

Building Professor-Student Relationships in an Age of Social Networking

The influence of teacher-student relationships on the quality of teaching and learning is well-documented (Klem & Connell, 2004; National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2012; Rigsbee, 2010). Especially at the college level, rapport between professors and students is likely to increase student learning because students feel valued, more comfortable expressing their feelings, and more willing to be intellectually challenged (Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence, 2012).

But college students are changing. Research shows that Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1999, prefer a variety of active learning activities, seek relevance so they can apply what they are learning, want to know the rationale behind course requirements, and desire a “laid back” learning environment in which they can informally interact with the professor and each other (Bart, 2011). Most significantly, “Millennials...are more willing to pursue learning outcomes when instructors connect with them on a personal level” (para. 5).

Use of technology, especially social networking, has been shown to influence professor-student relationships. Today’s college students use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, etc.) most often to connect with friends and family (89%) and to a lesser degree for educational purposes such as planning study sessions (28%), completing assignments and projects (33%), and communicating with faculty or advisors (15%) (NSSE, 2012). It appears that many of today’s professors are responding in kind: “More than half of the students who interacted with faculty or advisors through social media had *two-way* communications with them” (p. 18).

While some believe that virtual interactions between students and their professors nurtures the professor-student relationship, one recent study reports that 40% of college students and 30% of faculty believe it is inappropriate for professors to interact with students on social networking sites (Malesky & Peters, 2012). Wilkinson and Milbourne (in press) explain that college students’ prolific social networking habits lead to perceived intimacy in which they experience false feelings of closeness with others and expect everyone — including their professors — to be accessible and responsive 24/7. Such misguided feelings and expectations can eradicate professional boundaries and “demote” professors from their status as authority figures to the perceived status of peer or even service worker (Gangnon & Milbourne, 2014).

So how can college professors establish an effective balance between authority and a relationship with their students? Stewart (2009) suggests that professors first maintain academic standards “even if it means [students] must sometimes move outside their comfort zones and we must move outside ours” (p. 117). Following are a few suggestions for establishing authority and professional boundaries while still maintaining professor-student relationships characterized by warmth and friendliness:

1. **Model professionalism in your face-to-face interactions with students.** If your students perceive you as an authority figure, they will treat you with respect. Dress professionally, expect your students to address you formally (e.g., Dr. Smith, Mrs. Jones), and use professional language. With that said, you don’t have to be stuffy. A sense of humor and “being yourself” can go a long way with college students!

2. **Be prepared and well-organized.** Your students will feel reassured knowing they can trust you to lead them through the semester without vague information or last minute changes. To prevent misunderstandings, alleviate student stress, and avoid conflict, post everything students will need to be successful in your course (e.g., course policies, weekly schedule, PowerPoints, handouts, assignment directions, etc.) in a timely manner, if not by the first day of class.
3. **Provide a rationale and maintain some degree of flexibility.** We all appreciate understanding why things are the way they are. Clearly explain the reasoning behind your course policies, objectives guiding class assignments and activities, etc. On those occasions when students question, resist, or respond unenthusiastically, either review your rationale or consider making revisions. Even minor revisions based on student responses are likely to build professor-student rapport.
4. **Establish clear expectations for outside of class communication.** As the old saying goes, prevention is the best medicine. Let your students know how you prefer to be contacted (e.g., phone, e-mail, etc.), specify when you will hold office hours and respond to e-mail, and clearly state “off limits” modes of contact (e.g., no texting). If a student contacts you via text message when you’ve asked your class not to, maintain your boundary by not responding.
5. **Model professionalism through your virtual interactions with students.** Your written word is an extension of your actual self. In addition to using professional written language, share information appropriately (i.e., nothing too personal) and never use virtual communication to chastise or discipline. Begin each message with a greeting and end with a closing to maintain some level of formality. Always check for grammar and spelling and always proofread your entire message for tone before hitting the send button!
6. **Get to know your students, but maintain professional distance.** Once you know your students’ names — and pronounce their names correctly — you can begin getting to know them as people. But don’t get to know them too personally. Converse with them about their families, their jobs, their thinking and experiences related to your course/discipline, and their future plans, but leave the rest of their lives to them. There is no need to know about their love relationships, drinking habits, or personal problems. They do not need to know these details about your life either. Avoid friending your students on Facebook until they’ve graduated, and never, ever read Rate My Professor.com!

Resources:

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- Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence (2012). *Connecting with your students*. Retrieved from <http://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/building-inclusive-classrooms/connecting-with-your-students.html#impact>
- Gangnon, B., & Milbourne, C. (2014). *Dear barista: Professors as members of the service class*. Paper presented at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, IL.
- Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health, 74*(7), 262-273.
- Malesky, L. A., & Peters, C. (2012). Defining appropriate professional behavior for faculty and university students on social networking websites. *Higher Education, 63*, 135-151.
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2012). *Promoting Student Learning and Institutional Improvement: Lessons from NSSE at 13*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537442.pdf>
- Rigsbee, C. (2010, June). The relationship balance. *Educational Leadership, 67*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/summer10/vol67/num09/The-Relationship-Balance.aspx>
- Stewart, K. (2009). Lessons from teaching millennials. *College Teaching, 57*(2), 111-117.
- Wilkinson, J. S., & Milbourne, C. C. (in press). *Effects of social networking: Accessibility, immediacy, perceived intimacy*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

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