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Spring 2019

SPACE: Symposium for Part-Time, Adjunct and Contingent Educators, June 22, 2019

Teaching Skill Studied:

*Relatability.* One point that was stressed at the conference was the importance of being relatable in the classroom. A relatable instructor can inspire students to perform to the best of their abilities. To the extent that it's possible and appropriate, teachers should get to know their students, while simultaneously allowing students to know them. In presenting yourself to students—your interests, preferences, beliefs, etc.—it's important to be truthful and genuine. Students can detect inauthenticity, which impedes relatability. More so than other universities I've taught at, our students at CSUSB can lack confidence in their academic abilities. By getting our students to “see” themselves in their instructors, we can help them to thrive academically and persevere through difficulties.

Impact on Current Teaching:

To improve my relatability with students, I employed four tactics in my Fall 2019 and Winter 2020 classes. The first three essentially involved eliciting more information from students and disclosing more information about myself. The fourth involved a change in my grading procedure.

First, I extended student introductions on the first day of classes. In philosophy, our classes are capped at 32 students. This allows me to conduct introductions at the beginning of the quarter. (A larger class would obviously make this difficult or impossible.) I've always conducted first-day introductions, but this year I've had students talk more about themselves. I asked students to introduce themselves by talking about where they are from, which high school they attended (since most of our students are from the Inland Empire region), what movies or television shows they've seen recently, what genre of music they most and least enjoy, their favorite and least favorite foods, sports teams, cities, and animals. I did not force students to answer every question, but I gently encouraged them to do so. Before going around the room, I first answered each of these questions myself. I then allowed students to ask me personal questions (within reason, of course!).

Secondly, throughout the quarter I regularly made an effort to tell students about my weekend plans. At the end of the week, I would mention to students what I had planned for the weekend if I had something interesting or fun lined up. I would also ask students if they had anything interesting planned for their weekend.

Thirdly, on the first day of the quarter, I mentioned to students that I have a cat (named Risotto)

and a dog (named Suki). For the rest of the quarter, I brought pictures of my cat and dog and displayed them on the marker board at the front of the classroom.

Lastly, I implemented a grading change. I started taking improvement into consideration when calculating grades. By this I mean that if (say) a student performed poorly on an exam earlier in the quarter, I would allow the student the opportunity to overcome their poor grade by substantially improving on a later exam. For instance, suppose a student received a ‘D’ grade on their first exam. If that student improved significantly on their second exam, then I would “forgive” (to an extent) the initial ‘D’ grade. I usually did this by taking the average of the two exam grades, then substituting that for their first exam grade. My rationale for doing this was that a more flexible and forgiving instructor is more relatable and “human”—and this flexibility could perhaps serve to motivate students who have stumbled.

#### Assessment/Evaluation:

To my knowledge, three of the four applications to increase relatability with students were largely successful. By extending first-day introductions, I was able to create better connections with students. I grew up in nearby Moreno Valley, and I often have students who are also from Moreno Valley. When a student mentions that they are from my hometown, we instantly have something in common. I’m able to follow up with questions about what part of town they’re from, and we almost always end up discussing street names or local businesses as points of reference. I will often tease these students if they’re from a different part of the city than where I’m from or if they attended a rival high school. The teasing is good-natured, of course; the best part is that the student usually returns the good-natured teasing. I’m also familiar with other local cities, and so I’m able to chat with most of the students in the class about where they’re from—not just those from my hometown.

A similar point applies to the other questions I ask during introductions. When students and I are fans of the same sports teams, or of music genres/artists, or television shows, we have an instant connection. Furthermore, even when students and I vehemently disagree or have divergent preferences in sports/music/TV/etc., I find that connections are still forged. For instance, I’m a big Lakers fan. Sometimes some of my students are Clippers fans, much to my dismay. These students and I will often talk throughout the quarter about our teams (regarding wins/losses, trades, injuries, etc.). Indeed, last Fall when the Clippers beat my Lakers on opening night, a student, and Clippers fan, brought me a Clippers shirt to wear in class. (I wore it in absolute shame!) The point is, regardless of what answers the students give to the questions during first-day introductions, their answers provide the opportunity for developing early and lasting connections.

In fact, it occurs to me that simply showing a genuine interest in students creates connection. When students introduce themselves on the first day of class, I remember some of that information going forward (of course, I can’t remember it all!). Throughout the quarter I refer to this information—whether it’s about one’s high school, favorite animal, sports team, etc. Remembering this information conveys to students that you care about who they are as individuals. But to know some of this information about students, you must *ask* them. This

brings us back to the significance of extending first-day introductions to include various personal questions.

Regarding extending introductions, I should mention that I now spend the majority of the first day of the quarter having students introduce themselves. I think the extra time spent is worth it. In addition to developing relationships with the students in the room (as noted above), I find that these extended introductions create a more comfortable classroom atmosphere, which is important going forward. In my philosophy classes, it's crucial that students engage with the course material. Philosophy is not just about learning and memorizing what intelligent dead people have said about various issues. It's about becoming a clearer and more critical thinker. And the way to become a better critical thinker is, well, by thinking critically. But if students are just absorbing information in a philosophy classroom, they're not necessarily sharpening their critical thinking skills. To sharpen those skills, students need to engage the ideas of others (including their classmates)—ask questions, offer criticisms, etc. This sort of engagement flourishes in an environment where students feel comfortable and safe expressing themselves.

Regarding the second and third applications above—discussing weekend plans and posting pictures of my pets each day in class—they, too, improved relatability. I'm a big fan of heavy metal music. As such, I regularly attend concerts. If I were planning on attending a concert over the weekend, I would tell students briefly about which performers I was going to see and where (I usually did this at the beginning of class prior to taking attendance). I found that students were interested in hearing about this information—and they would almost always ask me about how things went at the beginning of the following week. I also found that students began disclosing to me (and the class) their plans for the weekend. I, too, would ask about how their plans went the following week. In doing this, we (the students and I) come to see each other as more than just “student” and “professor”—we see each other as individuals with lives that extend beyond the classroom. The same point applies to showing pictures and talking about my pets on a regular basis. It's such an easy thing to do. I'm convinced that some of my students last Fall and Winter were more concerned about my dog and cat than they were about me by the end of the quarter. They would constantly ask me about how Suki and Risotto are doing and if I could bring them to class. And on days when I would forget to show pictures, students would remind me to do so.

The fourth change that I implemented this year involved taking improvement into consideration when grading. I'm less certain about whether this tactic has improved my relatability. Certainly students that benefit from improvement are happy(ier) about having benefitted, but I find it difficult to know whether my forgivingness has promoted relatability or connection in any meaningful sense. I still plan on grading this way for the foreseeable future because I think it better aligns with life and failure in the “real world.” But this issue takes us beyond the scope of this report.

May 2, 2020