



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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IMPROVING CLASSROOM RETENTION

After reviewing comments students have made on my course evaluations over the years, I believe I have identified at least three reasons for my extraordinary success with classroom retention: students like my personality, feel they learn from my teaching style, and respect me. At the urging of my colleagues, I prepared a report on my retention rate and a companion article on retention strategies. Perhaps others can find something of value here and combine it with their own unique methods to improve classroom retention.

A Winning Personality

I put students at ease quickly by blending the formal and the professional with informality and comfort. I talk candidly and frankly with students, and I use humor frequently. Some students say there is a “laid back” atmosphere in my classroom, that I am down-to-earth, and that I am a stand-up comedian! Student comments include: “She makes class fun.” “Talks in tones we are able to comprehend.” “[She is] not intimidating toward the students.” And my all time favorite, “She’s cool to the max!”

I empathize with students, telling them that I remember what it was like “on the other side of the academic fence,” and I give them helpful tips that I learned (the hard way) as a student. Many students see me not only as an English instructor, but as a friend, mentor, or counselor. Comments include: “She connects with the students.” “She makes it to where you are comfortable talking to her.” “She really talks to the students rather than talk at them.”

Blended Teaching Style, Consistent Grading Protocol

While I lean more toward demonstration, providing examples to explain a concept or skill and demonstrating how it is used, I find that it is in blending the four traditional teaching styles—authoritarian, demonstration, facilitation, and delegation—that I serve all students best. For example, when lecturing on study skills

or the rules of standard written English, I adopt a formal authoritarian or instructor-centered style. I explain the rules and give examples; students listen, learn, and practice. When I speak about social issues or work on students’ essay drafts, I shift to a student-centered approach and serve as a facilitator. I keep students on task, guide them by posing questions, and help them recall and apply techniques or skills. When reviewing textbook materials, I delegate, placing the responsibility solely on the students to read, analyze, annotate, or outline chapters or articles. I serve as a consultant as students discuss the material, complete exercises, or work on projects. Students have commented: “She makes me confident in my writing ability.” “She always answered our questions and was direct with answers.” “She has a way of making students want to do a good job.”

I take assigning grades very seriously, expect students to perform, and strive to grade all work fairly. I provide a checklist for each assignment, including the specific elements on which the student will be graded. Students use the checklist as a guide during the writing process, and I use it when grading their papers. The checklists have helped improve students’ writing skills, clarified what is expected, and reduced the number of questions and complaints about grades. Comments from students include: “Explains clearly what she expects.” “Always gives good feedback on our papers.” “Makes it clear what is needed and expected of me in the class.” “Grade easier!”

I distribute handouts, worksheets, and examples; include symbols and mnemonic devices when writing material on the board; and explain complex concepts in common terms. Class sessions typically consist of a blend of lecture, discussion, and group or independent work. This shift in activities embraces different learning styles, reduces tedium, and makes the class more interesting.

My enthusiasm about English is contagious. When I talk about the wonderfully useful semi-colon, my students are amazed at the simple rules. When I proudly reveal my “secret formula” for writing persuasive academic essays, students smile and nod their heads when they realize that the dreaded task of writing an essay



may not be so bad after all. When I excitedly show how Toni Morrison reinvented the slave narrative, analyze an Emily Dickinson poem on the board, or talk about the blazing red A in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, they too become excited about analyzing these works and finding the social commentary. Comments from students include: "She is very interesting, enthusiastic, and really loves what she does." "She makes English exciting to learn."

I usually utilize the contextualized learning model, showing students how they can apply the skills they are learning in English to other classes, projects in the workplace, and situations in their personal lives. Students have the freedom to select writing topics that interest them; relate new concepts and skills to those they already know; write a research paper on a topic related to their major; write a critical analysis of a magazine article, song lyrics, or a movie; compare and contrast two advertisements; or write a letter to the editor of a newspaper. We work on mathematical word problems to strengthen students' deductive abilities. Sometimes I add a logic puzzle as an extra-credit option on an exam. Students have commented: "Uses clever ways in presenting examples of the topic." "She relates her topics to real life."

However, I occasionally yank them out of their comfort zones to try new things and ponder new ideas; produce an original creative work—such as a poem, a painting, a drawing, or a photograph—that addresses a controversial social issue and then present their work to the class; or complete a descriptive writing exercise, using vivid words to "paint a picture in the reader's mind," incorporating both personification and simile.

Finally, students enjoy talking about virtually anything in my classroom, and we have lively discussions about a wide range of social issues. I challenge them to share their opinions and be open to others' viewpoints, as well. We discuss topics of global, national, regional, and local concern—so there is always at least one topic of interest for everyone. Typically, we hear from those students who initially were reluctant to speak out in class.

Showing Respect

One student wrote: "She respects us as adults and individuals." I show respect for my students by not treating them like children. They are expected to complete reading assignments outside of class and come to the next class prepared to discuss the material, complete a project, or answer questions.

Another student commented: "She is not the 'traditional' English teacher, and that makes me like the class much more." At the beginning of each semester, I

tell students something about myself and ask them to introduce themselves in a paragraph or two. They are surprised to learn that I was once a hairdresser, a dental assistant, an administrative assistant, and a singer in a country band! This makes me seem less intimidating. I also tell them after I quit my job to attend college full-time, I completed the final two years of my undergraduate studies in a single year and went on to complete my two-year master's program in a single year.

Another student wrote: "[She is] very knowledgeable of her discipline." I lecture without referring to notes or the text—I have memorized my lectures. I touch upon some advanced concepts students will learn later on in their academic careers, recite poetry, and quote from classic works of literature.

One student stated that I was "very understanding and flexible." I go out of my way to help students succeed. I repeat material in class when students indicate that they are confused, or I ask a student who understands to explain it to the others. I meet with students to go over material in detail, have them visit the learning resource center, or find a tutor for additional help. And I encourage them with a simple "yes" or "exactly" when they give right answers or make relevant points in class. Sometimes, just a single word of praise from an instructor will keep students in class short-term and maybe even in college long-term.

Conclusions

Retention is a winning situation for everyone. It could be argued that student retention begins with the enrollment process. In fact, we should strive to make the application and financial aid procedures as effortless as possible. Some believe that retention should be the primary concern of counselors and learning resource centers. And, obviously, capable and caring admissions counselors and tutors are extremely important to student success. Others feel that retention should be left to the administrators who, indeed, are concerned about "the numbers." However, although everyone plays a part, the responsibility of retaining students ultimately rests with the faculty. To keep students in college and produce more graduates, we must first keep them in the classroom.

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