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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Five New Year's Resolutions for College Faculty

ONE OF THE PERKS of an academic career is the year-end break in December. It gives us some predictable downtime (or at least a bit of time within our control) when we can reflect on what went well during the past year and how we can “up our game” in the year ahead. In the spirit of the season, here are five resolutions to consider for the new year that should bring you and your students greater satisfaction with teaching and learning.

- 1. Learn your students' names early in the course**, and call them by name whenever you can. When you address someone by their name, you create an immediate bond that is hard for them to ignore. Faculty who know and use students' names seem more personable and more approachable. Middendorf and Osborn have some suggested strategies for learning names if that's not something that comes naturally.
- 2. Create clear rubrics for all assignments**, and share them with students when the assignments are given. Nothing puts a greater strain on faculty-learner relationships than disputes over assignments and grades. An unambiguous rubric that describes desired outcomes and assigns points for each category can avoid many misunderstandings. Learners can use the rubric as a checklist to ensure they have addressed each component of the assignment, and faculty can use it as the scoring guide (“Using Rubrics,” n.d.). If you are lucky enough to have a teaching assistant, rubrics also help improve interrater reliability when you have more than one person grading. As you redesign and improve assignments over the years, be sure to update the rubric to align with these changes.

- 3. Keep your content current—really current!** Think about how much new information you see every week from listservs, professional organizational emails, and new journal articles. Then consider how your students would react to your occasionally sharing something on the very cusp of the topic you are discussing. Sharing a PDF of the most recent writing on a topic can help them feel connected to the larger world of academia—not as an additional assignment, but as a point of interest or even a possible citation for their upcoming work. Consider how showing your engagement with your discipline can help generate this same engagement in students. Excitement is contagious.
- 4. Create pathways that lead outside the classroom.** For a recent lecture on active learning, problem-based learning, and team-based learning, I shared an email with my students from a colleague who recently published an article on the topic. The email was an overview of how she defined and differentiated these three techniques. With her permission, I used the email as the summary slide at the end of the lecture so learners could compare their lecture notes with the expert view. My students were not only impressed that I had a personal connection with the author, but they were also proud of themselves for recognizing some of the same issues she had identified.
It made the scholarly activity come alive when they stopped to consider that real people on other campuses were looking at the same issues as we were in our own classroom.
- 5. Treat your students as young professionals.** Make sure they feel “in

the loop” for campus activities where they could benefit. A quick email from you inviting them to a guest lecture (grand rounds as we say in healthcare), sharing a call for proposals for a campus-wide research fair, or providing other notices of campus and regional events helps them feel connected and should encourage the habit of lifelong learning. It's OK if some of the content is over their heads right now; these events can provide a glimpse of where they are going. I continue to tell my learners that they will graduate, but they will never be “out of school.” There is always something new to learn.

On the other side of campus, in the athletics department, they begin getting ready for the next season the minute the last game is over. For 2016, perhaps we in academia can borrow a page from that playbook and get ourselves ready for our best season ever.

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University Opens - January 4
Classes Begin - January 11
Registration Ends - January 15
Martin Luther King Day - January 18

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Influencing How Students Discuss Content

WHEN STUDENTS ARE talking with each other about content, most of us worry, at least a little bit. We've all heard less-than-impressive exchanges. For example, four students are in a group discussing three open-ended questions about two challenging readings. It's less than five minutes since they started, but they're already on question three. Or, they're working with clickers, supposedly exchanging ideas about a problem, but the group has already decided on one member's solution. She just happens to be a student who regularly answers in class and is almost always right.

When students are discussing content, teachers tend to feel powerless. If a good, open-ended, provocative question or challenging problem doesn't raise the caliber of the exchange, is there anything that will? We can prowl around the classroom and maybe ask a few pointed questions, but it still feels like the content is up for grabs.

However, are we as powerless as we feel? I have been reading through two long, detailed studies done in physics classes. In the findings are two examples of ways teachers can exert some control over student discussions of content.

The studies were conducted in large, introductory physics courses where teachers were implementing peer instruction (à la Eric Mazur), with students using clickers to report their solutions. The researchers hypothesized that how faculty interacted with students influenced the norms that governed how students interacted with each other. Using a research design that included multiple classroom observations, the researchers tracked a variety of teacher actions that were relevant to faculty-student interaction and student-student interaction. Using data derived from their observations, they positioned each teacher on two continua: somewhere between low and high on faculty-student collaboration, and between low and high on how they promoted student-student collaboration. Then they surveyed students to discover their perceptions about peer interaction in the course. They found that stu-

dent perceptions mirrored the observations of faculty. So, in courses where the instructor was on the low side of the two continua, students reported, among other things, being less comfortable communicating with the instructor and with each other.

It's a complicated research design and not easily explained in a blog post without some oversimplification. But the bottom line is pretty straightforward: How these teachers communicated with students influenced how the students felt about the interactions that occurred in that class. It's really about modeling. If we want students questioning each other; presenting different ideas, options, or solutions; explaining what they're proposing; and respectfully disagreeing, then that's how we need to be communicating with them, not just now and then, but regularly, for a significant portion of every period.

The researchers were also interested in whether students were "answer-making" or "sense-making" in their interactions. In the answer-making mode, students "are usually trying to come to the explanation that they think the teacher wants to hear rather than coming to an explanation that makes sense to the student." (p. 15) And here researchers found something interesting. In some of these courses, the clicker questions counted for extra credit, with correct answers counting more than incorrect ones. In another course, clicker questions also counted for extra credit, but whether the answer was right or wrong didn't matter. In that course, the instructor also emphasized reasoning, telling students to share their reasons with each other and asking for their explanations in whole-class discussions. Students in that course rated sense-making as more important than answer-making.

Because equal extra credit wasn't the only factor, we can't say that it made a difference, but it was part of what changed how students discussed answers. It's natural to think that right answers are worth more than wrong ones, but it's also easy to imagine how not having to worry about what an answer is worth might change the discourse in some

productive ways.

So, we shouldn't feel that student interaction is beyond our control. In this case, teacher actions influenced how students talked about the content, and a simple design decision set parameters that reshaped the discussion of answers. Let's use these examples to think of other ways we might positively influence student discussions of content.

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