



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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GETTING TO KNOW STUDENTS BY LETTING THEM KNOW YOU

Day one in almost any class is a bit like breaking into a long-forgotten tomb of an Egyptian pharaoh—dead silence. We all know the feeling—there’s simply no interaction; the classroom is a dead zone. No one knows anyone else; students sit there in stony silence, waiting for the instructor to wave the magic wand and start the teaching process.

As we proceed through the course, we make progress in breaking down communication barriers—e.g., we use various strategies to help students get to know each other. However, only a select few become much more than just names on a roster, no matter how hard we try to develop a better understanding of what drives and motivates them, what their interests are, or what they do for fun. Yet, to become a true learning college, where student learning is the primary, overarching goal, we need to have more than a superficial acquaintance with our students. I have discovered several techniques that work well in my classes, and they can work in yours if you are up to a bit of self-revelation!

The first week of class, after playing a trivia game in which students work in small groups and begin to talk with each other, I distribute a questionnaire that they must complete at home and bring back for the next class period. Students must answer these questions:

- What is your favorite TV show, type of music, and shopping experience (among other “favorites”)?
- What would you read if you had plenty of time?
- How much money would it take to make you feel rich?
- If you could ask a Supreme Being one question, what would it be?
- What person currently living do you admire the most?

Of course, I advise students that they are not required to answer all of the questions and that their answers will not be shared with the class. I explain that I ask the questions hoping that the answers will help me get to

know them on a more personal basis. I also promise that I will answer these questions in class after I have had a chance to digest their responses. Students’ answers to these questions are illuminating [and, occasionally, disturbing], and I trust that so are my own. They are, in fact, the first step to revealing myself to my students, and they seem genuinely to appreciate the effort! Sometimes, before answering these questions in class, I ask them to guess about what my answers might be and why. Sometimes I am exposing a stereotype or two (“What? A 60-year-old professor likes Metallica?”). Invariably, communication between teacher and students, and among students, improves significantly after we complete this activity. In fact, in no time at all, I notice that the few minutes before class begin to hum with conversation.

Our Management and Human Resources program teaches that effective, respected managers know their employees—and that getting to know them normally requires managers to reveal something of themselves, as well (Johari’s Window comes to mind!). At one point in the semester, students are graded on their performance in a one-on-one mock job interview. Of course, honest, open communication is as critical in this exercise as it is in real-world situations. To motivate students to complete the activity with enthusiasm and to help me be a better advisor, I set aside 30 minutes for a class session titled “Ask The Professor.” I say to my students:

This is your chance to ask your professor anything! We’ve spent a number of weeks together, and I’ve asked you lots of questions. Now it’s your turn! What questions do you want to ask me—personal and/or work-related? Want to hear my opinion about an issue or world event? Do you want to hear about something embarrassing or silly? Do you want to know about some of my favorite things, my likes and dislikes? You name it, I’ll answer it!

Students write down their questions and hand them to the designated shuffler and examiner; this student



reads each of the questions aloud—and I answer them *all!*

Want to get honest feedback from your workers as a manager? Let them get to know you! Of course, you likely have questions about this process. The most-asked question about this process is, “How do you respond to really personal questions?” [By the way, no *really* personal questions have been asked; students have been respectful of my privacy. I have had my share of jokesters in class, but none has ever trespassed the bounds of good taste. Should that happen, I would treat the situation as a “teaching moment.”] You are the best judge of your comfort levels and should address the situation when and if it occurs. We all have decisions and events in our lives that we agree were not our best or turned out badly. Revealing them to a group of students must be an individual call! But I have shared some situations from which I learned valuable lessons and succeeded in spite of the mistakes I made. Perhaps these are also valuable lessons we can teach our students.

Responding to students’ questions can be fun! It is an activity that has never failed to capture student attention. Students learn that professors are live human beings, just like them in many ways. Most important, students become more willing to communicate on a substantive level that carries over into a critical real-world skill—managerial communication. A give-and-take relationship with the professor can remain professional while allowing for healthy self-revelation.

And guess what? They still call me “professor” when they talk to me before classes or when we meet in the hallway. The important issue here is that they talk, and that helps me do all of those other jobs—advising, guiding, and mentoring students as they work toward entering that new career.

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