

Creating Positive Relationships in the Classroom, Even When It Seems Impossible

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Abstract: For instructors who work with minority students, it can be difficult to find a connection if they have had little to no experience working with these populations. By changing pedagogy styles and encouraging active learning (discussions, pair-share thinking, debates, etc.), teachers can begin to solidify the positive relationships they will have with the student, relationships fundamental to student support systems.

Every semester at Bryant & Stratton College, where I teach multiple levels of English and Communication, classes begin the same way. I introduce myself and, even though I'm white and we often aren't the same race, the students soon learn that I am more like them than they know. They learn that English is my second language, and Croatian is my first. They learn that I attended a high school system like many of them did, poorly funded and often called a failure. I tell them how I was raised on the side of town many of them are familiar with, and I can see their eyes widen as I begin to build my connection with them. I use this small connection to discuss how school was difficult for me at times and that I failed a class or two myself. I describe how the learning journey they are about to encounter is a small piece in a big puzzle. I've warmed them up and can see the hope in their eyes. With the connection I've begun, my uphill battle will be more of a gentle slope versus a steep and treacherous climb. Regardless of what class an instructor teaches, the student/instructor relationship can determine the amount of success that occurs in the classroom.

However, certain dynamics are established before the class even starts. Before I'm able to tell them about myself, I watch as students walk in and find a seat. I focus on one who sits in the back and stares at his phone, a typical behavior for many students. Like the majority attending the downtown Milwaukee campus of Bryant & Stratton College, the

for-profit college offering personalized career education and experience in a variety of fields, he is African American. In fact, the number of African Americans who enroll in colleges and universities has been on the rise. According to the most recent data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2014), the projected increase of the average white population enrollment from 2011 to 2022 is 7%, while the black population is projected to increase by 26% (Hussar & Bailey, p. 23). Bryant & Stratton's downtown Milwaukee campus falls within these numbers: 82% of the students are African American, and 56% of the student body is at least 25 years old (NCES, 2017).

As he sits staring at his phone, I watch him look up when someone new comes in. He has his guard up and assesses every new student like I do. However, as I look for readiness, he looks at them with hesitation. The shifting in his seat and the backpack in the chair next to him indicate he doesn't want anyone to sit next to him. This quiet passive aggressiveness is an all too common scene played out everyday. According to Thomas and Bierman (2006), African American children are more likely to attend bigger schools in neighborhoods where victimization is high and "aggressive behavior may be sanctioned by peers as an effective strategy for self protection and interpersonal conflict resolution" (p. 474). This unhealthy coping mechanism, a product of survival mindset, has been fine-tuned throughout his school experience, and he may not even realize he is doing it.

Recognizing these small habits, an instructor needs to ensure that everyone feels welcome. As students filter in, rather than standing stoically at the podium, I walk around and interact with them. I ask them individually if they've had a class prior to this or if the weather is nice outside. I walk back to the student on his phone, but there is no conversation offered. Instead, I smile and nod at him. I recognize his presence and he gives me a small smile back. Even though these are all small interactions, it helps him slightly lower his guard and relax a bit.

While every student has a different background, people of color in Milwaukee have a greater chance of living in poverty. Many people cannot sympathize with this

experience. According to the census data compiled and synthesized by Bishaw (2014), Wisconsin had a 7.4% increase in people living in poverty between 2000 and 2010. According to the latest statistics found in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Kids Count Data Book* (2015), 39% of African American children live in poverty versus 14% of Non-Hispanic White children (p. 20). These impoverished neighborhoods are filled with challenged schools where aggression and negative behavior is more prevalent. Students who attend these highly stressful classrooms can build skills that may reflect more individual work, establish relationships that are more self-serving, and practice their intrapersonal skills more than their interpersonal skills in order to avoid aggressive students.

Not only are these students surrounded by aggressive behavior in school, but aggression governs behaviors in their neighborhoods as well. In poverty-stricken neighborhoods, hierarchy is established through street families and sets of informal rules that govern interpersonal relationships. Citing their previous research, Stewart and Simons (2010) found that neighborhoods with high levels of structural disadvantage and violence led adolescents to adopt street code values in which they believed in the use of interpersonal violence to gain respect. A social norm such as maintaining eye contact is considered disrespectful, unlike in middle and upper class neighborhoods and typical work environments, where it is expected. When these types of street codes are broken, violence is often a justifiable way of handling the situation. When a student from these neighborhoods walks into a classroom, it is the instructor's job to establish the rules in a manner where students are not defensive, but is aware that the rules are different from the street rules they follow elsewhere.

In the classroom, I understand the apprehension that students may have towards me given their social surroundings at home or in their neighborhoods. The lack of trust they have is different from the average university student. I have my students introduce themselves to one or two peers. I watch intently as they go through the basic introduction: their name, their major, any other small tidbits they wish to share. I keep quiet as the classroom silences, and after half a minute or so, the conversation sparks up again. The student in the back of the classroom starts discussing the latest music he's

been listening to, and the person he introduced himself to smiles and nods enthusiastically. It's at this point that the student has found a commonality with a peer and lets down another wall. With the breakdown of these walls, the student begins to trust me and the classroom. After everyone finishes introductions, I ask them to quietly sit and write a small introduction. Rather than putting any students on the spot before they are comfortable with each other, I give them a chance to write what they feel is important for me to know. This interaction creates a vulnerability in the student and allows me to see their writing skills. Most often, I learn about the reasons for attending college, such as bettering themselves, showing their children how to be successful, moving up in their careers, or beginning a career. Usually these situations are also the reason they do not succeed. They cannot follow through because of schedule conflicts, lack of child care, or other life circumstances that challenge a school schedule. These writing introductions are a window into their world, and they allow me to see what kind challenges they might face during the semester.

These relationships are vital to all students, but especially to those who may not have had a good support system. Understanding this, instructors who value the importance of student/instructor relationships, and how these relationships can increase self-worth and engagement in the classroom, can make simple changes to aid in the formation of these relationships. Because many students who live in poverty are often linked with low efficacy in school and low self-esteem issues, the relationship with an instructor often helps because it increases both self-worth and knowledge (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Additionally, positive student/instructor relationships can also cut down on aggressive behavior in the classroom.

A weak or nonexistent support system is a significant reason that students drop out. In their synthesis of the literature on the concept social capital since 1986, Dika and Singh (2002) point out Coleman's argument the late 1980s that factors including a stable household with two parents, fewer siblings, and high educational expectations contribute to likelihood of matriculation (p. 34). Broken families, lack of child care, low income, and other variables create a system frail to begin with. Many students are not equipped with a support system, and when school becomes hard or when things occur in

life, rather than relying on someone to help, they stop attending class. If they reappear, the frustration and missing work can create a combination of circumstances that make dropping out the easy choice. The student/instructor relationship is vital to these situations because it can increase the positive perception of life, therefore the student will be more encouraged to find support outside the classroom. According to an expansive study by Umbach and Wawrzynski (2003), students in their first and senior year who frequently interacted with the instructors “reported greater gains in personal/social development, general education knowledge, and and practical competencies” (p. 12). By creating a classroom where active learning and challenging discourse are present, students become responsible for their actions and want to create a positive atmosphere where they’re more willing to succeed.

How does one continue to expand on the relationship that has been created? An instructor should create an academically challenging environment that promotes questions and conversations. However, when pointedly asking questions, the participation level is required but students can be less willing to answer. Rather, I create “polling” questions where students raise their hands to answer. Like his peers, the student in the back is hesitant at first, but when he sees others answering my questions, he also participates. By not pointing anyone out, I am creating a safe space where everyone can be comfortable. These small acts are recognized more unconsciously, and the student may not even realize the kind of environment the instructor is creating. When instructors focus on appropriate academic rigor, they garner trust because the students want to please them and are more willing to learn. In addition, by designing a curriculum that is inquiry driven and group focused (i.e., writing examples, pair-share thinking, and debates), instructors can initiate and facilitate participatory discussions.

Instructors can also create engaging activities and promote active learning requiring students to work with their peers to develop new ideas. By creating a classroom where active learning is present, students have to reach out to their peers to help complete tasks in class. In the beginning, students work as two individuals comparing notes, but as they continue they will form a relationship with each other and elevate the trust and accountability. This embodies an increase in self-worth and leads to an increase in

student engagement and a purpose to attending school. Instructors can aid in the process by actively involving themselves in the discussions and activities. If instructors are active, students will view them as individuals, not just moderators. Through this process, instructors become necessary tiers of the support system students need.

Acknowledging the social and economic differences in the classroom, utilizing active teaching methodologies while bonding with students, and creating a support system, the relationship between instructors and students becomes an integral part of a successful classroom. The student who sat in the back of the classroom begins to engage more with his peers and respects the classroom and acknowledges that the instructor is in charge. As the semester continues, the relationship will solidify and foster a safe space the student can feel free to grow in. The relationships with these students will help them in the first semester of college until their graduation.

Back in the classroom, the dust settles and I begin. I see students shift in their seats and settle down. The student in the back moves his backpack to the floor and sits up in his chair. He puts his phone away and looks at me, along with his peers, a pen in hand, dutifully taking notes. I continue to nurture and grow the bond I have begun. They know they have a long road ahead of them, and for most it is filled with hope and opportunity. But for some it will be difficult, and I know they will need someone in their corner. I will be there for them even if they don't realize it yet.

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