

Student-Teacher Relationships: Reflections from the Students' Perspective

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Shortly before students register for classes each semester, students and faculty are reminded of an emerging trend across college campuses: the growing use of the Web site www.ratemyprofessors.com. As readers of this essay may know, this Web site allows students to rate their teachers' easiness, clarity, and helpfulness. Based on a teacher's overall rating—which combines clarity and helpfulness but not easiness—he or she is assigned an icon that represents the “overall quality” of instruction. By looking to see if teachers have “happy,” “neutral,” or “unhappy” faces, students can quickly decide whose classes they should take. Students are also able to post anonymous comments about their teachers on the Web site. In general, the content and tone of the comments sometimes vary considerably for each teacher: Whereas some messages describe a teacher's personality (e.g., “She's really cool and friendly”), others focus on a teacher's particular instructional style (e.g., “He's a good teacher, invites questions, and then insults you for 20 minutes”). Finally, other comments focus on specific classroom behaviors—characteristics such as helpfulness, fairness, approachability, and humor that likely influence the type of “face” a teacher receives. In short, this Web site allows students to inform others—albeit implicitly—what makes someone a master teacher. Because many college teachers also peruse this Web site, an interesting question arises: Do students and faculty agree on what makes someone a master teacher?

Generally speaking, a master teacher is “an individual who is highly effective as a classroom teacher” (Schaeffer, Epting, Zinn, & Buskist, 2003, p. 134). Recent studies suggest that students and faculty agree on many of the criteria that define master teachers (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2003). However, the criteria on which students and professors disagree may provide interesting insight into the different motivations and perspectives of these two constituencies. In this essay, we will discuss faculty and student perspectives on master teaching and then discuss some possible reasons why undergraduate students, such as us, and faculty disagree to some extent on which characteristics are most important.

Research on Master Teachers

Buskist et al. (2002) observed that although there were differences between student and faculty perceptions of what constitutes a master teacher, these two groups agreed to a large extent. Specifically, Buskist et al. found that students and faculty at a large state university agreed on 6 of the top 10 characteristics that defined master teachers. In a subsequent study, Schaeffer et al. (2003) found similar results at a small community college, suggesting that student and faculty perceptions of master teachers are relatively stable across settings. However, in both studies, there were interesting discrepancies between faculty and students in what they ranked as the most and least important characteristics of master teachers.

Faculty and Student Discrepancies

The differences between students and faculty on the characteristics they ranked as most important reflect an emphasis on different aspects of teaching. Whereas students tended to emphasize characteristics that focus on student-teacher relationships (e.g., the teacher cares for students and is understanding), faculty stressed more technical aspects of teaching (e.g., the teacher focuses on developing critical thinking skills and presents current information). For example, Buskist et al. (2002) found that students ranked “happy/positive/humorous” as the seventh most important characteristic; in contrast, faculty rated it twenty-seventh. Similarly, whereas faculty ranked “promoting critical thinking” and “preparing” in their top 10, students did not rank these characteristics highly (see also Schaeffer et al., 2003).

Although the respective rankings of important teacher characteristics by students and teachers were not diametrically opposed, one question that emerges from an analysis of these rankings is: Why do students (more so than teachers) find student-teacher relationships to be so important? We believe there are important reasons for this discrepancy, and we hope to convince you that developing relationships with your students can have a beneficial effect on their motivation and desire to learn.

The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships

The atmosphere established in a classroom can strongly impact a student’s willingness to learn. Imagine this scenario: On the first day of class, still frightened by the novelty that often comes with a new course, a student finally musters up the courage to ask his teacher a question, which is followed by this response: “Well, it looks like someone was not listening and might not be able to handle the requirements of this course.” (Although this response might seem harsh, it actually happened in one of our classes.) Even though our imaginary teacher likely did not make this comment maliciously, the comment may have had a lasting—and negative—impact on his students. Our imaginary student (and possibly other students in the course) may avoid future contact with the teacher and may feel less hopeful of achieving his goals in the class. And most certainly he will feel uncomfortable asking his teacher another question. Without developing a comfortable relationship with his teacher, our student may lose interest in a subject that may have otherwise been very stimulating.

The preceding example illustrates the most important reason why student-teacher relationships are vital: These relationships may set the stage for increased student learning. For students, positive interactions with teachers are especially important. Students feel more comfortable asking questions in class and approaching the teacher outside of class, which might inspire them to set more challenging academic goals. With a positive student-teacher relationship in tow, students may be more likely to take chances and address their difficulties directly, not fearing embarrassment. Most likely, comfort with a teacher may lead to improved learning and the development of critical thinking skills—outcomes that most faculty view as important (Buskist et al., 2002). Conversely, if a student is afraid to participate in class, the odds of her learning new information are greatly reduced.

Positive student-teacher relationships can also increase students' initiative for taking advantage of the myriad opportunities college presents. To get the most out of college, students know they need to take advantage of opportunities designed to complement the traditional academic experience. Such opportunities include taking part in independent research and completing community service, among others. For example, in one of our classes, we were required to participate in a service learning project. At the end of the class, our teacher offered us opportunities to continue with our volunteer work. Because of the relationship we had with our teacher, each of us wanted to continue providing service to our community. Without this relationship, the idea of volunteering for no course credit would probably not have crossed our minds. Furthermore, teachers with whom students have established relationships may be more familiar with their students' interests and alert them to opportunities that might be of interest—for example, having the opportunity to write this essay! Conversely, without good student-teacher relationships, students might not know about these opportunities or, even if students are aware of them, may not seek them out as often. In sum, positive relationships with teachers may open the door to more enriching experiences and, as a result, increase students' self-efficacy.

Another reason why strong student-teacher relationships are vital is because these relationships can positively influence students' work ethic. We have found that there seems to be a positive relation between the amount of rapport a student has with a teacher and his or her willingness to work hard for that teacher. When students respect their teachers and have positive relationships with them, they also trust that the hard work they do will pay off. Each of us has taken many courses that required copious amounts of work. In those courses where we had positive relationships with our teachers, we were more likely to view the large amount of work as beneficial to our intellectual growth and not just "busy" work. For example, one course, in which we had a great relationship with our teacher, required nightly readings, a lengthy term paper, and frequent essay examinations. We felt, however, that the teacher would only require assignments that promoted our learning. In contrast, in classes where such a relationship was lacking, under-the-breath comments and complaints often followed what seemed to be redundant, pointless work. In reality, the amount and type of work in those classes was no different; the perception of why we completed so much work, however, was.

Also, when students establish good relationships with their teachers, they do not want to disappoint the teachers. Teachers who establish rapport with their students know their students and the capabilities their students possess, never allowing them to settle for doing less than their very best work. Just as there is often a fear of disappointing one's parents, so too is there a fear of disappointing a most respected teacher. Finally, students work harder in courses where they have good relationships with their teachers because they are more confident in their own abilities. When teachers expect exceptional performances from their students, students are more likely to strive for excellence. Upon entering college, most students feel unsure of their abilities. Over time, and as students become more familiar with college, their confidence grows, and this increased confidence is certainly aided by positive student-teacher relationships. Personally, we would not have enrolled in challenging classes, become involved in community service, and felt a sense of accomplishment if it were not for the support of our teachers. In essence, then, any confidence gained in the classroom is less likely to transfer to new situations if teachers do not establish good relationships with their students.

A final reason that student-teacher relationships are important to students is that students need mentors. Before leaving high school, parents, teachers, advisors, and elders often warn high school seniors about the harsh realities of entering the “real world.” In college, teachers become our mentors, sometimes “serving” for 4 or more years. In that time, students learn from their teachers not only course material but also life lessons learned outside the lecture hall. And although the college student in each of us knows that we should pursue the vast opportunities college offers, the high school senior in each of us still needs some guidance—and for that, we look to our teachers. Most likely, we will seek out guidance, and, thus, knowledge, from teachers who have made it a priority to develop a relationship with us.

Conclusion

College is not just about memorizing important dates or the criteria for a mental disorder. Nor is it about merely learning to survive in the “real world.” Instead, college is about learning to thrive. This “gateway to the world” is about becoming engaged, taking risks, getting involved, and establishing a work ethic; it is a place to learn about the etiquette of interaction with professionals and how to conduct ourselves not as young adults, but as adults, period. We no longer have the strict guidelines and stringent rules that high school had so neatly constructed for us. As we make the transition from high school to college, we ask that our teachers not give us every answer, but rather help us learn on our own. Our time in college is short, filled with papers, tests, projects, and speeches, some of which we will probably forget. Long after the content of our classes has faded from memory, the relationships we established with teachers will continue to impact our professional relationships as well as our confidence in our own abilities to succeed.

References

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