

POD —IDEA Center Notes

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IDEA Item # 20: “Encouraged student-faculty interaction outside of class”

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Background

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, and small group gatherings are some examples. For many students - particularly those in large lecture courses -- *these more individualized interactions offer the deepest kind of learning experiences* by enabling them 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.

For various reasons, students are often reluctant to seek out faculty beyond the classroom. In a similar vein, out-of-classroom interactions offer a mixed blessing for faculty: conversations 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 (interest in learning more). These items connect because their basis is in personal interactions that limited classroom time

may not always allow. Outside-class contact provides the vehicle for personal and extended interaction and such opportunities can lead to a more productive classroom process as well as enhanced learning.

Helpful Hints

The following 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, thinking through such issues as: 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?

Recognize that these interactions are part of your teaching, and not than separate, casual conversations. 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 styles and your own teaching style. Because one-on-one interactions offer the chance 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). Similarly, consider what role(s)—(such as information expert, personal role model, discussion facilitator, evaluator, consultant, etc.) you are most comfortable playing (4).

Make the most of office hours. Many faculty 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? 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. Additional ideas for making office hours productive (2) 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.

Use technology to create opportunities for interaction. E-mail can provide crucial avenues of connection and information between students and faculty outside of class, but also can create expectations and workloads that are unmanageable, particularly in large courses. A variety of strategies can help address these challenges (5). 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).

Assessment Issues

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 in the class. 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 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.

References and Resources

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