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Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

A Memo to Students: College and the Real World

To: My Students

From: Your Teacher

Re: What's happening in college—is it real?

I just read about a senior engineering student who was presenting a design project in an upper-division business communications course. In the presentation, he talked about what he would do if he were a “real” engineer. His teacher asked him what it was about what he was doing that wasn't “real” engineering. He'd designed the project. He was presenting it to a group of his peers. He answered, “It's school—not real engineering.”

I have a feeling that's how a lot of you think about what's happening in school, and in a certain sense you are right. What happens in college and what you'll be doing in your career aren't the same, but really and truly they aren't as different as many of you seem to think. Furthermore, when you believe what you're doing in school isn't the real deal, that changes how you approach your work. Rather than seeing it as preparation for professional life, you see it as stuff the teacher makes you do. When they're only assignments (i.e., hoops to jump through) and not real work, that motivates you to figure out what the teacher wants, do it well enough to get the grade you need, and not worry about whether you learn anything from the experience.

The same goes for classroom policies—too many students think there are things that matter to the teacher but probably won't matter later in life, or if they do matter in the world of work, well, you'll do them then. So for the time being, you can arrive to class late (and make up an excuse, if you're asked), and you can come to class unprepared (good chance you won't be caught). When it really matters, you tell yourself, you'll get to work

on time, be prepared, speak up and contribute without fear, collaborate on projects, and make professional presentations. But you're missing a chance to practice doing all those things now. Learning how to do them in college is easier and safer than figuring out how to do them in the “real” world.

I recently had a student complain about somebody in his group who wasn't contributing or doing his fair share of the work. He told me that I shouldn't make students work in groups because it wasn't like “real” group work. On the job, he told me, “people don't screw around” when they work together. I felt a bit like laughing. In my job, I'm regularly in groups with coworkers who don't contribute or care about the success of the group. Furthermore, when it's a “real” work situation where professionals are being paid to get a job done, it's not always the best idea to take group problems to the boss. College is the perfect time to figure out what actions a group can take when one of its members isn't delivering the goods.

I would agree that not all faculty assignments seem terribly applicable to the real world. As a professional, you won't be asked to write term papers with references in APA format, but you will have all sorts of writing assignments—persuading a potential client that your company has the best product, providing customers with clear, nontechnical descriptions on how to run your software, or perhaps outlining what employees do well and what they need to improve as part of a performance review. You won't have the same kinds of tests on the job that you have in the classroom, but your knowledge will be tested, and on-the-job exams are not scheduled. More likely, the boss will simply show up at your cubicle, point your way in a meeting, or e-mail or text you a question that requires an immediate answer.

You can think of college as a way station where you hang out before you get on with the rest of your life. That's not against the law, and no teacher can prevent you from doing that. But you're cheating—not the teacher, not the course, not the department, not the college—you are cheating yourself, and you deserve better. You may decide that a course isn't important or that an assignment doesn't matter. That's your call. But please, don't base that decision on the assumption that what's happening in college isn't “real work” that doesn't matter in the “real world.”

Sincerely,

Your Teacher

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; A Memo to Students: College and the Real World; Faculty Focus; August 30, 2019; [<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/a-memo-to-students-college-and-the-real-world/>] August 30, 2019.

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Encouragement for Online Learners

PRIOR TO EVERY course, faculty should consider how they can connect with their students. Building rapport with students must be intentional and consistent (Glazier, 2016). Merely copying and pasting the course content into a learning management system cannot be the extent of online course development.

Our role as faculty must extend beyond grading assignments but include verbal and written encouragement, which is vital for the academic and personal development of students (Lowe, 2005). Encouragement can come in many forms such as positive feedback on assignments, emails, phone calls, and video messages.

To encourage online learners, faculty can utilize a video technique called "Midweek Motivation," which consists of creating short videos that can be used to help students persevere through any academic and personal challenge they may be experiencing. The video topics are unlimited, but in my experience I have shared professional challenges I have overcome and funny stories.

One midweek motivation was about my youngest son, who was five months old at the time. He had soiled his pampers and the aroma was overwhelming. However, his smile and laughter were contagious. As I dreaded changing his pampers, I couldn't help but see the irony of the situation. Here he is sitting in a messy situation, but he was still smiling and laughing. Even in unpleasant circumstances, our attitude makes a difference.

Sharing stories with students can help create a bridge that often doesn't develop automatically because of the geographical distance between the instructor and students. The level of transparency may vary among faculty, but a midweek video can open a door for fruitful conversations during virtual office hours. In addition, the lessons shared in the videos can create opportunities to mentor students as they juggle their academic and personal responsibilities. I have found that the midweek motivation videos help foster authenticity, creativity, and community in my online courses.

Authenticity

Students can see my picture but when they get to hear my voice and see my body language it helps remove the artificial presence that distance courses can create. According to Kember (1995), "Even a few friendly words can mean that students will be prepared to contact a person at some later time as the need arises" (p. 204). The connection

formed between faculty and students can help students persist, particularly when they feel like they have someone they can connect with. Lowe (2005) describes relational support as "the more affective dimension of the learning process wherein we encourage, motivate, and nurture students" (p. 4). The video helps make me relatable, and my transparency allows the students to know that I care about them. Authenticity sends a message that you are knowledgeable about the course content and that the student can trust you to teach them.

Creativity

Technology allows faculty to diversify their instructional techniques to engage students (Dixon, 2010). Since the attention span of students must be considered, the weekly videos should be brief. I recommend that the videos be no more than five minutes in length. Faculty can add creativity to their courses by creating a welcome video (Brinthaup, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, and Woodard, 2011) using YouTube, Vimeo, or Powtoon. The video can include family pictures, vacations, hobbies, favorite mementos, and other memorable events. In addition, the faculty profile embedded in our courses can be presented as a video or digital storyboard. The video can include personal elements that capture who you are as a person that a CV or written biography cannot reveal.

Community

While the midweek motivation videos are not a course assignment, students often utilize the discussion forum in our LMS to share what they gleaned from the video, encourage other students, share struggles, and offer words of wisdom to empower one another. According to Moore (2014), "a sense of community allows students to feel connected not only to their instructors and classmates but also to the content itself" (p. 20).

Overall, the end of course evaluations revealed that the midweek motivation videos were effective and an aspect of the course that students looked forward to each week. One student remarked, "He knows how to connect with the students and how to relate to us and give us personal experiences in his own life that help us relate to him and better understand his method." Although fostering authentic relationships can be a challenge in any course, I have found that the midweek motivation videos have helped foster a support system that is necessary for student

success.

As distance education continues to evolve, teaching online courses is a craft. As we strive to connect with our students, we cannot forget the power of encouragement. The priority of teaching the content remains but we must allow our life experiences to intersect with the course content. Since learning should be fun, the use of midweek motivation videos can be therapeutic. Authenticity and creativity can help foster a supportive learning community when teaching online courses. By incorporating encouragement in our courses, we can make meaningful connections with our students and our students can connect with one another.

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- Jeremiah E. Shipp, EdD; *Encouragement for Online Learners*; *Faculty Focus*; August 28, 2019; [<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/online-course-encouragement/>] August 30, 2019.