"Getting to Know You"

—— Knowing Myself and My Students to Guide Learning ——

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Today's classrooms reflect more diversity among students than in previous decades. The process of providing teachers the tools and research-based approaches they need to reach these diverse groups more effectively has been a slow one. Researchers at the Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) have been thinking and talking in an effort to improve their understanding of student diversity and how to help teachers get to know students within diverse classes of learners. With this article, the conversation is being extended to the SIM Network. Your ideas, suggestions, reactions, and personal experiences with regard to getting to know students are invited. In fact, some of the most important learning experiences for the KU-CRL staff have come from case studies or teacher accounts of particular classroom dilemmas or solutions.

For the purposes of this article, a class with significant academic diversity is defined as one that is populated by **students achieving in the average, above-average, and below-average ranges of academic performance as measured by teacher judgment, district academic standards, or state academic standards. This diversity in performance may be attributed to individual differences in learning needs, culture, life experiences, abilities, skills, language proficiency, beliefs, goals, personal characteristics, and values.** Clearly, every class has some diversity within it. For example, a so-called relatively homogenous class of average achievers can reflect a great deal of diversity. Nevertheless, the emphasis within this article is on "significant academic diversity" because the focus of KU-CRL efforts is on improving the success of low-achieving students within inclusive classes containing successful learners.

As a last point of definition, thanks to educator Christopher Clark and others, KU-CRL researchers have come to think of classes of diverse learners as "learning communities," a term that captures the essence of students learning within a cooperative, diverse, and interdependent group. Some of the assumptions that have been adopted related to forming learning communities of diverse learners are the following:

1. Teachers must make the effort to develop and utilize systems and methods to get to know and to form relationships with members of the learning community.
2. Teachers' knowledge of students as individuals must include an understanding and appreciation of the commonalities and differences among students in terms of learning needs, culture, worldview, life experiences, skills, language proficiency, beliefs, goals, personal characteristics, and values.
3. Teachers must use this knowledge to plan and implement instruction and activities that are inclusive and responsive to diverse learning needs within the community.

Clearly, the goal of getting to know students is something that most teachers value and pursue. The emphasis of KU-CRL

exploration in this area has been focused on methods for developing the kinds of teacher-student relationships that enhance student learning, as well as on methods for maintaining such relationships throughout the year in a systematic way—a way that is practical for teachers to implement. Indeed, research has confirmed that certain kinds of teacher-student relationships can enhance student learning. Such relationships can affect students' self esteem, motivation, and even <u>what</u> they learn. Indeed, the kinds of relationships a teacher forms with students can substantially influence their learning experience.

A three-phase process has emerged for teacher use in developing these relationships. The phases are:

(1) Get to know yourself;
(2) Get to know your students through reflection; and
(3) Get to know your students through practice.

While this approach can result in immediate pay-offs, it is really a career or life-long process.

Phase 1: Getting to Know Yourself

The process begins with a teacher's effort to examine her or his worldview, including beliefs and biases about teaching and students. While the above three phases are inevitably inter-related and occur simultaneously, the willingness and effort to stand back and look at oneself is absolutely critical. Someone who is willing to examine herself or himself will tend to get to know students in a deeper or more authentic way. Knowing students at this level will provide invaluable information for teaching practice.

This self-reflective process will feel difficult at times, because it means acknowledging certain prejudices and beliefs about particular groups of people. It's impossible NOT to absorb various biases as one grows up—everyone does. What's important is to bring unexamined beliefs to the surface and take a look at them.

To prompt self-exploration, the following questions can be asked:
- *Explore personal experiences.* What kinds of experiences in my life have influenced my personal beliefs? What has affected my development to date as a person? What has affected my development to date as a learner?
- *Explore personal beliefs about learning:* How do students learn best? How do most students learn best? How do I learn best? What

can teachers do to help students learn effectively? Do my teaching practices match what I believe can help students learn?
- *Explore personal beliefs about developing relationships with students.* What teacher behaviors discourage or encourage trust? (See the lists of teacher behaviors identified by students in the box on this page.) Do my behaviors match those that encourage trust?
- *Consider potential personal barriers.* What kinds of students am I least or most comfortable teaching and why? What is my teaching style and how does this interact with the kinds of students I teach?

Teachers have reported that writing an autobiography, writing regularly in a journal, and having discussions with other teachers about these questions have helped them reflect about themselves and examine their own beliefs in these areas.

Phase 2: Getting to Know Students Through Reflection

Getting to know students is a long-term process, and reflection is a part of that process. Phase 2 of the process involves reflection about students in general and about the context in which relationships are to be developed with them. Asking oneself the following questions can be an aid to this process.

- *Consider barriers within the environment.* What blocks to knowing students exist within the teaching situation (e.g., factors in the school setting, students' personal lives)?

Teacher Behaviors Identfied by Students

<u>Student Trust DIScouragers</u>
- Sarcastic tone of voice, belittling students
- Playing favorites, treating individuals differently
- Little to no eye contact
- Rushing through material, not checking for understanding
- Testing over material not covered
- Lack of interest in subject, seeming lack of interest in teaching
- Failure to follow through on course description, assignments, etc.

<u>Student Trust ENcouragers</u>
- Treating students with respect
- Conveying real interest in students as people
- Avoiding jokes at one person's expense; teacher can laugh at self
- Connecting with students individually (eye contact, questions)
- Treating class members equitably
- Frequent checks for understanding
- Tests & other evaluation experiences are not surprises
- Delivering on promises made regarding course content, assessment, class routines, etc.
- Genuine interest in and competence regarding subject matter
- Zest for teaching

- *Consider students' learning needs.* What are the kinds of students that I am expected to teach? What are some learning differences I may observe within these groups of students? (See the box on this page in which some student learning differences are listed.)
- *Consider students' cultural backgrounds.* What are the different cultures that are represented in my class(es)? What are the characteristics of individuals within these cultures that may interact with learning (e.g., ethnic backgrounds, religion, values, beliefs, customs, behaviors)? (See the box on this page in which some potential cultural differences are listed.)*
- *Consider how students' learning needs might be met.* How can student differences be accommodated through my decisions in **planning**, **instructing**, **assessing**, and informally **interacting** with students?
- *Consider how cultural diversity in the learning community might be accommodated.* How can cultural diversity among my students be accommodated through my decisions in **planning**, **instructing**, **assessing**, and informally **interacting** with students?

Students' Learning Differences

Students may have difficulty:
- Distinguishing important from unimportant information.
- Organizing information meaningfully.
- Relating information to background experiences and knowledge.
- Remembering large amounts of information.
- Generating purposes and rationales for learning content.
- Breaking down complex concepts for learning.
- Discovering ways to understand abstract concepts.
- Analyzing information to arrive at conclusions & solve problems.
- Identifying and using instructional devices presented by teachers.
- Becoming more active in guiding personal learning.
- Valuing the process of learning how to learn.
- Believing that learning how to learn is important.

Phase 3: Getting to Know Students Through Practice

Finally, Phase 3 involves using a variety of tools to get to know individual students and develop and maintain relationships with them. Personal reflection (Phase 1) and reflection about students (Phase 2) can continue during this phase as well. Each teacher can design and individually tailor the tools to be used for Phase 3 to match the students who are enrolled in classes, the grade level being taught, and the subject(s) being taught. Clearly, each tool must be practical to use and personally meaningful to the teacher and appropriate for the course of study. Each tool needs to serve at least one of three simple

functions: (a) to gather initial information about students at the beginning of the course; (b) to check in with students throughout the course; and (c) to update information about students. We thank Gary Adams, Seattle Pacific

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Some Potential Cultural Differences

Eye Contact
Volunteering to answer questions
Answering a question another has answered incorrectly
Speaking out of turn
Acknowledging lack of understanding
Willingness to be open about own experiences
Family involvement in student learning
Extended family involvement in student's life

University, for sparking our thoughts in this direction, and for sharing his own systems for getting to know students with us.

Initial information can be gathered in a beginning-of-the-year survey that students complete for homework or during in-class exercises the first day of class. Some of the information that is helpful to gather includes the following:

- Name, nicknames
- Parent or caregiver(s) names
- Siblings' names and birth order
- Towns and states in which the student has lived
- Places the student has visited
- Hobbies and interests
- Pets
- Most favorite activities
- Student's current job
- Involvement in school activities, activities students would like to experience
- What the student expects to learn
- Concerns the student has about the course
- Things that help the student learn

Additional information might be gathered through the beginning-of-the-year survey that is specifically related to the subject(s) to be studied. For example, for a health course, questions might be asked about diseases the student has had, bones that have been broken, eating habits, and exercise habits. Once this initial information has been gathered, the teacher can review it regularly to become familiar with the information, to facilitate conversations with individual students, to bring students into the class discussion when the student knows

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* Knowledge and awareness of various cultures can enhance one's understanding of and ability to communicate with diverse groups of students. At the same time, assumptions about a particular student or group based on this knowledge must be avoided. Research has identified this <u>tendency to generalize</u> as one of the pitfalls of cross-cultural education. Recognizing that diversity exists <u>within</u> groups of people from the same culture is as important as recognizing that some commonalities exist across those same people.

The *Lesson Organizer* in Missouri

Teachers, students, and parents in the Raymore-Peculiar, Missouri District are excited about the *Lesson Organizer* Routine. Geography teacher, Linda Bass, and resource teacher, Virginia Jones, team together to introduce their geography lesson with the Lesson Organizer. They report that the routine has been very effective in assisting the students' organization and notetaking skills. When they conducted a survey of parents and students the results were overwhelming! Parents supported this new routine as a great teaching tool. Students have requested that other teachers use this method, too. They also reported that the use of the self-questioning box has helped to improve their test scores! To get feedback on the program from parents and students, Linda has used a home-school communication tool (**see pg. 6 for her communication memo**. The memo may be duplicated for classroom use.).

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Twas the Night Before the Big Exam

Twas the night before the big exam
When all through the town
Students studied hard
To get the facts down.

Information lists were all mastered
By Patrick, Jack, and Ted.
As FIRST -Letter mnemonics
Danced in each student's head.

While Natalie with her backpack
And James with his text
Had just settled down
To review LINCS cards next.

The moon on the crest
Of each notebook logo
Gave the students good reason
To rest without woe.

With a good night's sleep
And a feeling of content
Over an evening they viewed
As time well spent.

Then came the test day
And with great anticipation,
Students each whispered
Their own affirmation.

More rapid than recess
The facts were recalled
By strategic methods
Used to memorize them all.

Surveying the items
And completing the rest
Soon gave students to know
They had aced the big test.

Teachers heard them exclaim
As they strolled out in delight,
Strategic learning
Makes our futures bright!

(Written by the resource
students from Wethersfield H.S.
Wethersfield, CT)

MEMO

To: Parents & Students

From:

Dear Parents:

We have been using a *Lesson Organizer* in class as a tool for taking notes. We would like to know what <u>you</u> think.

Did your student show you this new notetaking strategy? **Yes** or **No**

Did the *Lesson Organizer* help you assist your student in his/her studies? **Yes** or **No**

What else did you like or dislike?

_____

_____

Thanks for helping by answering these questions.

Sincerely,

_____

Dear Student:

Please answer the following questions about the *Lesson Organizer* our new notetaking organizer by circling the answer.

Is it easy to take notes this way? **Yes** or **No**

Is the material easier to understand? **Yes** or **No**

Are you able to study better for tests by using the *Lesson Organizer*? **Yes** or **No**

Could you use this organizer in other classes? **Yes** or **No**

What else did you like or dislike?

GAMES, GAMES, GAMES

From
Barb Glaeser, KU-CRL

The learning of any strategy can be reinforced with a game. Stopping work for a day to play a game can reinforce learned concepts while maintaining high levels of motivation for learning the strategy. A good time to play a game with the students is when they have learned a new "chunk" of information, such as simple or compound sentences, prefixes, and suffixes, the steps of R.A.P. For one game, a format similar to the television show "Jeopardy" can be used.

To prepare the game, choose several categories related to the subject-matter the students have learned. For example, three categories for students who have learned simple and compound sentences might be: subjects, verbs, and type of sentence. Write several questions related to each category. Group the questions according to difficulty: those that students can receive 100 points, 200 points, 300 points, and 400 points for answering. Additionally, write at least two "extra difficult" questions for the "Double Jeopardy" questions which will be worth 800 in each category. Place an asterik by each of these questions.

Subjects	Verbs	Sentence Types
100	100	100
200	200	200
300	300	300
400	400	400

Example questions are:
• Subjects for 100 points - "Name the subject or subjects of this sentence: 'The dog barked.' "
• Subjects for 200 points - "Name the subject or subjects of this sentence: 'Jerry and Mary went shopping.' "
• Subjects for 300 points - "Name the subject or subjects of this sentence: 'Every day, the big yellow bus comes by our house.' "
• Subjects for 400 points - "Name the subject or subjects of this sentence: 'From behind the house came a large angry Doberman.' "
• Subjects for Double Jeopardy or 800 points - "Name the subject or subjects in this sentence: Before breakfast, the huge giant and the tiny dwarf walked along the river bank.'

Once the questions have been prepared, draw a Jeopardy Board on the chalkboard like the one illustrated above, and divide your students into small groups or teams. Choose someone to start, and ask her to select the category and the points the team will earn. Read the question, and give the team one minute to answer. The person selecting the category and points may consult with teammates, but only the selector may answer the question. If the student answers correctly, the points are earned. If the student answers incorrectly, the other team gets an opportunity to answer the same question to earn the points. Rotate opportunities to answer questions among the teams and among team members on each team. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to answer at least one question. The team with the most points wins!

Editor
Mary Lee

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background knowledge pertaining to the subject, and to create assignment options that will interest students.

There are several options for gathering information from students during the course of study. First, questionnaires can be used to gather information about how students are feeling about the course. Students can be asked how satisfied they are with the instruction, class activities, assignments, tests, etc. They can be asked for suggestions on how to improve the course. They can also be asked to report information about latest events in their lives and to update information from the beginning-of-the-year survey.

Second, at end of selected classes or at the end of the week, students can fill out a 3" X 5" card with personal comments or questions about what happened in class that day (or that week). Comments could pertain to the content or how learning was going (e.g., "I didn't understand ____ ."). They might also pertain to recent events in the student's life about which the student wants to inform the teacher. The comments on each card could be read by the teacher after school, responded to in writing if necessary,

and returned at the beginning of the next class. The comments would be used to guide planning, adjust instruction, and as the basis for private conversations with students as appropriate.

Third, a folder can be created for each student. The beginning-of-the-year survey can be placed in the folder, and the folder can be returned to students for updates. The weekly or daily comment cards can also be kept in the folder for teacher and student reference throughout the course. Brief comments can be written to praise effort or to prompt the student about late assignments and be placed in the folder. Students can place items in their folders that they would like teacher to review (e.g., papers from other classes, out of school accomplishments). The teacher can also use the personal folders to return or share items/ assignments with individual students.

Clearly, thinking about and developing ways to facilitate meaningful teacher-student relationships in today's learning communities is important work. According to many teachers and students, these relationships emerge as a key factor that affects student learning and teacher satisfaction. ▦

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