

**Utilizing Conversations to Encourage Instructor-Student Relationship and Promote Student Wellness and Career Focus**

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### **Introduction/Need for Idea**

As university instructors continue to navigate the pandemic, students are also seeking to find balance with the return to in-person classes, contracting covid and/or covid exposures, quarantine guidelines, and enrollment in distance education courses. The instructor-student relationship is key to helping students continue to navigate the pandemic and post-pandemic challenges that often bring uncertainty and change. Finding the appropriate balance of leniency and seriousness with students is often a consideration for instructors (Smith, 2015). Firm instructors may unknowingly stifle students' potential and compromise their success as an unnecessary boundary may be created between the instructor and the students. This divide can result in learners pulling back from asking for clarifications in class and from freely sharing their concerns when in need of advice. However, being too casual also can present significant challenges as instructors may be taken advantage of by the learners. The goal is to seek out the perfect balance that will allow for the establishment of rapport and a learning environment that is both inviting and challenging.

According to Claus et al. (2012), the instructor-student relationship is broad, and it encompasses the instructor's classroom behaviors. Instructors' verbal and nonverbal behaviors shape students' attention and perceptions about the course content, focus, and reshaping of their career goals (Rocca, 2004). Additionally, students' active participation in class is positively linked with the instructor's humor, credibility, and attractiveness (Claus et al., 2012). Several studies (Claus et al., 2012; Myers et al., 2005) found that instructors who create room for students to share their personal life and school challenges create confidence, feelings of self-worth, and affirmation that increase students' potential to seek out-of-class interactions. Frisby and Martin (2010) found connectedness between the instructor and the students goes beyond reinforcing course content to affecting the students' social life and enhancing cognitive learning. The instructor's behavior predicts students' ability to grasp content and facilitates the overall learning process.

### **How it Works/Methodology**

The concept of establishing rapport and showing care for your students seem like a simple concept to put into practice, however, was found to be not as common as expected. For this innovative idea, the instructors for two classes sought to engage enrolled students in conversations every class. In practice, this meant the instructors would acknowledge and have a conversation with every student during the class session. One class contained 26 students and another class contained 22 students. The instructors would arrive early to class and spend 10 minutes talking with students prior to class, and then would spend the first five minutes of class talking with students about positives and challenges that they had experienced since the last meeting. During the class session, instructors would deliberately incorporate student interests into presentations addressing those students whose interests aligned. In addition, the instructors incorporated a group activity for every class that lasted approximately five minutes, allowing students to talk with one another to build community. This time also provided the instructor the opportunity to circulate and talk with any students who had not yet been acknowledged. Furthermore, the instructors also made a point to discuss positive happenings in the students' daily lives and encouraged sharing with their peers.

### **Results to Date**

A survey of students and their experience in the courses revealed this strategy is working to help students feel more comfortable in the course as well as engage with the instructors. In addition, these strategies are assisting in alleviating some anxiety and stress. With over 80% of the students indicating feeling overwhelmed with courses, it is important that instructors utilize strategies that encourage students to seek guidance and advice from instructors. Over 75% of the students stated the conversations they had with their instructor helped decrease their stress levels and 94% indicated the conversations helped them have a better rapport with the instructors. In addition, the students indicated that the course instructors better understood their career goals. This quarter review of the class experience was positively viewed by the course instructors.

In addition, the conversations have provided instructors an opportunity to follow up with students who mentioned challenges. One student in particular who always lingered after class said “I feel comfortable talking with you both about assignments because you seem to take an interest in me and my success in the course.” Further, these discussions have allowed the course instructors to forward internship and job announcements to specific students based on career interests. The course instructors have seen an increase in students seeking advice and attribute that to the strategically planned conversations that have been embedded into the course sessions.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

The instructors plan to continue to utilize this practice in their future courses. They strongly believe the students enjoy sharing and have found a greater sense of community in the course. One of the biggest challenges that an instructor may face is engaging shy students and encouraging them to speak up. It is recommended that you allow students to join on their own terms, however, their contributions should be recognized and reminded of their value to the course. In addition, during group activities, students commonly select to work with friends or other familiar students. To promote collaboration, the instructors purposefully assign groups that change during each class session.

### **Cost/Resources Needed**

This idea is free of any costs, however, it should be noted that it does take a little bit of time. Time should be devoted to the planning questions that can be integrated during the lesson and also the creating activities and assigning groups. Additionally, some time was needed to create a survey, in this case, a Google Form, to allow students to evaluate the collaborative activities and conversation strategies that are used throughout the course.

## References

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