tend to think of the students we encounter as strangers, or faces in the crowd. This does not have to be the case. On the job opportunities for friendship are limitless. This is because the students that we are in business to serve want to be treated well. They want to be treated as friends. The truth is that human beings tend to avoid people with whom they have had a negative experience. In teaching, student that cannot avoid the teacher tend to think about the next move of the teacher to unsettle him or her as the teacher is delivering the lesson.

The emotive climate of the classroom literally contributes to or detracts from student learning. Mike. (2000) has underlined the need for caring teachers. Mike also studied student motivation for 20 years and have tied it directly to empathy.

The personality of the perfect mentor is a person who is able to focus on the needs of another. It has been established that personal growth is tied to the evident support of a caring person. Tschohl (2007) developed Human Relations Training to teach "helpers" (whom they define as teachers, not just counsellors) how to interact effectively with students regardless of their emotional state in order to guide them in a positive learning direction. Bloom (1956) developed taxonomy of the affective domain, which attempts to describe how individuals' affective reactions are the basis for cognitive shifts and notes also that cognition or thoughts can trigger affective reactions.

Howard Gardner has identified individuals who seem to have strong interpersonal skills and others who do not. Robert Diamond's new publication on designing courses and assessing curricula introduces the importance of the affective component of classroom interactions. Mike (2000) dared to state that students' EQs (emotional quotient) are as important as their IQs.

Unnecessary diversion to technology as solution

In the search to improve teaching particularly in the universities, attention has been turned to the search for technology – the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) – as the ultimate saviour. This in the researcher's opinion is misplaced. While ICT is welcome, the fundamental role of feelings of the teacher and the feelings of the students must be emphasised and got right before ICT can compliment.

The incessant shout of integrate technology, change the curriculum, use collaborative learning, stop lecturing and start teaching, assess student learning, design departmental assessment instruments and start publishing only in top notch journals are only effective when anchored on the notion that the students for which we are employed are seen as our customers! How are customers treated? Of course, customers are treated with smiles, courtesy and warmth. Do you see these attributes in the universities? The answer is no. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators expect excellent performances from their students. Before the researcher is seen as championing the cause of the students, that is not the goal. The goal is to affirm persuasively that emotion and interpersonal relationships either allow and support the mastery of content or entirely derail the learning process.

Next to knowing your subject well, understanding the feelings of students is a "prime directive" of effective teaching. If students feel alienated, they shut down or they argue or drop out or fail or form in their memory nasty evaluations of their teachers, and, most significantly, they do not learn. Viewing students as recalcitrant, ignorant, rude, uninterested, or underprepared sends teachers into the classroom with a stereotyping that prevents them from establishing a productive learning environment.

Taking a cue from the family

Feelings are what bind families together. Students are primary members of the teachers' families in the university setup. Feelings are not difficult to deal with. Feelings parallel intelligence in learning. To imagine learning as separated from feelings is to traffic in dangerous fantasy. Teachers in the universities are accustomed to this fantasy, however, and they are more comfortable accepting feelings importance only when they manifest in excess: when students get angry, when emotions intensify, and then tempers flair. The ensuing atmosphere erases any possibility for learning.

It is important for teachers in the university to understand that breakdowns in classroom communication can be addressed. A lot of literature describes various programmes designed to teach students how to resolve conflict, deal with emotions, and argue effectively. They often assume that all teachers know how to do so. In truth, university teachers may need some assistance in learning how to interact with student questions, emotional reactions, opinions, and direct confrontations. Rather than feeling held hostage by uncivil students, university teachers can learn how minor shifts in their own approach can contribute to student learning and satisfaction.

Students carry many non-academic problems with them when they enrol in the university. Therefore, the successful teacher must develop the whole student rather than solely deal with cognitive skill deficits. Teachers indicate that motivating students to learn and to participate in learning activities may be the most difficult task, especially in working with students. Related affective characteristics, such as self-regulation and academic procrastination, can be influenced by motivation. Glaser (1990) has reported that procrastination "compromises an individual's ability to set and achieve personal, academic, and career related goals" through self-regulated behaviour. Furthermore, Goldstein (1993) states that students who can self-identify skill areas that need improvement and are motivated to pursue assistance to gain appropriate skills are self-regulated. "The conscious development of self-regulation is the task that might distinguish developmental education programs from other postsecondary education programs" (p. 3). Some teachers, especially those in the universities, declare that it is not their responsibility to motivate students. These teachers need to engage in professional development quickly. It is, indeed, the responsibility of the teachers to help students sustain the motivation that led them to enrol in courses at the beginning of the semester and strengthen that motivation as the semester progresses. Teachers are challenged to try to determine how and when students lost their motivation and help them regain that initial vision. Of course, motivation is a team effort: No teacher can motivate a student who does not want to join the effort.

Glaser (1990) recommends these strategies for motivating students: define course goals and help students think about personal learning goals, make use of students' interests and background knowledge, show the relevance of material, teach students skills for independent learning, and give helpful and frequent feedback.

Helping students set goals is critical to maintaining motivation. Unfortunately, many teachers assume that undergraduates are adults who have well-defined goals for their lives and they should recognise what it takes to achieving those goals. It is the responsibility of the teacher to help students set both short- and long-term goals. At this point professional teamwork is vital, and the teacher may need to call on the counsellors to help. Goal setting may well be the factor that determines if the student will complete his course and continue in school long enough to achieve those goals.

Goldstein (1993) reported that students who have clear goals are more likely to succeed in schools. An effective education teacher helps each student create a vision and see how the course and everyday activities help to achieve that goal, a first step that should be repeated throughout the student's academic career.

Developing and maintaining positive self-esteem is important for students. Although some of them do not show it, they often have low self-esteem, especially in regard to academic work. Teachers can help students overcome those perceptions that impede learning by using suggestions from research: create a supportive environment among students, enhance self-esteem through positive comments, simplify objectives and learning, use success in learning to promote student satisfaction, demand specificity in learning, advise and coach frequently, and avoid excessive negative feedback.

Conclusion

The relationship between student and teacher, if it is to be maximally productive, must reflect certain attitudes and commitments of each to the other. Specifically, three elements must exist in a student's relationship to a teacher:

First, the student must respect his or her teacher and hold him in the highest esteem, for this is a necessary prerequisite to accepting his advice. Regarding someone who is only giving factual information, and not assuming the role of mentor, this condition becomes less critical. In relation to a counsellor, however, the student needs to feel deference and admiration, for this creates a willingness and desire to receive the teacher's instruction, even though this instruction may be uncomfortable and disconcerting at times.

Secondly, the student must trust the teacher's concern. The student must believe that the teacher always has his or her best interests in mind. If the student would sense some ulterior motive, some self interest, or even carelessness in the teacher's instruction, he or she would not be able to surrender whole heartedly to the teacher's advice, and this would make the entire exchange meaningless.

Finally, the student must commit himself or herself to following the instruction with utmost discipline, for only then can the intended effect be realized. Just as a doctor's orders must be followed precisely, since failure to do so could cause more harm than good, so a teacher's "prescription" must be obeyed with equal conscientiousness and deference to his superior knowledge and authority.

The teacher also has three levels of responsibility to his students in relation to giving advice: The first is fulfilment of the prerequisite of getting to know his students individually, to probe the innermost depths of their hearts as well as examining the outer details of their lives. As the teacher's familiarity grows, so the potency of his advice deepens proportionately.

Secondly, the teacher must express love and affection toward his students. It is this affection that dissolves the students' natural tendency to resist being told what to do. Thus, the advice can penetrate more deeply and effectively.

Finally, the teacher must take time to reflect upon his students' progress, refining and adjusting his vision of how best to influence them toward positive change. This is an ongoing requirement because students quickly "outgrow" old advice, and the categories of what is beautiful and what is ugly change with each new stage of growth.

If there is any more skill for university teachers to learn, it is that of their students. The care, with which, he sifts through various options, seeking that which will satisfy and beautify, is truly an act of love. The measure of a teacher's affection is reflected in his concern for his students' "appearance" - that their personalities be balanced and well proportioned, that they feel at peace with themselves and their environment, which they utilise their talents and fulfil their potential. If the teacher's instructions come from such a place of loving endearment, then he will save his students much wasted effort in their journey toward self-fulfilment and service of God. In contrast, the advice

of a teacher who lacks such concern will be less potent. His behaviours evidence his own immaturity and narrow mindedness, factors which make his instruction more arbitrary and, necessarily, less penetrating.

The primary task of the teacher is to design engaging tasks and activities for students that call upon students to learn what the school has determined they should learn, and then leading students to success in the completion of these tasks. Teachers are, therefore, designers and leaders, and the role of teacher needs to be redefined to reflect this view. To redefine the role of teacher, it will also be necessary to redesign every other role in the school, including the roles of the superintendent, the board of education, central office personnel, as well as principals and parents. All of this redesign must reflect a clear understanding and acceptance of the fact the schools should be organized to nurture engagement as opposed to produce attendance and compliance.

Teachers may as well take this to heart that students favourite teacher will be recognised because they had at least in one way or another the qualities that have been discussed in this paper, although teachers are not aware of it during the time they teach the students in school, but teachers are well recognised at a later time of the students' lives.

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