

Roll Out the Welcome Mat: Using Hope, Hospitality, and Humor to Create a Comfortable Classroom

The welcome mat is often the first thing that many of us see when we visit someone. It sends a clear message to visitors that they are entering a welcoming space. Most of us visit and return to places where we feel welcomed and comfortable. I frequently return to restaurants, department stores, and homes of friends and colleagues because of how I am treated and because of how they make me feel. Of course, the quality of the products, the service, and the relationships are important as well, but the welcoming experience affects me to a much greater degree and determines whether I will return. Psychological theories tell us this is basic human nature and behavior.

My experience has been that the majority of students feel the same way about education. This feeling of being welcomed and comfortable is especially true when it comes to student and faculty interaction. The faculty has the longest and strongest relationship with students and the greatest influence on them during their higher education experience. In addition, the growing competition between two- and four-year colleges, due in large part to the cost of a four-year education and to the introduction and growth of distance education, has forced higher education to revisit and revise recruitment and retention strategies. Making students feel comfortable and welcome is vital to the longevity and success of our educational institutions and students' academic success.

The research reveals that students learn best when placed in a caring and comfortable environment where they are validated as individuals with unique gifts and talents. Although students and professors are stakeholders in this process, professors have the primary responsibility for establishing and maintaining a caring relationship with students and creating an optimal learning environment. To accomplish this connection, I have implemented three elements into my course instruction and classroom environment that helps my students feel more at ease so they can excel personally and academically. These three elements are hope, hospitality, and humor.

Hope: "Inspirational Moment"

I am a first-generation college student. Reflecting on my academic career, I can recall how daunting my first day of class was those many years ago. The professors and educational system were so intimidating, aloof, and seemingly indifferent to my unique academic and personal needs. I wish I could say that what I experienced was an isolated situation, but it repeated itself more often than I care to recall. As a professor, I

have drawn from these negative experiences to improve my instruction, and, more importantly, to improve my relationship with my students.

I realize the one thing that all students need—and all people for that matter—is a sense of hope. College is a demanding and difficult undertaking for many students. Therefore, to minimize the elevated anxiety levels experienced by many of my students, I decided to encourage and motivate students by beginning my classes with inspirational quotes from famous and not-so-famous individuals. I arrive early to class to display the quote on a PowerPoint slide so that it is the first thing students see when they walk into the classroom. This display cultivates a positive and calming atmosphere in the classroom that helps to facilitate student, academic, and personal success. This approach has created a greater connection between my students and me and made them more receptive to the course material I teach. Sometimes we engage in a brief discussion about how the quote relates to their lives and how it inspires them to become better people and students. I introduce these inspirational quotes on the first day of class and display them throughout the semester. I also use motivational background music to further assist me in this effort.

We live in a society in which negative news is fairly common. Students are constantly bombarded with numerous negative messages reminding them of their inadequacies. I know many of my students are coming to class weighed down with academic worries and personal problems, such as divorce, unemployment, health and mental wellness matters, low self-esteem, etc. I realize I cannot solve all of my students' problems, but I can encourage them by letting them know there is hope. I want them to know that with the right attitude and assistance, they can overcome their obstacles and the temporary setbacks of life. As professors, we give our students hope by demonstrating in our interactions with them that we believe in them and care about them. After all, hope lies at the very heart of what education is all about—the hope for a better life for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world.

Hospitality: "Make Yourself at Home Y'all"

Growing up in the Deep South, I believe in the transforming power of good, old-fashioned hospitality. It was the thread that ran through the cultural fabric of our community. Daily salutations such as "Good morning, ma'am" and "Have a great day, sir" were the order of the day. People not only spoke to you, but they also looked you in the eye when they said it. They shook your hand and gave you a big smile while they were doing it. I never questioned their motivation because their gestures always felt sincere, genuine, and heartfelt. These small gestures paid off in big dividends, such as meeting nicer people and having a close and caring community.

I try to do the same things with my students because we are a community of teachers and learners. I continuously self-assess and monitor my emotions, behavior, and attitude to maximize my effectiveness in this area. I am concerned with how I express my interpersonal skills when I interact with students. I begin with adjusting my attitude so that I sincerely respect my students and address their individual needs just as I would for a close friend, colleague, or family member. I endeavor to see the best in them. Doing these things makes it easier for me to treat them in the authentic, hospitable ways that they deserve, expect, and appreciate.

At the beginning of class, I greet my students with a big smile. I try to remember to smile from time to time while I am lecturing. A sincere smile goes a long way in making people feel comfortable. I ask them how their day is going or how their weekends went. Sometimes, their response is positive; other times, it's negative, but my expression of concern and care for them is always consistent and heartfelt.

I try to respond and relate to my students in a respectful manner. I make good eye contact so that they know I am actively listening to and care about their opinions. Students need to know that they are being heard and that we value them and their perspectives, whether or not we agree with them. I encourage my students to express themselves. I try to create an environment that will foster that communication by avoiding condescending and demeaning comments and behavior. I have discovered that students see their perspectives as an extension of themselves. When teachers disrespect their perspectives, they feel teachers are disrespecting them as people. When students feel disrespected, they often become defensive and shut down. One of my life lessons is that it is always timely, wise, and appropriate to apologize when we offend someone. When I find myself in these types of situations, I respond with a swift and sincere apology. Students appreciate and respond well to this act of humility. Being a good professor and a humble person are not mutually exclusive qualities. These two attributes can successfully coexist in the classroom and enhance any professor's authority and effectiveness.

Finally, on some occasions, I will bring donuts to class to share with my students. I still believe the best way to people's hearts, but also to their minds, is through their stomachs. We use food in our culture for various reasons. As a little girl, my mother and I would bake cakes and pies to share with new neighbors. It was our way of welcoming them to the community. Food is a great and easy way to say, "You're welcome. Here's a little something to say I care. I'm glad you're here!" I find this random act of kindness is an unexpected, appreciated, and a pleasant surprise for my students.

Humor: "Make 'em Laugh"

There is nothing like humor to put someone at ease. Who doesn't like a good laugh? Laughter is one of my favorite sounds in life. As a professor, I love to hear the laughter of my students. Humor is good for us physically, psychologically, and cognitively. I like beginning class on a positive note and ending on

a humorous one, which are perfect bookends! I surf YouTube and other internet sources to find funny links to share with my students at the end of class. I title this time, "Laughter Does Good. So Laugh Much, Laugh Often." These links usually put a smile on their faces, laughter in their mouths, and somewhat lightens their burdens. These links help them not to take themselves and their temporary circumstances so seriously. Sometimes in class, we cover very sensitive and traumatic topics that hit close to home. The humor helps to lighten the moment so that the students are able to transition to the next class, work, or home. It's like having a sweet, delicious desert after eating your vegetables. I don't know anyone who turns down desert! The students really enjoy these funny moments. They look forward to seeing what comes next. Some will even send me links to share with the rest of the class. These humorous pieces can, but do not have to fit in with the current class discourse. The only requirements are that they tickle the funny bone and that they are tasteful so it does not offend anyone.

Final Thoughts

When I was younger, I was brought up to follow the golden rule: "Treat others as you want to be treated." A major part of making students feel comfortable and welcomed is for faculty to draw from their own experiences as former students, which will help us to better empathize with the weaknesses and insecurities of our students. We need to put ourselves in their shoes to truly connect with them so that we can become more effective in the classroom. We need to see them not just as students, but also as people who lead very complex lives. We need to see them as individuals who at times are filled with self-doubt, but who are also full of unrealized, unlimited, and untapped potential and possibility. All they need is for us to help them "lift the lid" so that they can become self-actualized individuals.

All this begins with creating a comfortable learning environment. Creating this comfort zone means not doing things as usual, but instead, being more innovative and creative in our faculty and student interactions and curriculum and instruction development. These innovations will improve students' academic performances and make us better professors and people in the process. We reproduce in our students and society the things we teach and model in our classrooms. Education is not just academic. Education, like all other aspects of life, is about establishing and maintaining good relationships that produce healthy living and learning spaces that ultimately benefit us all. So, roll out the welcome mat and give your students hope, hospitality, and humor that will keep them coming back for more!

Cynthia Morris, Associate Professor, Psychology and Sociology

For more information, please contact the author at McLennan Community College, 1400 College Drive Waco, TX. 76708. Email: cmorris@mclennan.edu