Volume 11
Issue 4
April
2019

Lander University's

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

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Six Things You Can Do to Deepen Student Learning

FOR BASEBALL FANS and players, springtime can only mean one thing: spring training. Every year professional baseball players head to Arizona or Florida to hone their craft. These are professionals mind you, but they continue to spend hours each year working on many of the same things Little Leaguers work on during the start of their seasons—throwing, catching, hitting, base running, and so forth.

As they make minor adjustments in these fundamentals of the game, the overall outcome is a major improvement. The same is true for faculty who remain mindful of their fundamentals, and make small, incremental improvements to their teaching.

It's against this backdrop that Tyler Griffin, PhD, associate professor at Brigham Young University, shared his six A's for promoting deep and lasting learning in your courses.

1. **Adjustments** – Most courses don't require a complete overhaul. Take a moment and write down a few of those common complaints or top frustrations you hear from your students year after year. Are there any small things that you could address that would make a big impact? If you've taught the course before, where do students tend to struggle? What can you do to support students through the most difficult spots? In most cases, it's not possible to remove every obstacle to learning—a key concept may be difficult and you can't learn it for them—but there are things you can do to better support their learning.

   "Sometimes a particular unit is going to be a pain point for the students because it's just plain hard and takes a lot of effort," said Griffin. "Well, let them know that. Let them understand the significance of why this difficult unit is so essential to their overall education, especially in your course. And make them aware of the fact that you understand completely how difficult it is."

2. **Audience** – The first step to learning more about your students is getting a baseline read on who they are, their backgrounds, their struggles, and their successes. You also need to know why they are taking the course. Is it just to fulfill a graduation requirement, or do they have an interest in the topic?

   As you learn more about your students, you'll be better able to monitor their engagement and respond accordingly. Do they get sleepy if you dim the lights for too long? Are they easily distracted by technology or others around them? Are there times when they are not really following the lesson or when they simply go through the motions of being a live body in the classroom?

   "We've all had this experience … you're teaching, you look out at your class, and you get this moment of recognition that, uh-oh, this isn't going well," said Griffin. "They're dying on the vine. Or they're struggling. Or they're distracted. The knee jerk response is to do more … to push the gas pedal down even more. But you'll find that if you actually do less and have them do more at those moments, you're far more likely to re-engage a greater percentage of them."

3. **Applicability** – The big question here is, so what? How is what you're teaching going to help students not only in your class, but in their life and careers? One way to help students see the relevance of a particular concept or a course as a whole is to explain it early and often. Don't keep your course's relevance a secret or save it for the "big reveal" at the end.

   "The problem is that often we save our applicability for the end, thus wasting or losing a lot of the effectiveness of the instruction time," said Griffin. "So one simple thing you can do is to front load relevance to avoid this wasted instruction time."

   With an individual assignment, this could be accomplished by providing some context to what they will be reading or doing and offering clues as to what they should look for and be ready to discuss, he said.

4. **Adaptability** – Many of you have probably heard that students start going into cognitive overload after seven to 15 minutes. More recently, some researchers have started saying that it's probably closer to three to five minutes. "We've got to find dynamic ways to stretch them without breaking them," said Griffin, "but at the same time not completely sell out what we're trying to do and what we have to cover in our courses."

   Delivering bite-sized chunks of content interspersed with appropriate active learning exercises and context builders is one way to keep students interested and engaged. Griffin is also a big fan of using what he calls the three Ex's of instruction: explanations, examples (including non-examples), and experiences.

5. **Accentuation** – Learning is deeper and lasts longer when students process

see Deepening, Page 2

Summer & Fall Reg. Begins
New Students - Apr. 15
Classes End - Apr. 29
Last Day to Withdraw - Apr. 29
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Strategies for Creating a Safe and Supportive Classroom

WHEN WE CONSIDER the multiple life challenges and wellness issues faced by college students, it is safe to assume that the impact of trauma is manifest in every classroom. Trauma, whether experienced as a singular event or as a chronically unsafe environment, shapes how survivors perceive their vulnerability in the world and challenges their ability to cope. When we pursue greater understanding of the effects of trauma on individuals and the systems in which they operate, there is also a growing awareness that trauma is far more prevalent than we might have imagined. In fact, recent studies indicate that exposure to trauma is a widespread experience.

The last 20 years of scientific trauma research has improved our understanding of trauma and has brought focus to the prevalence and impact of trauma in our primary through post-secondary educational systems. For example, a 2008 study, Prevalence, Type, Disclosure, and Severity of Adverse Life Events in College Students (Smyth et al., 2008) found that 20 percent of college students nationwide (N = 6,053) report "symptoms indicative of clinical or subclinical PTSD".

Exposure to traumatic events can affect learning, behavior, and relationships. Multiple traumatic events or chronic experiences or circumstances that are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening can impair executive functioning and can culminate in lifelong challenges. Behavioral issues, physical and/or mental health conditions, and vulnerability to addiction and substance abuse are just a few of these challenges. When we take into account that uninformed or rigid systems, procedures, and organizational structure can serve to re-traumatize victims, the mandate to cultivate a trauma-informed approach to our classrooms and institutions becomes apparent.

Educational systems are beginning to catch up with approaches currently implemented across behavioral health, medical, and criminal/juvenile justice settings. Systemic change takes time, but faculty are free to incorporate trauma-informed practices in their classrooms. At the minimum, faculty and administrators must strive to avoid re-traumatizing students with negligent approaches and policies. In other words, first, do no harm.

A traumatized student's primary need is a sense of safety. By reframing student behaviors such as apathy, perfectionism, lack of motivation, aggression, and emotionality as possible symptoms of trauma, it allows us to defer to compassion rather than judgment and reactivity. Rather than asking ourselves, "What is wrong with this student?" we should ask "What has happened to this student?" A trauma- informed approach is one that requires faculty to put curiosity before reactivity. We are cautious about reacting to a student in ways that may appear disdainful or shaming. We ensure that conversations about behaviors and performance take place in private. By being respectfully inquisitive about your concerns with a student, you may discover the underlying issues behind a student's conduct or demeanor.

Traumatized students are predisposed to feel distrustful, powerless, and fearful. Remember that trauma can affect perception and memory. Therefore, it is best practice to provide students with an agenda and a syllabus that is clear about your expectations, boundaries, schedule, activities, and student rights. Consider including your rationale for these categories in your syllabus. Avoid zero tolerance policies that communicate you are inflexible, regardless of unseen circumstances.

Create room in your class activities for some flexibility. Too much rigidity in the classroom lacks consideration for the traumatized student who may struggle with some tasks. Allowing for choices when appropriate gives traumatized students the opportunity to be more successful.

It is always helpful to acknowledge that you cannot know someone's experiences in life. So be mindful when class material covers topics that may be emotionally challenging to students. Recognize that asking students about personal experiences or discussing historical, cultural, or social/gender trauma may trigger strong emotions in some students. Consider trigger warnings on visual materials that may be disturbing.

Finally, commit to collaborating with students rather than doing things to or for them. It is easy to over-function when we are attempting to "rescue" a student from their hardships. Engage the student as a partner in problem-solving any issues that may arise. This empowers the student to take ownership in the process and builds self-efficacy in handling challenges.

MaryAnn Raybuck; Strategies for Creating a Safe and Supportive Classroom; Faculty Focus; April 1, 2019; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/strategies-for-creating-a-safe-and-supportive-classroom/] April 1, 2019.

Deepening
Continued from Page 1

critical information in multiple ways, over time. But how do most students study? They cram, which typically means reading or reviewing their notes over and over the night before the exam. On the day of the exam, everything they crammed into their brain spills out into the exam booklet and is promptly forgotten.

Rather than being frustrated with this process of forgetting, Griffin encourages faculty to change the frequency, recency, and potency of students' exposure to crucial information to make learning last.

"Begin by selecting the most crucial facts, theories, skills, or processes you expect students to remember the longest from your course," he said. "Make sure they are exposed to these critical items more than once or twice in your classes—increasing the recency and frequency factors. Also make sure they interact with these vital elements in a variety of engaging and relevant ways—increasing the potency factor."

6. **Assessments** – Too often students see course content as disjointed units, rather than building blocks to a deeper understanding of key concepts. As you design your course, think about the big-picture processes you want you students to be able to accomplish by the end of the term. Then create the relevant, increasingly complex assignments and assessments necessary to help build students' skills as they progress through the course.

"Students are going to learn a lot better and retain learning a lot longer if they're working on whole tasks," said Griffin. "Make them feel like there's purpose and meaning to the class, rather than just jumping through the hoops of learning what you want them to learn so they can regurgitate it on the test."

Mary Bart; Six Things You Can Do to Deepen Student Learning; Faculty Focus; March 29th, 2019; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/six-things-you-can-do-to-deepen-student-learning/] March 29, 2019.