

## We Teach Much More Than Our Disciplines

More than two decades ago, a teaching and learning colleague of mine passed along a lasting nugget of wisdom. On that particular day, we shared some of the daily struggles and challenges our students faced. While we both worked with students who lacked basic academic skills, all of our students had non-academic challenges to address; challenges that presented obstacles to their progress. These included homelessness (functional and actual), domestic violence, substance abuse issues, financial challenges, childcare challenges, and health concerns.

Effective teachers provide engaging opportunities for students to discover that their studies have purpose and that their individual efforts affect their success. And they pay close attention to, what I dub, The 7Rs. These seven interrelated areas for personal development—Relationships, Relevance, Rainbows, Resources, Responsibility, Reflection, and Resilience—are integral to classroom and life success.

- **Relationships.** We need to help our students develop the “soft skills” of personal connections: meaningful connections and networks for a greater purpose. (Side note: It is interesting that soft skills seem to be making a resurgence in both the literature and what business leaders want in their employees. In short, the topic of relationships appears to be a little “sexier” to talk about and advocate for in the workplace.) How do you help your students focus on supportive networking?
- **Suggested Strategy.** Begin face-to-face (or online) relationship building the first day of class. (See my article “The First Day of Class: People Before Paper” *Innovation Abstracts*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 14, May 1, 2015.) In addition to whatever community building exercises you use to help students get to know one another, consider what you will share about your journey in higher education or life in general. While being mindful of boundaries and limits around what you share, this introduction to you as a person can go a long way in setting the tone for the class and the semester.
- **Relevance.** Demonstrate for students that their learning in the classroom has relevance to their lives and future careers. If there is no relevance, then why waste a portion of their lives (and yours) dumping arcane and isolated pieces of data into their heads?

Einstein reportedly said, “Education is not the learning of facts. It’s rather the training of the mind to think.” What innovative methods have you used to make your classes consistently relevant?

- **Suggested Strategy.** I made a promise to my students the first day of each semester: “If, at the end of a class session, you cannot apply what you read for class and/or what we discussed in class to your life outside of the classroom, then I failed you that day.” So, whether I delivered a lesson on the catalysts for the Declaration of Independence or the application of test-taking strategies, I always worked to make relevant connections to their lives beyond campus. Bring in current events, campus issues, and/or topics specific to your course content. Again, if it is not relevant, then why teach it?
- **Rainbows.** Every student comes to campus with dreams. Some arrive laser-focused. Others come a bit confused. And, according to national surveys, somewhere around 50 percent will switch their majors. When students can see their own brightly colored rainbows, then their own purpose comes into clearer focus. Their campus experiences have more relevance (see above). Now that is inspiration! How do you help your students articulate their dreams and take the specific steps they need to move toward those dreams?
- **Suggested Strategy.** Even the best students need a little cheerleading at times. They need a reminder not to give up on their rainbow. In addition to regular outside-of-class communications throughout the semester, I found that a targeted email about four weeks from the end of the semester reminding them that “Now is My Time” works as a booster shot for their energy. (See my blog post “Now is My Time” at <https://stevepiscitelli.wordpress.com/?s=now+is+my+time> for the specific wording and more about this strategy.)
- **Resources.** Think of the times you may have struggled in your chosen calling. Even the seasoned songwriter and author may hit the wall and come up dry from time to time. The prolific salesperson experiences a slump. And even the straight-A student will eventually run into her toughest professor ever! Your students will never be in another place in their lives like your institution, with so many resources dedicated to their success. However, they have to do two things—know about the resources, and use the resources.

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What effective strategy do you use to help your students “collide with resources?”

- **Suggested Strategy.**  
Help your students find key resources with my “3-in-15” approach. Ask various student services and reference professionals (financial aid, career center, and the library, for example) to come to your class and share the three most important resources in their area for student and life success. And limit their presentation to 15 minutes. This helps to focus student attention as well as the guest speaker’s presentation. As an added bonus, once the presentation is completed and the students have asked questions, consider a “field trip” to that resource’s part of the campus. Then the students will have (1) heard about the resource, (2) discussed the resource, and (3) visited the resource.
- **Responsibility.** I have met a lot of people with ambition. I have worked with individuals who had potential. But I have found that without initiative, the first two will not amount to much. All three are needed: the desire (ambition), the ability (potential), and the drive (initiative). The sweet spot is the intersection of all three. This takes discipline. You and your colleagues can craft magnificent lessons and provide spot-on resources, but if the students do not do their part, they will not succeed. How can you help your students clearly identify and work toward their priorities?
- **Suggested Strategy.**  
Just as fuel in the gas tank alone won’t get us to a destination, hope without action will not get any of us to our Rainbow (see above). We must push the gas pedal. Hope needs to be combined with planning and action in order to get to the destination ( $H + P + A = D$ ). Encourage your students to identify the “non-negotiable” parts of their lives. These are the priority items and actions that will help them move toward their dreams. They should also identify their “negotiables” that have become distractions on the way to their destination. The best place to start this is with an accurate log of how they use their 168 weekly hours. Until any of us know how we use our Resources (time, for instance), it is difficult to understand where we need to make adjustments.
- **Reflection.** As much as the “what” of their education is important (their major concentration, for instance), students need to understand why they are doing what they are doing. Knowing the “why” behind the “what” can help keep them moving even in those tough days (mid-semester blues). Do we give students time to truly reflect on what they are doing in class and in their lives?
- **Suggested Strategy.**  
Have the students draw a line down the center of a piece of paper. At the top of the left column,

they write the word “VALUE,” and at the top of the right column, they write the word “TIME.” In the VALUE column, ask them to list three things that are the most valuable (the biggest priorities in their lives right now). These are their non-negotiables (see above). In the TIME column, they list the three things that take up most of their time each week—not counting sleep. The final step can be an eye-opener. When they look at what they say they value and how they actually use their time, do they see any disconnections? The VALUE column represents the stories they tell themselves. The TIME column represents the stories they live. None of us are completed projects. We have the opportunity to continue to evolve until we stop breathing.

- **Resilience.** We live multi-dimensional lives, and so do our students. We are not “just a student” or “just a teacher” or “just a [you fill in the blank].” If we don’t take care of ourselves, if we don’t maintain a sense of balance, how will we be able to reach our goals? While labels might differ, we essentially have six dimensions to our lives: social, occupational, spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional. We have to keep them in tune and balanced. When one dimension (say, emotional or physical or social) is out of tune, it will affect the others. How do we help our students understand they need to maintain a healthy balance in their lives? We have tutoring rooms. Do we have resilience rooms?

- **Suggested Strategy.**

When one or more of our life dimensions goes off the tracks, that is the time to Hit The Reset Button (H.T.R.B.). Make well-being a non-negotiable emphasis on your campus. Help students become more attuned to their energy levels. That includes diet, exercise, and proper sleep. (Our faculty and staff can use these as well.) Guest speakers, workshops, quick-hit articles in the campus newspaper, and posts on social media can keep well-being in the forefront. Relationships and Resources can also help (see above).

Success is the product of small, yet consistent choices we all make and do (or don’t do) each day. The 7 Rs, when faithfully applied, can help our students stay the course, continue their journey, and enjoy growth and resilience.

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