

THIRTEEN STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING INTERACTION WITH STUDENTS

Carol A. Weiss, Ph.D.
Director, Villanova Institute for Teaching and Learning
Villanova University

*Students' perceptions of positive teacher interactions are often shaped by their participation in specific class activities that require communication between learners and professors. Perhaps even more strongly, students' responses are influenced by the extent to which they believe that professors **care** about their learning. This does **not** mean that we must become entertainers or totally change the way we teach. Sometimes, however, we are so intent on conveying the content that we may appear unaware of, or unresponsive to, our students and their learning needs. The suggestions for enhancing interaction offered below represent a compilation of ideas taken from the literature on teaching and learning, and perhaps even more important, contributed by students themselves.*

1. Introduce yourself to students on the first day of class, telling them a bit about yourself and your teaching and research interests. It helps them to see you as a human being, which can have a positive impact on their motivation in your class.
2. Greet students before you start the day's class. Sometimes we are so focused upon the day's topics that we almost lose sight of the fact that there are other people in the classroom.
3. If you get to class a few minutes early, make conversation with the early arrivals. Asking them questions about their weekend or what they think of the Eagles/ Phillies/ Flyers is fine. Don't think that you have to tell jokes or be amusing.
4. Learn names, perhaps by having students fill out a seating chart with their names, after they have chosen their seats for the semester. (Students rarely change after the first couple of days.) When students think that you know their names, they tend to take more responsibility for learning than when they feel like just an anonymous face.
5. Remember to make eye contact often. It is not unusual for faculty members to appear to be staring off into space for many minutes while presenting material.
6. Put a brief outline, no more than 4 or 5 lines, of the day's major topics on the board, transparency, or handout. This will act as an "advance organizer" for students, alerting them to what to expect and what to consider important during the class. As experts, we know exactly what we are doing. Sharing our organization with the students (to whom it may be less obvious) communicates that we care about their learning and also helps them structure their own thinking by making the content clear. Refer back to the outline periodically to remind them where they've been, where they are, and where they are going.
7. Start class with a "hook," that is, put on the board, handout, or PowerPoint slide a problem, issue, case, etc. that embodies the concepts to be addressed in the day's class.

Periodically remind students that they should be using the information that you are sharing to begin to solve/analyze/discuss the problem. Doing this is an excellent motivator; it helps them understand why they are learning this particular material and to see its eventual application.

8. Come out from behind the desk/lectern occasionally. If the room arrangement permits, walk down the aisles or around the perimeter of the room. Non-verbal communication is important.

The adult attention span is between 15 and 20 minutes! (We can surmise that for students taking required courses it may be even less.) Keep that in mind while planning the day's class. Many of the suggestions below represent ways to vary what goes on in a class, even one that is primarily lecture.

9. Use multiple ways to convey the material: oral, written, graphic, pictorial, etc. Students have a variety of learning styles, and while it is impossible to tailor the course to each person's learning style, presenting information in a variety of ways is very helpful. Remember, your learning style is probably very different from theirs.

10. It is okay to call on students who haven't said anything. Some faculty members are reluctant to do so, feeling that they don't want to embarrass the students. However, that relieves those students of their responsibility to contribute to the class and to their own learning. There are ways to do this that are nonthreatening.

- Mention at the beginning of the course that you expect everyone to contribute, but knowing that students are sometimes uncomfortable or unprepared, you will give all students two (or whatever number you choose) free "passes" when you call on them. When they request a pass, you will skip them for that day. Giving students this flexibility often increases their volunteering or their readiness to answer questions when called upon.
- After you've asked a question or posed a problem, and particularly when there is no response after several seconds, ask the students to turn to the person next to him or her and discuss a possible answer with that individual. You might even occasionally ask them to write down their answer. Once they have received moral support from another student, they are much more willing to volunteer. If they don't, you can call on them to read what they have discussed or written, which is much less intimidating than being called on "cold."
- By the way, the optimal time to wait after asking a question is **10** seconds or even longer. The average time that most of us wait is only **1.5** seconds. Waiting allows students to collect their thoughts before answering. If we have been lecturing, and they have been in "passive" mode, they need time to change the channel to "active" mode.
- Rather than asking "Are there any questions?" change the syntax around to ask "What questions do you have?" The latter wording conveys the implicit

- assumption that students must indeed have questions, while the former approach asks them (from their point of view) to look dumb in front of their classmates, if they **do** have a question. Remember that many of our students are elderly adolescents, more concerned about looking foolish in front of their peers than about having their professor clarify a point.

11. Check on what students have understood by asking them to take out a piece of paper and write their answers to two questions: (1) What are the most important points you've learned in the last 15 minutes (half hour, 45 minutes, etc.), and (2) What points are still unclear? (This is often called the "One-minute paper.") You can ask them to hand the papers in, or alternatively, ask them to exchange papers with a few people and then call on several to read what is on the paper that they have. This gives you instant feedback about whether they have learned what you want them to learn. It also gives them the same feedback. If most of them seem to have learned the material, you can move on. If not, you and they have a chance to revisit and clarify the material immediately.

12. Occasionally give students a "quickie application exercise" related to material that you have been addressing. Research suggests that students retain information and concepts better when they have an opportunity to apply them immediately. This application can take the form of a multiple-choice question (especially if some of your tests have multiple-choice items), a problem to begin solving, or a more complex question to begin addressing. ("What might be the first step you would take...?") Give them a couple of minutes to complete the exercise and then ask for a few volunteers. These applications can also be made similar to the types of exam questions that students will encounter in your course. Students always appreciate the opportunity to gain practice ahead of time responding to such questions, and they often do better on exams as a result.

13. In the last few minutes of each class, have a student (picked at random) summarize each day's main points. A final review is good for all the students, and they are apt to pay more attention if they think they might be called on to be the day's "summarizer."