How To: Use the Power of Personal Connection to Motivate Students

A positive relationship with the teacher is often a crucial factor in motivating a struggling student. The power of positive teacher-student interactions is illustrated in one recent study, which found that--when instructors took just a few seconds to greet inattentive students by name at the start of class--the percentage of time those students spent academically engaged during the first 10 minutes of instruction soared from 45% to 72% (Allday & Pakurar, 2007).

Teachers who are 'proactively positive' in their classroom interactions can foster strong student connections with a minimum of effort. However, in the push to increase the academic rigor of classrooms to implement the Common Core State Standards, teachers can sometimes forget to use simple but effective tools such as praise (Kern & Clemens, 2007) that motivate students even as they strengthen teacher-student relationships. In this discussion, we review efficient strategies to use in connecting with students, along with pointers for integrating those practices into teachers' instructional routines.

Connecting With Students: Strategies. Here are recommendations for building student relationships that work--but do not require a great deal of time or effort

- *Greet students at the start of class.* As students arrive at the start of class, the teacher stands at the door and briefly greets each student by name (Allday & Pakurar, 2007). This modest effort has been shown to substantially increase student attention and focus. Teachers who commit to using student greetings rearrange their start-of-class routine to allow them consistently to be standing just outside or inside the classroom door as the students arrive.

- *Promote positive interactions via the 3-positives:1-negative ratio.* To keep relationships on a positive footing throughout the classroom, the teacher self-monitors encounters with particular students and sets the goal of having at least 3 positive interactions for each disciplinary interaction (Sprick, Borgmeier & Nolet, 2002). Positive teacher-student interactions can vary in format: for example, greeting, praise, conversation, smile, thumbs-up sign. By maintaining at least a 3:1 ratio between relationship-enhancing vs. disciplinary interactions, the teacher bends the odds in his or her favor that every student in the class will view the instructor as fair and caring.

- *Use targeted praise.* Teachers can enhance the positive climate of the classroom, motivate learners, and shape student performance in the desired direction by using frequent praise-statements (Kern & Clemens, 2007). To maximize its impact, praise should describe in specific terms the behavior that is praise-worthy and be delivered as soon as possible after the observed student behavior .

- *Emphasize the Positive in Teacher Requests* (Braithwaite, 2001). The teacher avoids using negative phrasing (e.g., "If you don't return to your seat, I can't help you with your assignment") when making a request of a student. Instead, the teacher request is stated in positive terms (e.g., "I will be over to help you on the assignment just as soon as you return to your seat"). When a request has a positive 'spin', that teacher is less likely to trigger a power struggle and more likely to gain student compliance.

- *Provide teacher attention for positive behavior: The 'two-by-ten' intervention.* If a teacher has a strained (or non-existent) relationship with a particular student, that teacher may want to jump-start a more positive pattern of interaction using the 'two-by-ten' intervention (Mendler, 2000). With this time-efficient strategy, the teacher commits to having a positive 2-minute conversation with the student at least once per day across 10 consecutive school days. The active ingredient in the intervention is regular and positive teacher attention delivered at times

when the student is *not* misbehaving. After the 10-day intervention, teachers often find that their relationships with formerly problematic students have improved markedly.

Teachers know that building relationships with students is not a process that occurs by magic--but instead requires thoughtful planning and effort. However, the four ideas presented here are a good starting point for instructors who seek efficient ways to promote interpersonal connections that motivate and inspire students.

References

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