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Lander University's

# White Board

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*Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy*

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

# First Exam of the Semester: A Wake-up Call for Students

THIS WEEKEND I discovered a "memo to students who are disappointed with their last test grade." What a great idea! I wasn't surprised when I found out it was more of Rich Felder's good work.

Students are terribly optimistic about their grades, especially at the beginning of a course. Then comes the first exam, many of us giving it early on in an attempt to dislodge these convictions that success will come easily and with little or no effort. If we return the exams during class, disappointment hangs heavy in the air. In those moments of despair there's an opportunity to confront students with what they might have done (or not done) that caused (or is at least related to) that disappointing score.

Felder is an engineer so his short, friendly memo precedes a checklist of questions about how students are doing the homework and what they did to prepare for the test. They answer each question yes or no. The instructions say, "Answer 'yes' only if you usually did the things (as opposed to occasionally or never)." At the end of the checklist students are advised, "If you recorded two or more 'No' responses, think seriously about making some changes in how you prepare for the next test."

As with any good instructional idea, it's not about precise replication but taking the idea and making it your own. In this case, the first and probably easiest adaptation is revision of the questions on the checklist. But having a checklist isn't a requirement. You could attach to the memo some study suggestions collected from former students who've done well on your tests.

In *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice,* I wrote about a physics professor who, before the first test, gave students a set of study suggestions offered by students who had done well in the course the previous semester. Student response to that handout was amazing. It looked rather like Moses had just delivered the Ten Commandments. Ironically, but not surprising, the advice from former students echoed things professors say all the time, but when those recommendations came from somebody who had aced the exams, they took on a whole new level of credibility.

A memo like this gives teachers the chance to communicate a variety of messages. Felder points out the value of working with other students, not to copy solutions but to compare and discuss them. Students need reminders that ongoing study garners far better results than cramming. If they don't believe you they should try it. They also need to hear that effort trumps natural ability—it's much more about hard work than big brains. Perhaps a review of available resources is in order—office hours, the learning center, and the additional textbook materials accessible online. Maybe you could have students suggest activities that might better support their efforts to learn. Finally, you can use the memo to convey your concern, your commitment to helping students succeed, and your belief that exam scores will improve if students use appropriate study strategies.

Getting this information to the students who most need it requires some finesse. A teacher-generated list of study suggestions attached only to low-scoring tests is not going to be as effective as letting the disappointed students identify themselves. "If your test grade wasn't as high as you expected, you might want to take a look at a memo I've posted on the course website. It's addressed to students disappointed with their test score. Even if you got a high B but wanted an A, most of the study advice probably still applies." Faculty also could print copies of the memo and make it available for students to pick up as they leave class, post it to their office door, or send it out in an email to the class. You get the drift.

Often we despair that students seemingly don't listen or do what we tell them. Do we underestimate the importance of timing? Study advice before an exam can prevent disaster, but a disaster is what some students need to persuade them that success in the course isn't automatic.

**Reference:**

Felder, R.M. (1999). Memo to students who are disappointed with their last test grade. *Chemical Engineering Education*, 33(2), 136–137. www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Columns/memo.pdf

*Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; "First Exam of the Semester: A Wake -up Call for Students;" Faculty Focus; January 28, 2015; [ http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/first-exam-semester-wake-call-students/] February 2, 2015*

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# Strategies for Preventing Student Resistance

*Editor's note:* The following is an excerpt from "What if students revolt?"—Considering student resistance: origins, options and opportunities for investigation. *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education,* 12 (Winter), 586-595. The Teaching Professor Blog recently named it to its list of top pedagogical articles.

"What if the students revolt?" "What if I ask them to talk to a neighbor, and they simply refuse?" "What if they do not see active learning as teaching?" "What if they just want me to lecture?" "What if my teaching evaluation scores plummet?" "Even if I am excited about innovative teaching and learning, what if I encounter student resistance?"

When teachers try something different in the classroom and students resist, the teacher may back down. Often, this is due to fear of what will happen to their student evaluations and contract renewals. I have been told by many instructors that they once tried active learning but the students hated it, so they went back to what was tried and true. (Silverthorn, 2006, p. 139)

There is little doubt that the potential for student resistance in response to attempting a new teaching strategy is a widespread fear of many instructors. Even the rumor that another instructor who tried innovative approaches may have experienced student resistance could be enough to deter instructors from ever trying these teaching methods themselves.

While addressing student resistance in a classroom when it arises is no doubt a key concern for many instructors, preventing student resistance altogether would seem to be the ultimate goal. Few research studies appear to have directly investigated the efficacy of different teaching strategies in avoiding student resistance. However, numerous potential approaches are commonly suggested by experienced instructors and faculty professional development specialists that appear to address the classroom concerns raised by students as reported in the literature (Silverthorn, 2006; Prince and Felder, 2007; Smith, 2008; Science Education Initiative, 2013). Below are several such teaching strategies, connected where possible to the research literatures presented above.

**Practice Instructor Immediacy—Decrease Social Distance between Yourself and Your Students**

While teacher (mis)behavior may play a role in student resistance, teacher behaviors are also central to significantly and positively influencing student motivation and learning. Researchers in social psychology have characterized a phenomenon dubbed instructor immediacy, the presence of behaviors by an instructor that effectively decreases the social distance between themselves and their students (Mehrabian, 1971; Science Education Research Center [SERC], 2013). Such behaviors encompass a variety of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are observed by students and influence their perceptions of their relationship with their instructor. Does the instructor smile? Does the instructor know students' names? Does the instructor seem comfortable with students? Does the instructor make eye contact? Does the instructor move around the classroom, physically reducing the distance between himself or herself and students?

Importantly, research evidence suggests that high levels of instructor immediacy may be inversely related to student resistance in a classroom, as well as being positively correlated with student learning (Kearney et al., 1988; Kelley and Gorham, 1988). One study of the relationship between student resistance and instructor immediacy found that students were significantly more likely to comply with instructor requests from a moderate or highly immediate instructor than requests from a low-immediacy instructor (Burroughs, 2007). In addition, high instructor immediacy has been shown to correlate with student motivation to learn, as well as affective and cognitive learning (Titsworth, 2001; Witt and Wheeless, 2001; Allen et al., 2006). While instructor immediacy is likely not a term that many undergraduate biology instructors are familiar with, many no doubt either consciously or unconsciously engage in such behaviors. Actively maximizing these behaviors—smiling, learning students' names, moving around the classroom space, and making eye contact—are simple behaviors that could prevent or reduce student resistance in college biology classrooms, perhaps through countering the impact of instructor misbehaviors that may also occur.

**Be Explicit with Students about the Reasoning behind Your Pedagogical Choices**

Currently, there is little systematic investigation about the extent to which biology instructors attempting innovative teaching explicitly share with students the reasoning behind the pedagogical choices they are making in their classroom. However, many experienced practitioners and faculty development experts often encourage instructors to tell students why the teaching methods being used have been chosen as a method of blunting potential student resistance. Some have referred to this explicit discussion of pedagogical choices with students as framing, the use of language and class time to highlight the nature of the classroom environment rather than the conceptual ideas being taught there (Science Education Initiative, 2013). Sample strategies and language from a variety of instructors who have used framing in their classrooms include sharing with students findings from studies about research on the efficacy of active learning, engaging students in reflecting on how they learn, and establishing expected student behaviors during class (Science Education Initiative, 2013). Alternatively, Richard Felder provides what he calls "mini-sermons" to help explain to students why he uses the teaching strategies he does, including responses he has used to address student complaints about working in groups, writing assignments, and his choice of interactive teaching methods over lecture (Felder, 2007).

Being explicit with students about your pedagogical choices may be useful on the first day of a course, as well as throughout the duration of the course term. Regardless of when they are used, these strategies from different sources all encourage instructors to metaphorically "pull back the curtain" on teaching and reveal for students the reasons behind the teaching choices being made. Not only might this practice provide students with a rationale for why their classroom experience in a course is the way it is, it may also effectively increase instructor immediacy through cultivating a partnership with students in the teaching and learning process. By explaining pedagogical choices to students, we treat them as colleagues, discussing with them—the same way you might with another instructor in your department—how you plan to teach and why you think this method will help them learn.

Read the full article on the **Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education website.** There you also can access the entire reference list and tables that highlight examples of what student resistance can look like, instructor misbehaviors that may elicit student resistance, and methods for collecting evidence about students' concerns. Free via Creative Commons.

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*Shannon B. Seidel, PhD and Kimberly D. Tanner, PhD; Effective Classroom Management; Faculty Focus; January 26, 2015; [ http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/strategies-preventing-student-resistance/ ]; February 2, 2015.*