To Know My Name, to Know Me: The Impact on Learning at All Ages

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During my last year of graduate school, while writing my dissertation, I accepted a position to teach at the University of Massachusetts Boston, a campus that had been in existence for only a few years. The offices and classrooms were comprised of rental space in several office buildings in downtown Boston, still a number of years away from moving to a more permanent site at Columbia Point. Although the physical trappings were different from the tree-lined, grassy knolls of many other colleges, this did not seem to bother the students. Many in my classes were the first members of their families to attend college and their excitement about doing so together with being pioneers in the creation of a new university more than compensated for the lack of grass and trees. The setting at the University of Massachusetts Boston triggered fond memories of my own undergraduate education when I attended college in a similar environment in Manhattan.

My responsibilities required that I teach three sections of the same course each semester with approximately 30-35 students in each. I felt fortunate that at that point there were no large lecture classes with hundreds of students enrolled. Although I had been a teaching assistant during graduate school, I was now embarking on a new journey in my professional career, namely, assuming responsibility for my own classes.

This responsibility generated excitement as well as some trepidation. This was the first time I was teaching this particular subject and I had not had the time I hoped for in preparing my notes during the summer. Not only was I spending hours each day conducting research for my doctorate, but, most importantly, my first child, Richard, was born in mid-May, resulting in a very busy household. Rich was born a few days before I was to begin my research at several hospitals, research which was postponed for a couple of weeks so that my wife and I could adjust to the incredible presence of a child. What busy times, but as I recall those days, I appreciate the challenges and beauty of welcoming a child into the world, beginning a very rewarding professional career, and completing study for my doctorate (I guess with age, I have pushed aside memories of the anxiety occasioned by these events).

Connecting the Dots

In my January, 2006 website article I wrote about a commencement speech delivered by Steven Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple Computers, to graduates of Stanford University. One of the points he emphasized concerned connecting life's dots. Jobs noted, "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever." As I noted in my website article, Jobs' observations prompted me to reflect on my own journey. Little did I realize that certain practices I adopted at the University of Massachusetts Boston were to have a significant impact on my later views and writings about such themes as classroom climate, motivation, and resilience. Paralleling Jobs' observations, with time I could certainly connect the dots looking back.

As I prepared to teach at the University of Massachusetts Boston, I considered my experiences as an undergraduate student and the professors whose courses I had attended. Numerous questions arose, including:

"With which professors did I feel most comfortable?"

"Which professors created a classroom environment that was thought-provoking and one that I would not want to miss?"

"What did these professors say or do to create this atmosphere?"

"With which professors did I feel least comfortable?"

"What classes did I not mind missing?"

"What did professors say or do (or not say or do) that led me to feel more distant from them?"

I felt the more I could define the approach and practices of those professors whose classes I never wanted to miss, the more I could model some of my own teaching practices on what they did. My goal was not to be a clone of the educators I admired, but rather to learn from what they did and to incorporate their successful practices within my own teaching style.

I discovered that my positive or negative evaluation of different professors had little to do with the amount of work required for the course. For example, one of the most demanding professors I had in college was one I greatly admired. Her academic requirements were very extensive and her tests very challenging. She had the reputation

of being a "tough grader." Yet, after being in one of her courses, I enrolled in her other classes. I felt she had nurtured what I was to call years later a "motivating environment."

Somewhat to my surprise, how much time a professor spent lecturing as opposed to engaging the students in dialogue was not as much a determining factor in my evaluation of their effectiveness as I had expected (as long as their lecture style was filled with enthusiasm and they were not reading from scripted notes).

Certainly, knowledge of the subject matter was an essential quality of an effective teacher. However, with rare exception all of my professors possessed such knowledge; yet, for some this knowledge did not translate into a teaching and interpersonal style I wanted to emulate.

I continued to consider how a professor's approach contributed to a favorable classroom climate. All of the professors I rated highly displayed a passion for what they were teaching. Their love of the subject was obvious and their enjoyment enriched their classes. Also, a professor's sense of humor was important to me. I found that humor served to nurture an environment in which students were more comfortable and more receptive to learning. Years after my undergraduate days I authored a chapter about the importance of humor in therapy and have encouraged the use of humor and playfulness in therapeutic and educational settings. Connecting the dots backwards once again.

Perhaps the most salient factor in my ratings of professors was whether I sensed they "knew" their students, whether they made an attempt to learn our names, whether they were available and accessible to us. I am aware that if one teaches hundreds of students, getting to know each one is not possible, but I have known professors who conveyed the message that they were accessible even when teaching a large section.

Here is another example of connecting the dots backwards. Years after my first teaching experience, I began to focus on the topic of classroom climate. I emphasized in my workshops and writings the importance of developing a positive relationship with students. I shared with educators that when I interviewed students in elementary and secondary school and asked them what actions teachers and other school personnel could initiate to help students feel welcome, the two most frequent responses were: "greet me by name" and "smile." I began to share a saying I had heard, namely, "Students don't

care what you know until they first know you care." This interpersonal dynamic, which seems very apparent, needs to be in the forefront of our thinking.

Relying on memories of my undergraduate and graduate education, I decided to begin each of my University of Massachusetts Boston classes by discussing my teaching style and practices. I informed the students that I would be calling attendance for the first 3-4 weeks of class primarily to learn their names, not to monitor their attendance. I also said that if at any point they wished to see me during my office hours, they should not hesitate to make an appointment. I emphasized the importance of no one feeling reluctant to ask me questions. I wanted to establish the same kind of positive tone that my favorite professors had created.

I found my teaching experiences at the University of Massachusetts Boston to be very rewarding and satisfying. I was energized by the enthusiasm of the students. They were open to asking questions, expressing their ideas and insights, and challenging assumptions. My office hours were always filled with student appointments. At the conclusion of the semester, students completed evaluations of each professor. I was delighted by the numerical evaluations I received, but of greater importance were the comments of the students. Many of them highlighted my effort to learn their names and get to know them; they felt that this effort contributed to their motivation in class.

Many readers may ask, "Shouldn't all educators attempt to foster such a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom whether they teach in elementary or secondary schools or college?" I would offer a resounding "yes" to the question, but at times a focus on the teaching content takes center stage while consideration of the teacher-student relationship is relegated to the background. While some educators appreciate the importance of the student-teacher relationship, what is most disheartening is when I hear an educator minimize the importance of this relationship. "I am here to teach a subject and whether a student likes me or not or whether I know a student's name is not important." I disagree. I believe it is very important.

Appreciating the Relationship

Those reading this article might wonder what prompted me to reflect upon my early teaching experiences. It was an article that appeared in *The Boston Globe* last

month. The article, written by Peter Schworm, was titled, "In College, It's Who You Know: Instructors Take Pains to Learn Students' Faces."

The article describes the efforts of college professors to learn the names of their students. Schworm writes, "The goal goes beyond simple politeness. Faculty hope the effort will make students feel comfortable, sparking a livelier exchange of ideas. The approach also gives large lectures a personal touch that makes students feel less anonymous and more accountable to the class."

Gregory Hall, a psychology professor at Bentley College in Waltham, MA studies ID pictures on an internal college website prior to the beginning of classes. Hall observes, "If you feel a personal connection, you feel obligation. It creates a sense of community in the classroom. They are the Facebook generation, so they aren't surprised by it at all." Schworm adds, "Faculty members stand to benefit, as well. Many students applaud the effort in teacher evaluations, which carry some weight in promotion decisions. And a round of good reviews on ratemyprofessors.com doesn't hurt the cause, either, faculty members noted."

The same article reports the practice of Beverly Jaeger at Northeastern University in Boston who during the first class of the semester requested 20 students in her freshman engineering design class to write their names on a folded piece of construction paper and place it in front of them on their desk. "It's pretty important for me to know who you are. I don't want you to be just an ID number." She then walked around the room to speak individually with each student. One of the students reported that he welcomed the personal touch and felt it unified the class.

I was thrilled to hear the efforts these and other instructors were making to forge a closer relationship with their students.

A Concluding Thought

It's difficult for me to believe that my initial teaching experience at the University of Massachusetts Boston occurred in 1968—40 years ago! Writing this article brought back wonderful memories, many of which go beyond 40 years to those teachers and professors from whom I learned; they truly touched my mind and heart and contributed in innumerable ways to both my personal and professional life. With perspective I can connect the dots backwards and appreciate more fully the impact they had. They are the

educators who got to know me during my years as a student. I and countless others are the beneficiaries of their kindness and thoughtfulness.

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