



# Teaching Notes

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Editor: Tom Pusateri, CETL Associate Director for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning

## CETL Funding Opportunities for Enhancing Undergraduate Research

CETL provides several funding opportunities for enhancing undergraduate research: [http://www.kennesaw.edu/cetl/faculty\\_funds/undergraduate\\_research.html](http://www.kennesaw.edu/cetl/faculty_funds/undergraduate_research.html).

The **Creative Activities and Research Experiences for Teams (CARET)** program encourages and supports faculty engagement in research or creative activity with undergraduate student collaborators using a team approach over two semesters (\$5500 total). The deadline for receipt of proposals is September 15, 2009 for Spring-Summer 2010 projects and January 11, 2010 for Summer-Fall 2010 projects.

The **Undergraduate Research & Creative Activities (URCA) Funding Awards** may be used for either (a) Travel stipends for undergraduate researchers or (b) Supplies or other project needs for undergraduate research/creative activities (\$500 each). There are four application due dates this academic year: October 1, 2009; December 1, 2009; February 2, 2010; and March 5, 2010.

The **Global Learning through Undergraduate Scholarship (GLUS) Funding Awards** are designed to promote undergraduate scholarship that has a global component. Each GLUS grant will fund (a) a summer 2010 stipend for the faculty mentor (\$1500) and (b) travel money and/or supplies for at least two undergraduate researchers (\$1000). The deadline for proposals is January 29, 2010.

The **Mentoring Undergraduate Scholars: Summer Stipends (MUSSS)** are designed to promote faculty mentoring of undergraduate scholarship during the summer (\$2,000). Each faculty mentor must supervise a minimum of two undergraduate scholars during the summer. The deadline for receipt of proposals is January 15, 2010.

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## Teaching Publications by KSU Faculty

Dr. Scott Lewis and Dr. Janet Shaw, Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, published "Attitude Counts: Self-Concept and Success in General Chemistry" in the June 2009 issue of the *Journal of Chemical Education* with co-authors Judith Heitz, a KSU student, and Dr. Gail Webster, Guilford College.

Dr. Binbin Jiang, Dr. Judith Patterson, Dr. Mary Chandler, and Dr. Tak Cheung Chiang, Department of Educational Leadership, published "Practicum Experience in Educational Leadership Program: Perspectives of supervisors, Mentors and Candidates" in the Winter 2009 issue of the international *Journal of Educational Management in Theory and Practice*.

Both studies were partially funded by CETL Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (STLT) Funding Awards.

## Humor and Respect in the Classroom

Daniel M. Niederjohn  
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As professors we aspire to make material meaningful, personally relevant, and memorable. When we teach, learning occurs, yet how can we operationally define this learning and which type of learning is ultimately most important? Although there is much research that suggests good teaching involves being prepared (Eble, 1983); being genuine, approachable, and humorous (Vargo, 1997), showing mutual respect (Beidler, 1997), and creating a welcoming environment (Brookfield, 1990), there is limited research devoted to how these qualities actually affect the learning process in the classroom.

Professor immediacy (PI) is a construct that envelops characteristics that show genuine concern for students, a positive attitude toward students, and a desire for students to succeed (Wilson & Taylor, 2001). Immediacy is defined as the physical and psychological availability of a professor, which can be measured by both students' reports of verbal and nonverbal professor behaviors. Research has focused on the associations between professor immediacy and students feeling liked (Wilson & Taylor), student motivation (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Frymier, 1994), and learning (Frymier). Findings have not supported the association between PI and actual or projected grades and this has led some researchers to question whether PI actually alters student performance and change (Wilson & Taylor).

Given the paucity of data to support the relationship between PI and student learning, I examined the relationship between these two constructs. Specifically, I hypothesized that PI behaviors are linked with specific learning outcomes and that specific professor behaviors, such as using humor, and creating a respectful classroom environment will elicit greater learning in the classroom.

Seventy-nine undergraduates enrolled in a General Psychology and a Theories of Personality course at a public university in Georgia participated in this study. Data were collected during the final week of each course. Students completed a PI scale (Wilson & Taylor, 2001) to measure specific professor immediacy behaviors exhibited in the classroom. Seventeen verbal and 6 nonverbal immediacy items were assessed using a 5-point scale (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). In addition, a second measure consisted of a multiple-choice exam created to measure learning specific to the courses. Each multiple-choice exam consisted of 20 items taken from the text's test banks, representing all sections of the courses.

My findings suggest that PI behaviors are predictive of learning in the college classroom. Students who perceived high PI behaviors scored eight percentage points higher than those who perceived low PI behaviors on the outcome measure. This appears to be a first step at understanding

the link between professor behaviors and student outcomes.

In addition, we found that specific professor behaviors such as using humor and creating a respectful classroom environment elicit greater learning. Praising students' work, actions, and comments ( $r = .405$ ), asking questions to solicit viewpoints and opinions ( $r = .322$ ), referring to the class as "our" class ( $r = .299$ ), and using humor ( $r = .262$ ) were most positively related to amount learned.

Although prior research (Vargo, 1997; Beidler, 1997; Brookfield, 1990) addressed PI behaviors, limited research has linked these behaviors to learning in the form of student learning outcomes. Because of the strong association of PI behaviors with learning, I will focus on specific actions that professors can take to improve their teaching methods, thereby engaging more students in the learning process.

### **Praising students' work, action, or comments**

Students have stated that they often get papers back only outlining the errors that they made. Limiting grading to marking only incorrect performance may not be particularly helpful for student learning. In the positive coaching literature (Kauffman, 2006), there tends to be a focus on maintaining a five-to-one ratio of compliments to criticism in order for athletes to actually incorporate and accept the critique. This same rule can apply to class participation. Students must feel as though they are initially reinforced in order to take constructive criticism, which can lead to greater learning and change.

### **Asking questions to solicit viewpoints and opinions**

At the beginning of each class period I always as if there are any questions, comments, concerns, or otherwise. I am surprised by how many students reference this seemingly minute behavior in overall course evaluations. In addition, I encourage students to disagree or at least critically examine what I say in the classroom. Although this opens the door for some students to try to one-up, I have found that by creating an open arena for their opinions there is less of need for competition. By modeling acceptance of perspectives that are different from my own, I see students have more of an open mind of beliefs and thoughts that they had not previously considered.

### **Referring to class as "our" class or what "we" are doing**

By simply making this change in your classroom vocabulary, a sense of "we-ness" can be created. In addition, one way to enhance this aspect in teaching is by creating an on-line discussion tool for your courses. This virtual classroom allows for students to stay engaged with each other and you when outside of class.

### **Using humor in class**

As I indicated earlier, humor offers a great deal of promise for student learning. Self-deprecating humor is particularly easy for me to use in my classroom. When I make mistakes or when I use humor to make myself more "real" to students, I believe humor allows students to take more risks in the classroom. One type of humor that must be cautiously used is sarcasm. I have made the mistake of making sarcastic comments at the beginning of the

semester, before students have gotten to know me well, and they land with a thud. I imagine that some students could be quite offended by sarcastic remarks, so dosage and timing is particularly important to consider. I recently shared a humorous story about a presentation that I gave as an undergraduate just before students gave their senior seminar presentation. Each day following, students asked for more stories and I when I ran out of humorous stories – that I was willing to share – they were able to fill the space with their own.

### **Conclusions**

As professors we try to create an environment in which students will have the best opportunity to grow and learn. By incorporating the specific behaviors mentioned above into every day teaching habits, we can enhance the learning experience and overall engagement of our students.

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### ***Teaching Notes Seeks Your Ideas***

If you have suggestions or are interested in submitting a column or article, email Tom Pusateri, Editor of Teaching Notes, at <mailto:tpusater@kennesaw.edu>. A 1-column article contains about 400-500 words and a full-page article contains about 900-1000 words.

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The Tomorrow's Professor Mailing List (Msg. #913)  
<http://ctl.stanford.edu/Tomprof/>

## Student Motivation: Problem Solved?

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Dean of Academic Affairs  
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In my years of teaching and developing faculty members, I have heard every excuse in the book for why some of our - mostly non-traditional - students aren't performing up to par. Most of the excuses come in the form of statements like, "She's just not motivated," "He's just here because his parents want him here," "He's just using up his GI bill," "She doesn't want to be here," or - horror of horrors - "He doesn't belong here." These statements point to elements that may seem to the teacher to be beyond their control. When asked "who is responsible for student motivation at an institution of higher learning, faculty members will often put the onus solely on the student. After all, aren't they all adults? Shouldn't faculty members be concerned delivering the wisdom of their years and inculcating the students with the knowledge and skills required to master the subject rather than worrying about things like who wants to learn and who doesn't?"

In a perfect world, high school graduates would all arrive on campus ready to become little sponges of knowledge; to hang on every word of their wizened professors; show up early and often; to stay late, and pepper the teacher with cogent, topical questions that move the learning in the right direction.

Too often this is not the case. Sometimes faculty members do wonder if the student realizes how much tuition money they are frittering away. As faculty members, we need to take ownership of student motivation, as often it could be things we are doing - and not doing - that causes students' enthusiasm to wane. Below are three elements that are in full control of any competent faculty member that, if manipulated properly, will often improve student moral and motivation.

**1) VALUE:** Do the students value the course material? Do they see an immediate, practical application? Or is it something they'll use in two three or four years. The sooner the students can apply their newfound knowledge, the better. Is there a lab with the course? Can you point out how the classroom theory is going to be applied in their labs? Can you build an application into your theory course, or apply it to the world outside the classroom? Are you, as the teacher, enthusiastic about the subject? Or is it something you have to get through so you can get back to your research? If you act bored with the class or topic, that will lower the value to the students. Even if it's not your favorite subject, even if you've taught it a hundred times, even if you see it as an obstacle to your "real" work, look for ways to make it interesting to you and at the least, make it valuable to the students.

We are a technical school. We teach technical and computer subjects and our students often don't understand why English Composition is important. I explain to them that being able to write an excellent resume or proposal, once mastered, will always be virtually the same, that this

will help them write excellent lab reports in their other classes, and that while they will constantly be re-learning the technology, it is their ability to communicate effectively that will have the most impact on their future careers.

**2) CONFIDENCE:** Students are often reluctant to reveal a lack of confidence in their ability to master the material for fear of losing the respect of their peers or their teachers. Research shows that overconfidence is often as dangerous as lack of confidence in learning a skill. As a teacher, it is a good idea to look for ways to boost the confidence of your students by offering plenty of positive reinforcement, and adding enough challenge to the course to prevent students from becoming overconfident and having the course lose value for them. Reward students for critical thinking and participating in class discussions, even if their answers are off the mark, while gently nudging them in the right direction. This type of corrective feedback pays off.

**3) MOOD:** What is the mood of your classroom? Is there an excitement about the subject and an eagerness to move forward? Or do students drag into the room and sit sullenly, averting eye contact with you or their fellow students? Are you one of those teachers who begin the semester with "Look to your left and your right: One of you won't be here at graduation."? I have always believed that there is an element of showmanship in good teaching. Whether you believe that or not, research has shown that lightening the mood in a classroom increases motivation. We've all shown up for meetings wherein the mood was dull and drab, or even hostile. How much more productive are those meetings where the atmosphere is upbeat and the facilitator kept things on an even keel. Many of the behaviors that add value to the class also improve the mood. Enthusiasm is contagious. So is boredom. In *Talking about Leaving*, a study of why students drop out of science and engineering programs, the authors reported one of the main student complaints was a lack of enthusiasm by their instructor. The students reported that their faculty member didn't have time to answer their questions, but always referred them to the TA. Others said their faculty member came to class unprepared or made them feel like teaching the class was a necessary evil that they had to endure so that they could get back to their research. Keep an eye on the mood of your class. If necessary, stop the class and address the issue: "It seems that you guys are out of sorts this morning. What can I do to help us get on the right track?" Often the very act of letting the students know you recognize their mood and are willing to work with them may lighten the atmosphere.

If your students' motivation seems to be flagging, before blaming them, take a step back and look at the value the students hold for the subject, their confidence, and the mood of the class. Chances are, if you can improve one or more of these areas, you can improve your students' motivation and improved learning will almost certainly follow.

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The posting below, while focusing on engineering faculty, has implications for all of us in how approachable we are to students. It is by Christina M. Vogt and is from the March 2008 issue of *ASEE Prism*, Volume 17, Number 7. . The author is a member of the education adjunct faculty at American University. This article is adapted from "Faculty as a Critical Juncture in Student Retention and Performance in Engineering Programs," in the January 2008 *Journal of Engineering Education*. JEE. <http://www.asee.org/publications/jee/index.cfm> Copyright © 2008 ASEE, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Rick Reis

## **Professors Need to Lighten Up**

**Christina M. Vogt  
American University**

Unapproachable, condescending faculty drive students out of engineering.

It is well known that large numbers of capable students leave engineering programs before graduation. Why? Largely, it is because of inaccessible and unapproachable faculty. This is the conclusion of a study that I conducted at four large, highly ranked West Coast universities. The research included a survey of 713 engineering students and advanced statistical modeling.

Self-efficacy has been found to be the major determinant of academic success. The term refers to a student's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute the steps necessary for success in a specific domain, such as engineering. Given two students of approximately equal ability, the one with the greater self-efficacy will most likely get higher grades.

I found that self-efficacy was directly and positively influenced by faculty approachability and negatively affected by faculty distance. Thus, a professor's interactions with students are crucial to student performance. Many engineering faculty members "intuitively" know this and also know that how approachable they are has an impact on student retention. However, the way a teacher interacts with students is seldom accorded the importance it deserves. The teaching and education component of a professor's annual review will often be confined to a sentence or two stating whether a professor did or did not perform the required amount of teaching. Research universities, in particular, often make a half-hearted attempt to encourage faculty to be more effective teachers.

Given the clear link between students' self-efficacy and the climate that exists in the classroom, professors need to work on developing a better rapport with students. They need to show that they are personally accessible and approachable. Often, small changes can make a major difference, such as showing an interest in students, sharing personal information, and advising students on research projects. One effective way of building rapport is for a professor to let students know that he or she also had to struggle at times. This kind of candor helps bridge the gap

between students and faculty members. Students sometimes feel that professors are such intellectual giants that it's futile to try to match their accomplishments. Too often, professors seem to like this ivory tower image and are thus reluctant to break down the barriers separating them from students.

Expressions, intonation, and body language that might convey a condescending attitude need to be modified. Professors should never be derogatory or insulting when students do not answer correctly. Insulting remarks, such as "This was covered in the ABCs of fluid mechanics," should be avoided. Suggesting that you believe a particular student is less capable can be especially detrimental when dealing with women and/or minorities.

As my research highlighted, there are negative consequences for being stand-offish and condescending toward students. Such behavior by professors lowered students' self-efficacy, resulting in lower grade-point averages. Moreover, while good teaching is admirable, my more recent research - in which I measure teaching along two dimensions of interpersonal rapport and teaching skill - suggests that a professor's approachability is perhaps more important than his or her teaching abilities. While learning to teach well takes time, being personable can be instantly implemented.

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### **Recommended Web site: The IDEA Center**

Kansas State University's IDEA Center publishes an online series of papers on teaching, learning, and faculty evaluation. Visit <http://www.theideacenter.org/IDEAPapers> for a complete list of papers. Recent titles include:

- #45. Assessing Your Program-Level Assessment Plan
- #44. The Learning Portfolio: A Powerful Idea for Significant Learning
- #43. The Technology Literate Professoriate: Are We There Yet?
- #42. Integrated Course Design
- #41. Student Goal Orientation, Motivation, and Learning
- #40. Getting Students to Read: Fourteen Tips
- #39. Establishing Rapport: Personal Interaction and Learning
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- #37. Helping Your Students Develop Critical Thinking Skills
- #36. Appraising Teaching Effectiveness: Beyond Student Ratings

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