

**Handshakes and Hellos:
Using a Brief Introductory Meeting Assignment to Improve Perceptions of
Teacher Immediacy**

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Introduction/ Need for Idea

The higher the quality of relationships students have with their instructors as well as their peers, the higher the quality of their college experience (Astin, 1993). Relationship development at the course level, particularly at the beginning, is critical to the success of the course and its students (Felder & Brent, 2016). Displaying verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy behaviors can shorten the distance between student and instructor, helping to increase student motivation and engagement (Carrell & Menzel, 2001; Estep, 2012; King & Witt, 2009). Learning the names of students and something about them can go a long way toward establishing direct connections and tailoring the class to student needs and interests (Felder & Brent, 2016). In an attempt to connect with as many of the 94 students as possible, those enrolled in a non-major agricultural communications course at [university] were assigned a questionnaire and one-on-one meeting with the instructor at the beginning of the semester.

How It Works

Students were assigned an activity for a small amount of pass/fail credit that required they complete a short questionnaire about themselves, then meet the instructor to submit the questionnaire and briefly discuss it. Students had a two-week period at the beginning of the semester to complete the assignment. The questions were:

- First and last name
- Year, major and minor (if applicable)
- Where are you from?
- What is your favorite TV show(s) and/or movie(s)?
- Do you work? If so, where? How many hours each week, on average?
- How can I best help you be successful in this class?
- What is something I should know about you?

The meeting took place during the instructor's office hours, which were twice a week for one hour each, or immediately before or after class, which was held three times a week. Given these parameters, students were responsible for finding a time that worked best for them to meet with the instructor. When the student arrived, the instructor shook hands with the student, asked their name, then skimmed the survey before briefly discussing one or two pieces of information the student provided. On average, the individual meetings took between two to three minutes.

Results to Date/ Implications

The student responses were used by the instructor to tailor examples used during class lectures, as well as to put students into teams for a group work assignment later in the semester. Responses also made the instructor aware of any special circumstances held by students, making the instructor better able to address issues as they arose.

In order to evaluate whether the students liked the instructor meeting assignment, students were asked, "Thinking back to the beginning of the semester, did you like the Meet [instructor] assignment?" and "Why did you like or dislike the Meet [instructor] assignment?" as a part of a Qualtrics questionnaire.

Approachability

Many students brought up the reason for liking the assignment to meet the instructor because, “it made it easier to consult [instructor] for future assignments because we had already met.” The course took place in an auditorium style classroom with more than 90 students enrolled, so the assignment, “minimized intimidation of a large classroom setting.” By requiring an initial meeting to break the ice, students reported the assignment, “created a safe space to ask any questions or elaborate on concerns.”

Connection

The meeting activity established a personal connection between the student and the instructor. Several students provided statements along the same lines as indicating the assignment, “gave a personal connection with the teacher and helped encourage a one-on-one relationship down the road.” Learning the name of each student as well as a little about them was an important part of that connection as, “it made it seem like I wasn't just a number in a class and actually a person to my professor.”

Caring

Taking a few minutes to formally meet each student helped to establish, as one student put it, “a sense that the teacher cared and respected the students.” Students reported appreciating the opportunity to close the gap between the lectern and the school desk as, “It showed me that she cared for us and wanted to get to know us.” Several students conveyed the feeling of being “important, and as if my presence in the class truly mattered.”

Negatives

Although 77 of the 80 student respondents reacted positively regarding their feeling about the assignment, a few students did not like the activity. Of those, one reported forgetting to do the assignment, another indicated an inability to find a convenient time to meet due to other obligations, and the third refused the assignment as they believed, “It is against school policy to force someone to meet with the instructor outside of class for a grade.” This statement is a misinterpretation of university policy.

Advice to Others

Instructors who choose to integrate this activity into their coursework should consider planning some time immediately before or after class for students to complete the meeting as this was the most popular time students wanted to meet. In addition, office hours should be provided to students so they can drop in to meet the instructor. This approach lowers the number of meetings which must be scheduled via email or personal conversations. In addition, this meeting can establish the meaning and availability of office hours in the minds of the students, encouraging them to make use of the time for questions and concerns later in the semester.

Costs/ Resources Needed

This activity can be executed at no cost to the instructor or students. Each student will need to be supplied with the response survey either in hard copy or electronic form. Students will need to submit their survey via hard copy during the meeting with the instructor.

References

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