

Encouraged student-faculty interaction outside of class

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Why this Teaching Method Matters

One of the most important factors in students' success in college is interaction with their teachers (1). Student-faculty interaction outside of class can take many forms: office hours either in-person or on-line (2), e-mail exchanges, serving as an advisor for a club, volunteer opportunities, and small group gatherings are just a few examples. For many—particularly those in large lecture courses—these more individualized interactions offer the deepest kind of learning experiences by enabling students to ask questions related to their own struggles and interests, to take responsibility for their own intellectual development, and to make more personal connections with their teachers.

It is important to note that students may be reluctant to seek out or interact with faculty beyond the classroom for a number of reasons. Students may be first generation students who are easily intimidated by faculty in general, and during the first out-of-class interaction they may have no frame of reference regarding social protocol in such a situation. In order to provide additional encouragement, some faculty make coming for a short visit during an office hour an early assignment in the course. This often “breaks the ice” regarding future interactions. Of course, out-of-classroom interactions do offer a mixed blessing for faculty. Conversations with students about

the course or the discipline can be enriching both professionally and personally, but also can become extremely (or even prohibitively) time-intensive, especially for faculty with large numbers of students. Because student and teacher roles and expectations in these interactions are far less structured and more diverse (3), they require careful attention in order to be successful. As you consider the strategies below, pay particular attention to your scores on IDEA items #1 (displaying interest in students), #2 (helping students to answer their own questions), #13 (introducing stimulating ideas), #15 (inspiring students to set and reach challenging goals), and #18 (asking students to help each other). Item #20 correlates closely with these areas and with IDEA learning objective items #23 (learning to apply course material), #24 (developing specific professional skills), #29 (learning how to find and use resources), and #32 (acquiring an interest in learning more).

These items correlate highly because their basis is in personal interactions that limited classroom time may not always allow. Outside-class contact often provides the vehicle for personal and extended interaction and such opportunities can lead to a more productive classroom process as well as enhanced learning.

Applying this Teaching Method in the Classroom

Here are some strategies for effective student-faculty interactions outside of class, including approaches for addressing common challenges or pitfalls.

Be clear about boundaries of time and space. Before the start of the semester, think through issues such as: How would you like students to address you? Do you want your students to call you at home or not? Is it OK for students to visit your office outside of posted office

hours? How long should your students expect to wait for an e-mail response from you? Is it appropriate to be “Facebook Friends?”

Recognize that interactions are part of your teaching. From a “teaching-centered” approach, interaction outside of the classroom may be relatively limited. However, with a more student-centered approach external interaction beyond casual conversations are encouraged where

feasible. As such, they deserve the same awareness of communication, organization, and of your role as teacher (and the power it holds) that you have while working in the classroom.

Be aware of your students' individual learning preferences and your own teaching style. Because one-on-one interactions offer the opportunity for more tailored conversations about students' gains and struggles with the course material, style differences are particularly important to notice and attend to (3). Don't assume that all students employ the same learning model; indeed, students use a wide range of approaches to learning (competitive vs. collaborative, avoidant vs. participative, dependent vs. independent [4]). Similarly, consider what role(s)—such as information expert, personal role model, discussion facilitator, evaluator, consultant, etc. – you are most comfortable playing (5).

Be mindful of professional and personal roles. Additional interactions will blur professional and personal lines. With increased external communication and interaction, students will likely see you in a much less formal manner. This works well in some situations, but for those who wish to maintain very strict formal relationships external interaction may be more challenging. In order to facilitate a productive relationship keep roles and boundaries clearly defined.

Students may not all want contact outside of class. It is helpful to consider that within the class there are large personality differences. Some students will gravitate quickly toward opportunities to interact with you outside of class; whereas others will do all they can to avoid these additional contacts. A refusal for out of class interaction may well not be a personal rejection, but rather nervousness or a very busy schedule for your student. It is easy to be quickly drawn to those more affable students and at times assume that there exists a relationship between their eagerness for interaction and their interest and accomplishments in learning. At times it is the quiet and socially awkward student who needs the most attention and may also be the student who has the best grasp on the course material.

Make the most of office hours. Many faculty members find that even though their office hours and location are clearly marked in the syllabus, students rarely visit (except perhaps right before an exam or afterwards with grade complaints). Consider some of the reasons why students might not attend your office hours more regularly: Do they know how to find the location? Are they concerned that they won't know what to talk about or that their questions will seem stupid? Would they be more comfortable in pairs or small groups?

As noted earlier, one strategy for addressing these ideas is to require students to sign up for and attend an office hour visit very early in the semester. These can be brief sessions, and can focus on something non-threatening, such as a student information sheet, or an ungraded diagnostic response paper or other initial assignment. For large courses, you could save time by having students come in pairs or small groups; this has the added benefit of enabling the students to get to know each other.

Consider holding office hours at times amenable to student schedules. For instance, if classes start on the hour on your campus, holding an office hour between 1:30 and 2:30 will allow more students to attend (at least part of the hour) than holding it from 1:00 to 2:00. Also consider alternate locations, such as coffee shops or rooms in other academic buildings around campus. Additional ideas for making office hours productive include having students satisfy a course requirement during office hours, prompting students to prepare specific questions in advance of the visit, and to follow up with students who miss office hours (2).

Applying this Teaching Method Online

Technology is changing very quickly in our world and methods to establish global connections with one another are being used with increasing frequency for faculty to interact with students (1). It is typically unwise to try to keep up with all advances as they appear (and it seems something new emerges almost daily). Select one or two new technology-enhanced ideas that sound beneficial, speak to colleagues and IT professionals on your campus, and then proceed with both excitement and caution.

Use technology to create opportunities for interaction. E-mail, asynchronous chats, and online office hours can provide crucial avenues of connection and information between students and faculty outside of class. Use of synchronous or asynchronous audio and video tools when communicating with students can help build rapport. However, be careful not to create expectations and workloads that are unmanageable, particularly in large courses. A variety of strategies can help address these challenges. For example, set electronic office hour times when you'll either be available live (through chat) and/or when you'll respond to e-mails; this way, students will know not to expect an immediate answer to an e-mail. You can also create one-to-many e-mails (vs. just one-to-one), and use student questions in individual e-mails to generate a class "FAQ" list to post on a course website. Both of these strategies will help save time and redundancy.

“Just-in-Time Teaching” is a powerful way to enact effective interactions outside of the classroom that lead to deeper learning in it. In this approach, students complete web-based assignments shortly before each class session, and the feedback this gives to instructors helps them to shape the lecture or other class activity to address students’ questions and needs (6, 7). Students can respond positively when they see questions they asked before class being addressed and answered during class.

Social Media and Networking. As social media presence continues to increase dramatically on college and university campuses, many institutions have developed “Social Media Guidelines” (8). Increasing numbers of faculty create a Facebook page for a given class and then require students to join that page. This helps with many facets of the course, such as communication and sharing within the class.

That said, navigating boundaries on social networks can be challenging. Be careful to avoid the “creepy treehouse” effect (9) that can occur when faculty insert themselves in digital spaces seen as personal by students. For instance, some faculty members have a policy not to “friend” students unless the student is the one requesting the connection. Other instructors elect not to “friend” any students on Facebook, but feel comfortable connecting with students on other, more professionally oriented social networks, like LinkedIn. Some faculty prefer to connect with students on social networks that do not have real name policies, such as Twitter, where students can be asked to create “disposable” accounts dedicated to classroom, not personal, use (10).

Assessing this Teaching Method

There are a variety of ways to know how interactions outside of class have impacted your students’ learning. One simple process would be to document the frequency and duration of interactions and compare the data to exam or course grades. Of course, to take into account the ability and prior preparation of students, more complex data collection would be needed. As well, much of what transpires in these interactions is best considered and reported using qualitative methods and these are time-consuming. Nevertheless, they often provide the most effective way of understanding and describing the nature and impact of the interactions. The use of course management or other technological systems is one way to efficiently capture qualitative data. Here are a few ideas for documenting interaction activity and results. You can keep track of who does and doesn’t attend office hours or correspond to you on-line, and how each group performs on examinations and term papers. You can ask students who do these things to describe to you how those interactions have shaped their learning, and then use those reflections and experiences to both assess the effectiveness of the activity and also share the responses with future students to motivate them to do the same. Finally, both you and your students can use archives of threaded discussion (or other on-line interactions) to compile portfolios of their learning by offering evidence of change over time in their achievement of learning objectives.

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