



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Nurturing Classroom Engagement

A student's involvement in classroom discussions is largely based on his or her experiences during the first class of the semester. It is during this crucial period that a classroom's culture begins to develop. Students analyze verbal and nonverbal cues from their peers and professor and use this information to determine how they will interact throughout the course. Most students choose the safe option and avoid situations in which asserting their opinions could result in ridicule. To overcome this natural inclination, students must believe they are in an atmosphere of trust and respect. This article discusses six factors instructors should consider when creating positive classroom experiences for students and the instructor. The six key factors discussed below include:

- Establishing an Environment of Trust
- Respect for Students
- Enthusiasm for Course Material
- Organizational Skills
- Instilling a Sense of Accomplishment
- Unique Approach to Teaching

The above factors are not mutually exclusive; in fact, many of them are associated with one or more of the other factors.

Establishing an Environment of Trust

I believe the fear of being ridiculed is the most significant factor inhibiting a student's willingness to be involved in classroom discussions. Individuals have a deep-seated fear of failure and public humiliation. This is especially true in the case of students, most of whom are young and have not developed a mature identity. Disregarding their youth, students have an opinion. What 18-year-old doesn't want to share his or her opinions with the world?

An instructor's tone, demeanor, and actions are immediately analyzed by students and impact their expectations for the coming semester. Paying attention to these factors minimizes the power differential between instructor and students. The power differential theory states that there is inherently greater power attributed to the person giving help compared to the individuals receiving help. To cultivate trust, instructors need to be genuine. Instructors need to display their work faces, but also let their home faces peek through the facade. In other words, instructors should know how to conduct a classroom, but also know how to share their personalities and interests with their students. For example, I often share with students my past struggle to become a certified public

accountant (CPA). It took me four times before I was able to pass the CPA exam. I explain to students that test results do not determine what makes a good employee or team member, but that work ethic and practical application of business acumen are more important in the business world. My struggle humanizes me to students because most of them can relate with being a poor test taker. An instructor shouldn't expect students to express themselves or ask questions if the instructor doesn't do the same. Instructors need to be genuine in their communication with students.

Respect for Students

Does the instructor consider teaching a job to generate a paycheck and gain tenure or is it a career path chosen because the instructor has a passion for educating the next generation? Unsurprisingly, students can tell the difference between an instructor motivated by a paycheck and an instructor motivated to inspire students. Students are savvy at determining their instructor's viewpoint and can quickly decide whether they are viewed as unique individuals with strengths and weaknesses or as a part of an enrollment initiative. Students want to be valued and they want to be respected. An instructor who understands these desires and strives to connect with students—whether by learning students' names or greeting students at the beginning of class and asking about their weekends—conveys to students the value the instructor places on their relationships. To connect with students on a personal level, I use a polling app in class to gather information about students' course loads, job statuses, and other topics that impact their classroom involvement. I genuinely want to know who my students are. After the in-class poll, students and I engage in an informative, informal class discussion about students' priorities and motivations.

Enthusiasm for Course Material

Individuals who are enthusiastic and passionate about their lives can positively affect the people around them. People are drawn to them, wishing to share in their exuberance. Students are subject to the same pull. They *know* when an instructor loves the course material and genuinely desires to pass on their knowledge. While pursuing his bachelor's in accounting, Shane Wiglesworth, a former Harford Community College student, had a business law professor who began the first class of the semester with a speech about his frustration with students and their readiness for the course. Wiglesworth attributes the general demeanor his professor expressed on the first day, and every class thereafter, as the reason for minimal student involvement. Conversely, while pursuing his

massage therapy license, Wiglesworth had an instructor whose enthusiasm for the subject matter was apparent. The instructor was vivacious and knowledgeable, always willing to converse with students and provide them with “tricks of the trade.” The instructor set a tone of openness which invited classroom discussion, all the while being able to maintain a structured and orderly environment.

Organizational Skills

Students prefer concise course guidelines detailing what is expected of them throughout the semester. Most of this information is discussed during the first class; it provides students with the ability to analyze how they will juggle their course loads, work lives, and free time. The first day of the course is one of the most crucial days for instructors to be organized. Instructors who clearly communicate their course expectations to students and allow students to ask questions begin creating an engaging environment for students on the first day. I find it beneficial to ensure course materials are provided on the college’s learning management system (LMS) by the first day of class. Course materials include an electronic copy of the course syllabus, links to publisher content, copies of PowerPoint slides, relevant articles, and a clear course schedule or calendar.

Instilling a Sense of Accomplishment

Human nature motivates us to crave achievement and acknowledgement for our accomplishments. I have found it beneficial to begin a course with a simple classroom activity that sets the tone for future classes. The activity can be a quiz, poll, or small group assignment. The challenge is to devise a task students can successfully complete on the first day of class. In my Introduction to Business course, I give students a simple 5-10 question quiz about basic business concepts. The quiz highlights topics most students are already familiar with. These basic questions allow students to discern what they already know and enables them to leave class with a sense of accomplishment. When students accomplish a task, they gain confidence, which helps them face other hurdles in the future.

Unique Approach to Teaching

Instructors need to be challenged to break the mold. If students attend class and are faced with the “sage on the stage” model from the late twentieth century, they tend to automatically tune out the instructor. If students are greeted with something unique and engaging they are more willing to come back to class with a positive outlook. Shane Wiglesworth once had the experience of walking into a class to find the instructor had pushed the desks and chairs against the classroom walls. The students were then instructed to sit in a circle on the floor. Initially, students were taken aback, but as the class progressed the uniqueness of the situation triggered classroom discussions.

Conclusion

The six factors examined above significantly impact student engagement. The seeds of classroom

culture are sown during the first day of class. The first day of class is particularly important for framing the norms, expectations, and rationale for your class approach by tapping into students’ internal motivations and creating a supportive class community.

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