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The Importance of Knowledge, Relationships, and Scholarship

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Teaching consists of several components: course content and teaching method, interpersonal relationships with students, and continued faculty involvement in the discipline. Depending on a teacher's effectiveness in these areas, each can either enhance or detract from the others. Students work harder for and learn better from instructors they respect and like. Instructors who excel at teaching their discipline find that students respect and often like them.

Regarding course content and teaching method, the faculty member chooses which topics are essential and which can be added as time or student capabilities allow. He or she must also determine the most effective way to present these topics. Most of my teaching has been in general (introductory) chemistry, where students are expected to master the foundational concepts necessary for success in advanced courses. However, I see a broader purpose to the course: helping students transition to college by developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills transferable to other disciplines.

One problem we face is the lack of college-preparedness of high school graduates. They sometimes lack the necessary math skills to work problems, so we have trouble actually getting to the chemistry. Additionally, many students have not fully developed their critical thinking skills. I deliberately use my teaching methods to address these skill deficits. I have found that asking questions designed to lead students through the thought process helps them learn to break down and solve problems. Many students, however, find this approach frustrating because previously they succeeded in their educational experience by memorizing solutions to particular problems. As long as the exam looks exactly like their memorized solution, they can work it out. Any minor deviation leaves them confounded. They want the teacher to just "give them" the solution steps to memorize and then ask them to replicate the steps on the exam.

It requires patience and persistence to keep asking questions until the students discover they can understand problems and use critical thinking to figure out

solutions. It is rewarding when the light comes on and chemistry begins to fall into place for a student. One of my favorite student evaluations from early in my teaching career said, “The best thing about Mrs. Ewert is that she doesn’t answer our questions. She keeps asking us questions until we figure it out ourselves.” I must admit, though, that it has been hard to maintain this teaching approach over the years. It is easier and faster to “just answer” a student’s question, even though I know it does not encourage him or her to develop critical thinking skills.

Another way our course helps students transition from high school to college is the level of hand-holding we exercise. Early in the fall semester, we remind the students frequently about assignments due. By the beginning of second semester, however, we expect them to organize their time themselves to meet deadlines. Heavy point penalties for late work encourage students to complete assignments on time. Course expectations that are clearly stated and enforced maintain standards that are necessary to ensure our students acquire the skills our B.A. or B.S. degree implies they possess.

Throughout this process students need to be reminded of progress they have made. To encourage students who struggle with the transition from high school to college, I use both myself and our older daughter as examples. Each of us raised our grade point average one whole point from first to second semester our freshman year. I tell students that stumbling a bit first semester is not fatal, as long as they figure out what is required for success in college and make the necessary adjustments. Hearing they are not the only ones who had a less-than-stellar first semester in college can be the boost they need to regain their self-confidence and begin to succeed in their learning process.

This encouragement of students crosses into the area of interpersonal relationships between the faculty member and student. Working toward student success conveys respect for students, increases our enjoyment of teaching (which students sense), and creates a more positive learning environment for them.

Personally, I have found that attending music and drama performances and athletic events gives me a better understanding of students. One student in particular frustrated me by challenging every point deduction. When I observed that same aggressiveness as a valued asset on an athletic team, I viewed the student in a

different light. When a student struggling in chemistry participates in a wonderful concert I can genuinely praise him or her. I read the following quote, which explains how this affects classroom dynamics: “They do not care what you know until they know that you care.” When students perceive our interest in their personal lives, they find it easier to work with us on course material. Isn’t that what we want?

Most students find that when they get to know the instructor outside of class it is easier to understand them in the classroom. The more we faculty members interact with students, the more apt we are to understand the questions they pose and the ideas they contribute to class discussion. As students talk with us, they learn how we speak and find that our explanations during class make more sense. This all improves class dynamics, which enhances the learning environment for all involved.

The third component of teaching is our personal involvement in our discipline. As faculty we need to actively maintain a passion for our discipline. How can we expect students to enjoy our course if we ourselves do not find the material engaging? I recognize that as years pass while teaching mainly the same courses, it is easy to lose the satisfaction we felt during graduate school as we studied and researched our area of interest. But it is critical that we stay current with new research findings and trends in our field. When we incorporate these fresh ideas into our courses, students see the content as dynamic and relevant to their world. It becomes something intriguing, worth expending energy to understand. Students might even be motivated to choose our discipline as their major.

Something students frequently mention is my enthusiasm for chemistry and the positive impact it makes on their lab experience. By letting my excitement show, I make lab more fun for them, even students who fear lab courses. But interestingly enough, it also makes teaching more pleasurable for me. Enjoying working with students in chemistry is the reason I like to enter our building, prepare labs, step into the classroom, and engage students. The time when I am no longer energized by students will be the time I need to retire.