

Our Students Are Geniuses: Helping Them Believe It, Too

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Two of the most important components of creating effective classrooms, whether online, hybrid, hyflex, or face-to-face, are connecting with students and providing opportunities for them to connect with the course content. My main goal when designing activities and assignments is to make content come alive and feel pertinent to students' career readiness and success outside of the classroom. Students need to feel that they have a stake in their learning.

Many companies, such as 3M, Google, and Target, allow employees time to develop creative projects to stay engaged and enculturated in the organizations they work for. It is important that students have creative freedoms as well, and I build opportunities for creativity into the courses that I teach in the business department. I teach a wide variety of courses including statistics, law, and communication, and I have found this technique to be a very empowering and self-reflective activity for students in all my courses. It is also a great deal of fun for me to grade and mentor students as they work on their projects.

We begin the genius project on the first day of the semester. I use ice-breaker questions at the beginning of each class meeting to get everyone talking and getting to know one another in a non-threatening way. The first questions I ask all my students are, "What is your area of expertise? What makes you a genius?" Many students do not think of themselves in this way and so many responses sound something like, "I do not have an area of expertise," or "I am not a genius at anything." I have learned that this activity must be prefaced with a preliminary discussion of what a genius and expert are so students are prepared for these questions.

I ask students how they define genius, including real-life examples of individuals they consider geniuses. This allows students from diverse cultures and backgrounds to name individuals whom they are familiar with that others may not be. This is a built-in opportunity for students to define geniuses based on cultures, histories, and experiences they may not have previously been aware of. After we identify geniuses, I ask students to dig deeper into what characteristics make these individuals geniuses. Students often identify traits such as creativity, intelligence, and adventurousness. I encourage students to then think about a time when they have displayed these traits as well, and reflect on how they, too, are geniuses. Helping students break down the term and then apply it to themselves can result in some significant answers to the initial ice-breaker question: "What makes you a genius?"

I use many strategies to encourage students to avoid providing the answer they think I'm looking for. I encourage students to take risks and think outside of the box during discussions so they feel more comfortable doing so with assignments, as well. The strategy is to create a culture of safety and risk-taking that allows students to explore, create, and use their imaginations to connect content with their lives outside the classroom. Their education becomes more than just memorization and passing a test—it has meaning.

When a class discussion is winding down, I always ask students to provide one more answer to the question or predicament. Some of the best responses come from creative, outside-the-box ideas that everyone initially laughs at, but after additional consideration, bring value and novelty to the conversation.

I encourage students to make mistakes and learn from them. Some of the best class discussions have come from mistakes that were made and recommendations from the group about how to remedy the mistakes. Again, students must feel safe to make mistakes and ask for help in order to take risks. In creating this culture, I provide students opportunities for revision and resubmission on projects based on feedback from myself and other class members so there is continual and collaborative learning. I ask students to learn about each other's areas of expertise so they can use the network of resources in the classroom while working on their projects. I see students gain confidence in their personal areas of expertise as they begin to trust others with their ideas and open up to feedback.

Another strategy that is incredibly useful is problem-seeking, rather than problem-solving. I ask students to examine the content we are covering and find problems within it rather than solving the problems they know already exist. This encourages students to be proactive and forward-thinking in their approaches. I have students spend ten minutes individually problem seeking and then I ask them to work with one or two other classmates to share ideas. Then as a class, we come together and share the problems we have identified.

I also make it clear that there are many different ways to complete the assignments in my courses. I provide a list of ways the assignments can be completed, but encourage students to think of new and different ways they could complete the projects, as well. This is often a new concept for students to consider. As the semester goes on, they become more comfortable with their own creativity when completing the tasks. We have mini-meetings to discuss the projects they are working on and what the expectations

are for the outcomes to provide clarity. I provide a rubric for each assignment and ask students to think about the objectives of the assignment as they prepare their project.

In allowing students to use their own genius to demonstrate their learning and understanding of the content, they develop a sense of accomplishment and empowerment in the classroom because they can show their best work in their best way. I do have students who choose to take traditional true/false and multiple-choice quizzes, but I have far more students who choose to demonstrate their competency and understanding through other means.

Taking risks and becoming experts in the classroom is a daunting task for many students, but we can offer them the challenge of becoming geniuses by recognizing that they all bring critical knowledge, histories, and experiences to the learning environment. My past students' course reviews have noted they feel the information they learned will be helpful in the workplace, as well as in the classroom. Risk-taking, empowerment, and asking questions are the skills of great leaders, and teaching those skills in the classroom help students gain confidence in the workplace as leaders.

Julie Stewart, *Adjunct Instructor*, Business and Management

For more information, contact the author at Community College of Aurora, julie.stewart@ccaaurora.edu.