

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH STUDENTS

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Research shows that instructor communication in the classroom greatly effects student satisfaction and motivation, and is connected to organization, clarity, and rapport. Here are some quick tips for establishing these with your students.

ORGANIZATION

One of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, as described by Chickering and Gamson, is “emphasizes time on task”; that emphasis includes helping students manage their time effectively. Mike Theall, one of the foremost researchers on student evaluations of instructors, notes that “Research on the dimensions of college teaching provides powerful evidence of the importance of helping students to organize their time. With respect to student achievement, the most strongly correlated teaching dimensions are **organization** and **clarity**.” As such, it is crucial that instructors organize and clearly communicate their expectations to students from the start, especially in terms of assignments, because students need and appreciate the opportunity to manage their time and coursework. Research likewise suggests that the current generation of college students – Millennials, or the Net Generation – exhibits strong appreciation for structure. *So what’s the easiest way to do this?*

- Provide students with a **complete syllabus with clear timelines and due dates at the start of the semester, and adhere to this syllabus for the remainder of the semester**. This demonstrates organization, clearly lays out your assignments for students, and avoids surprises, thereby allowing students to plan their time accordingly from the start. Don’t forget that your students have a lot of other responsibilities to juggle as well!
 - Issuing last-minute homework on the weekends or over holidays with short turn-around time would probably catch students off-guard, disrupt their current plans for coursework and time management, and thus create resentment.
 - Demonstrating organization and clarity also shows respect for students’ time, which in turn will increase student motivation.
 - If you are worried about being bound by a strict timeline, you can still build room for flexibility into your syllabus. The key is preparation: if you are anticipating a change in the syllabus, be sure to give students plenty of notice ahead of time so that they can adjust their own schedules. One caveat: it’s probably not a good idea to change an assignment deadline unless you are giving your students extra time! Eliminating preparation time will likely antagonize students under pressure. For similar reasons, adding an assignment to a course schedule (especially late in the semester) is also not a good idea.

CLARITY/TRANSPARENCY

Another key to effective communication is transparency – that is, simply being clear about **what** you’re doing and **why** you are doing it. Remember, the decisions you made in what assignments to give might seem like common sense to you, but might not be as intuitive to your students. They will appreciate knowing the rationale behind a curriculum.

Similarly, it is also important for instructors to be clear with students from the beginning about *how* they will communicate with students. In other words, if you plan to communicate with students outside of class through email, or via a course management system, etc., then make sure that they know that from the start.

A few notes about communicating with students outside of class:

- It’s smart to set a **clear response policy** about email communication. For instance, you might inform your students that you maintain a 36-hour turnaround time for responses to their emails during the week, or that you will not respond to email on weekends so that they know what to expect from you.
- Likewise, talk to your students to set a policy with them about their own response times. Chances are they might not check their email on the weekends either! They’ll also appreciate the opportunity to play a role in the policy-making.

RAPPORT

Organization and clarity in communication can both work towards one particular element that is of vital importance in the classroom: **respect and consideration for students** (Hodgson, 1984). Research indicates that empathy with students' needs along with clear communication are important factors in effective teaching, both of which are clearly related to rapport. Showing respect for your students will help you gain their trust and build a positive relationship with them, which in turn will increase their motivation and satisfaction. And if students have good rapport with you, chances are they will be open to communication with you as well. In addition to demonstrating transparency and organization in your teaching, there are some simple ways to build rapport with your students:

- Display enthusiasm for the course content and learning in general.
- Demonstrate what is known as "immediacy," or communication traits (verbal or non-verbal) that display warmth and closeness to students. These include little things such as making eye contact, nodding and smiling when students are speaking, using students' names, etc.
- Be sensitive and responsive to feedback. Listen to your students and observe how they respond in class. Take time to ask if everyone understands and prepare questions that will help you assess their learning.
- Provide students with prompt and frequent feedback.

A FEW RESOURCES

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