

**Mining Our Experiences:  
Reflecting on the Subtle Interpersonal Dimension of Teaching and Learning**

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**Abstract**

Although the past decade has seen increased attention directed to technology and technical aspects of instruction, we focus here on suggestions related to interpersonal dimensions of teaching and learning. In the form of a relational checklist, thirteen specific points are raised. These tips can be used to help instructors to attend to the often subtle human components of professional practice. The suggestions raised include (a) exposing your own learning needs, (b) offering responsibility to students, (c) seeking out positive humor, (d) delighting in your own contradictions, (e) revisiting stories, and (f) sharing the whys of the various teaching strategies that you use.

More than once, we have cringed, but remained silent while advice about better use of instructional technologies, rethinking evaluation criteria, or the relevancy of specific curricula were discussed, even though the real problem or concern was the relationship between the professor and the students at the interpersonal level. The face-to-face interaction between professor and students is at the heart of pedagogical experience, but is readily denied as the source of a problem or a reason for intervention. Efforts to aid a struggling teacher in dealing with this dimension of teaching (either as self-reflection and/or with colleagues) is, at best, awkward and comical, and at worst, counter-productive. For that matter, even if a professor is not struggling, regular perception checks concerning one's manner as a human being with other human beings is a healthy practice. It is an erroneous but common assumption that one's personality, or one's personal and interactive teaching style, is an immutable given.

The goal here is to acknowledge the interpersonal qualities of teaching, and to consider the subtle and perhaps more obvious strategies that can be used to enhance a productive classroom learning environment. Interpersonal relations are pivotal to the classroom ambiance. Bruce Wilshire (1991), in his thoughtful examination of "the educating act," wrote:

all sharply focusing professional consciousness runs the risk of being a constructed awareness which conceals from itself portions of *ourselves with others*, and *ourselves and the background*, which solicit us. It risks boxing itself in the mirror-lined container of ego. Hegel spoke aptly of history happening behind our backs. (p. 29, original emphasis)

Certainly, we, as lecturing and seminar discussion-minded professors, can remember moments when our egos, in their short-sighted ways, lost track of the "other;" a faux pas of interpersonal sensitivity occurred, and we were doomed for a while to an emerging history of behind-our-back discussions. Why should we care? As long as the content material of the day is covered, what does pandering to the personhood of the students get us...or them? We have learned to care greatly about our own personhood and those of the students with whom we work. For what we get in an arrangement that is attentive to interpersonal factors is a classroom ambiance without (significant) dialogic barriers, hostile relations, and behind-our-back happenings. In a positive vein, what one can strive for is classroom equanimity most conducive to the students and to one's style, the subject, and the educating act.

The following checklist is meant to capture ideas for recognition and principles of conduct that

may help one to attend to interpersonal elements both for one's own teaching and for those annoying moments when you are certain that the wrong advice is being given: for example, when one is being encouraged to change from the overhead projector to PowerPoint, when the reality of necessary changes would deal with the classroom interpersonal ambiance. Perhaps this listing of principles in the form of a relational checklist may offer points of entry to address the readily denied interpersonal realities of teaching.

*Expose your own learning needs, flaws, and present state of being as it may be influencing the moment.* When you have just learned something new in class, let the students know. When you are confused with some theme in the discussion, announce your confusion. When you are excited by the topic or events or when you are less excited for various reasons, allow it to be evident. React to your spelling blunders, forgetfulness, or other personal foibles in a way that cries out, "this is me." In short, we are human. It is important, therefore, to appear so. This humanness is part of our responsibility. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) offered a story in this regard:

When I first became a dean, I admired the campus skating rink and started talking about learning to skate, but helpful faculty friends argued that as dean I could not afford to let colleagues see me in the inevitable comic falls. (p. 69)

We conclude, as did Mary Catherine Bateson, that the falls are worth it. Bateson stated, "Given a choice, few will choose the reversal of status that is involved in being ignorant and being a learner, unless there is a significant gain of intimacy or respect in the new learning" (p. 69). We maintain the necessary respect and degree of intimacy needed to draw out a person to dialogue is worth the odd comic fall. What a treat to have fun with who we are rather than being horrified.

*Offer some responsibility for the course to students.* Students too easily have learned to hide behind courses. By this we mean that some students consciously and intentionally avoid all responsibility. This is manifested in a keenness to remain anonymous, to deem the course an evaluation exercise rather than a learning experience, and to be generally passive in the affairs of learning. It has become a bit of a buzz phrase to suggest that students should be more responsible for their own learning. At its face, this

seems like a wonderful approach that respects the adult learner; yet it is far more complex. Most educators that we have encountered are enamored with the idea of increased responsibility among students. They tend not to be as keen on this idea's flipside: granting more freedom to students, or put another way, relinquishing total control as professor. For students to be truly responsible, they must be given authentic choices. They have to have the chance to make decisions with which we may disagree. A couple of ways we have tried to offer influence to students are (a) by giving them input into the subject matter to be included, and (b) by allowing them to negotiate how they will be evaluated. This sounds easy enough, but it is not so simple. From our experience, these are delicate matters for all to handle. Students need guidance toward more responsibility (usually greatly valued by the more serious, sincere students). And colleagues need to know that we are not inspiring campus-wide student revolutions. One of us has been accused of stirring up trouble by giving students the above two options. "Us against them," we believe, was the intended message to be "taken under advisement."

*As you approach change, start where the learners are.* When negotiating class evaluations, creating novel classroom assignments and activities, or when offering a new class structure and format, be aware of the students' entry points, developmental level, and learning history (to the extent that it is possible). This is not to say teach only to where the students are, but rather acknowledge that radical change to their contextualized students' ways of knowing can be introduced gradually and in developmentally appropriate ways to avoid the shock of change. There may be times when baptism by fire is the most effective teaching strategy. Yet, in our own excitement to cultivate new paths and expand students' horizons, we have, in certain cases, gone too far, too fast. For example, one useful model that may be helpful in this capacity is Perry's (1970) Stages of Intellectual Development. Particularly when we attempt to expose students to new paradigms, to critical thinking, and to seeing multiple points of view, it is important to consider if they are seeing the world in black and white terms (Stage 1), believing that every idea is as good as the next (Stage 2), or if they are moving toward responsible knowing in a discipline-specific (Stage 3) or multi-disciplinary way (Stage 4). If students are in Stage 1, we may work to move them along the developmental trajectory over time, but we should acknowledge and accept that we will not easily progress to Stage 4. Of course, as teachers, we need to be ever-reflective on our own positioning

within the conceptual models that we employ. Another example would be the keenness to negotiate evaluation criteria with a class of intimidated first-year students. Perhaps this place is not the best setting. We actively pursue change from the conventional teacher/lecture-centered approach to a more multi-faceted approach to teaching strategies--and, thus, to a more lively student-centered approach overall. We regularly find, however, that we must temper our personal enthusiasm for progressive approaches to return closer to where the students are.

*Seek out positive humor.* One variety of bringing levity to the classroom is the use of self-effacing humor. Part of successful interpersonal relations depends on breaking down the stereotypes of the omnipotent or omniscient professor. By poking fun at ourselves, we forge more equal relations with students by dismantling some of our power in the spirit of a richer more intriguing humility. Simple statements such as "we are all learning together" or "I want you to see me as the senior member, but as an equal" may be cast aside by students. Years of socialization into the cultures of classrooms may bring about well-founded doubts. And perhaps nothing is worse than not delivering with such intentions for a co-investigative/mutuality based, student-centered model. In short, if we don't do what we advocate, we become the joke. This is *not* the *positive* humor we seek, although noting to the class when we stray from a certain advocacy position can ease a humiliation toward a humbling human gesture. By laughing at ourselves, we can become more credible.

A corollary of warning may be in order. Poking fun at students rarely, if ever, builds the positive spirit in the classroom that we are discussing. We have found that even when an individual student seems to enjoy such joking, other students often feel that one of them has been attacked and they cannot be sure who might be the next target. One of us suffers from a sarcastic sense of humor and has learned that it is best checked at the classroom door. The other one of us must check an over-developed **self**-parody that is too readily extended to others. We try to remember that there is a balance here.

Finding humor in life, in our respective disciplines, and in the issues of the day, while rejoicing in the ironies and smiles that appear when we look for them, is an excellent way to warm the environment. Thinking of classroom ambience, it may add a useful touch of humility to consider the following: "Laughter is our reminder that our theories are an attempt to make existence intelligible, but necessarily only an

attempt, and does not the irrational, the instinctive burst in to keep the balance true by laughter” (Whitehead 1956, p. 55).

*Delight in your own contradictions.* Sometimes it is seductive to attempt to present ourselves as internally consistent, wholly rational beings. To break down barriers, to promote critical thinking, and perhaps to approximate something more authentic, it may be best to remind everyone that contradictions are major opportunities for learning. It was Whitman who said, “Oh, let me be a man of contradictions.” Or was it Whitman who said, “Contradiction is the site of all learning.” (The fact that we have retained a collection of contradiction quotes over time should in no way be conceived as an indication of any predisposition in this regard). Students thrive on spotting professors’ contradictions, too often in a vindictive manner. Why not embrace them as a site of powerful learning and challenge the class, in a playful Socratic manner, to extend the detection game to all. The key is that we have to be the quarterbacks of this one. One year in an environmental inquiry course, I (Bob) had the class join me at my home for a house inspector to do an environmental audit of my home. The environmental professor fully exposed, so to speak. Yes, contradictions abounded, but such learning occurred. After that audit, class dialogue concerning personal lifestyles and environmental initiative picked up briskly. Contradiction became sites of learning for all.

*Talk with students, not over them.* How does one manage to find the appropriate level and manner to engage students without perpetuating a hierarchy? There is true subtlety in any answer. As the number of years between our ages and those of the students grows, sometimes the challenge to stay “on their level” (or even close enough to be relevant) seems to increase as well. And to embrace a contradiction, sometimes it gets easier as we don’t feel as compelled to show our knowledge or to demonstrate that we deserve the PhDs we had recently earned; these insecurities can detonate other efforts to build interpersonal bridges. Considering physical factors of the classroom and oneself may be helpful in this effort. We have found that lecterns and tables can have interesting effects. When the classroom architecture permits, sitting with students can help to establish the sense that we are talking together. But mostly, not talking over students’ heads is a matter of language: body language, dialectic, intellectual discourse...oops...oral language, and spatial/mood language. As we have found ourselves distanced from

the days when we watched many of the same movies and listened to much of the same music as students, we have learned to poke fun at our *so not hip* middle-agedness. One of us can pinpoint the day when it was clear that he was no longer of the same generation as the students: making a reference to a film he had seen in the theatre that weekend and noticing the utter lack of recognition, he learned that the only other person in the reasonably large lecture hall who had seen The Story of Us, was a mature student approximately equal in years to the instructor. Sadly, Woody Allen and Bruce Springsteen are no longer shared favorites, but historical figures. Common ground can be built with respect and compassion when our iPods have little in common.

*Respond to the positive more than the negative.* We have heard this rule of thumb referred to as “reinforce the right thing at the right time.” Others talk about catching people in the act of doing what they are supposed to do. Not only can this approach curb or pre-empt discipline problems, but the more frequent flow of positive energy from the instructor also builds connections among people. John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach, advocated praising the individual and correcting the group. This can add to positive energy and take the potential sting off of negative feedback. A related and often-quoted management principle is to provide four or five positive comments for every negative remark. Given our professorial predilection for correcting, it is a challenge to have 80% of our communication be praise and acknowledgment.

*Know your students by name as early as possible.* This one (as some of the other thoughts may be) is not novel. It is, however, an objective that is clearly worth the effort. Many variations on using photographs of class members can be helpful in this regard. For some, names come easily; for others, it requires great time and effort to put names to faces. We submit that the dividends justify the investment. Whereas some methods of connecting with students take considerable creativity and thought, knowing students by name may be equally effective in building interpersonal bridges. We take great pride in learning a roomful of students' names on the first day of class and addressing students as individuals at the first opportunity. The rapport seems to grow instantly. The power of knowing students may increase simply because of its scarcity in the students' experiences. On a mid-term evaluation, one third-year

student wrote, “you are the first professor that has known my name.” In the large faceless university, knowledge of a name can be a significant and positive force in students’ learning. Similarly, if knowing names is impossible by circumstance, then ask for names and acknowledge that it is important to all and we will work at it together. The message here is that we, as a class, care about ourselves as a classroom full of human beings. When a name is known at the outset or early along the way, the fun in noting the students’ surprise (and delight) makes this checklist item worth the extra effort. Just this year one of us overheard a student rating one professor against another. Her criteria: “This one professor knows my name in the first class (class size 40) this other professor didn’t have a clue months in. Come on, a little effort please.” Hmm, a little thing, but a big impact.

*Make your first class exemplary of the expectation for the whole.* Is there an educational idea more robust than the notion of primacy? If an uninterrupted stream of teacher talk dominates the first session, stark silence may follow one’s attempt to have a discussion in a second session. Learned from painful mistakes, a maxim that might be put forth is “Don’t lecture the first class and then expect discussions to follow readily in the future.” One might consider devoting the entire first session (or more) to forging a classroom community, *the* classroom community, that is to be exemplary (Schmier, 1996).

*Make overheads/slides available to students.* With the advent of technologies like Blackboard and WebCT, there is greater technical ease in the classroom and a welcomed decrease in photocopying, but some explanation is needed here. If you want to facilitate students’ focus on discussion and listening, then it may be helpful to provide notes/slides to students electronically or as class handouts. Students appreciate avoiding the situation where they feel they have to think, write, listen, and discuss at the same time. Students’ expectations around the timing, quality, and availability of such notes seem to have increased each year. If their expectations are managed or met, it can increase the student-teacher connection. A caveat here is that we distinguish what goes on overheads/slides from what students should be reading for class. Lecturing the same content as students have been asked to read for class is a teacher behavior that encourages irresponsible learner behavior (Browne & Keeley, 1994). And another caveat: expand beyond the material that you provide. If the visuals represent the bulk of the content and

are provided, students may opt for more engaging out-of-class activities; it is important to add both additional materials and interactions that enhance the classroom learning over getting the notes.

*Acknowledge that certain students tend to serve as classroom barometers.* Often one or more students are particularly good indicators about what is happening with the whole class. Try assigning this role. It can be fun. It will likely take several weeks before the student barometer becomes readily apparent. Furthermore, other methods of taking the classroom temperature (are we mixing our weather metaphors?) by eliciting students' feedback, such as via the "one-minute paper" and other classroom assessment techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993), show students that we care about how they are experiencing our course.

*Revisit certain stories.* Shared stories can serve as an in-class common language. It can develop a sense of clubness, having something special together that will be memorable, fun (note the frequency of this sly little word within this checklist), and most important, will foster learning. For example, on the first day of one course, a story was presented that became a touchstone for the course. By going back to it as new layers of meaning emerged, a sense of cohesiveness grew as class members had bonds of connections back to this story. Recalling a story can have the same benefit as a comedian's "call back" (restating a punch line used earlier in the performance). For example, an improvisational theatre exercise that was used as a mixer on the first day of a class resulted in several shared stories and punch lines. The mention of those mutually-held experiences throughout the term, by both teacher and students, created mirthful moments of bonding.

*Share the "why's" of the various teaching strategies that you use.* Some of the assessments of our teaching that we use (Critical Incident Questionnaire, Brookfield, 1995) reveal consistently that some students prefer different modes or teaching strategies. By making this fact explicit and by giving reasons for different approaches, students are more likely to understand and to welcome the variety. An interesting example (which perhaps needs an explanation) is the strategy of using a timer set at fifteen minute maximums. Why? To control the tendency to talk *too* long without some pause or activity. Another

example, this time on the macro level, is when following an experimental or specific course format, use the idea of a certain theorist. One of us uses Alfred North Whitehead's (1929) notions of rhythms of education, moving students through a cycle of romance with content, precision with content, and generalization out into a broader application/investigation with the content, which then returns the class back to new romance. Students, as they should expect to be, are confused by the difference of the nature of romance that begins the cycle. Confusion is an inherent part of the cycle. It is inappropriate, we suggest, for professors to be the sole bearers of the theory from which they are teaching. Bringing students on board allows them the ownership and possible commitment to the theory in use. Better still, they can then help keep the theory on track.

The spirit here is not to be like us: dutiful and attentive and wise to the interpersonal, both subtle and obvious, and natural at it to boot. Far from it. We are comfortable talking about all of the above from our past experiences of despair. Like most things, diligent learning and repeated practice are required to develop skills toward which we might be working. This component, the interpersonal component, is not a matter of being a good guy or a natural. It is a self-reflective commitment to a skill in authentic communication and respect for others. It involves valuing a dimension of teaching and learning that is not necessarily self-evident. It is hard work and a rewarding part of the job. As has been highlighted, this relational checklist can help put fun into the teaching equation. When September beckons with enthusiasm and a healthy apprehension, we are reminded of Bruce Wilshire's (1991) haunting possibility, "What if in all our knowing we fail to grasp ourselves [and our students]?" (p. 31).

## References

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