TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative Instructor Talk

What do you say in class when you're not talking about course content? If you can identify those conversations, would you say they might lead to a transformative experience for one or more students?

In aggregate over the entire term, and sometimes even in the course of a single conversation, what we say when we're not talking about course content can have a profound impact on students. You probably remember a professor in your own college career whose non-content-related comments made an impression you still remember.

To investigate the topic of "noncontent instructor talk," researchers taking a grounded-theory approach wanted to discover whether there were discernible categories of discussion topics when faculty talked with students on matters not strictly related to course content in a co-taught introductory biology course with 270 students at a large public university (Siedel, Reggi, Schinske, Burrus, & Tanner, 2015).

Examining their findings brings to light clear opportunities for potentially transformative impacts on student thinking that go beyond learning course content.

Five categories of noncontent instructor talk emerged from the research. Listed in order of prevalence, they were:

● **Building the instructor/student relationship:** Subcategories here included demonstrating respect for students (e.g., building collegial relationships with students), revealing secrets to success (e.g., helping students find ways to study and learn more successfully), and boosting self-efficacy (e.g., helping students develop confidence they will succeed in the class).
● **Establishing classroom culture:** Pre-framing classroom activities, practicing scientific habits of mind, building a biology student collaborative culture, proper crediting of colleagues' work, and helping students understand it's okay to disagree.
● **Explaining pedagogical choices:** If you've ever wondered whether other teachers take the time to help students learn how to learn, what the instructors under observation did concerning this category should dispel any doubt that part of faculty's work really is helping students learn how to learn: discussions about teaching choices and why they're made, helping students see in their own work why certain instructional strategies make sense, connecting biology to the real world and students' careers, talking about how people learn, and conversations about long-term learning.

- **Sharing personal experiences:** Doing this helped teachers communicate about the nature of science through personal anecdotes. This category of talk also helped teachers relate to students' experiences.
- **Unmasking science:** These were explicit conversations about the nature of science and about promoting diversity of viewpoints and of people in science.

Any of these five categories of noncontent talk might be transformative. Building the instructor/student relationship and sharing personal experiences are certainly rife with potential due to the affective component such communications could well include.

If we want to frame such conversations in service to potential transformative impact, what would we do?

Because the most prevalent category, building instructor/student relationships, includes the subcategory of developing students' self-efficacy and beliefs they can succeed in the course, consider the transformative impact of this realization writ large: students develop the belief that by using the tools the instructor provides and the guidance on how to use them, they are now capable of succeeding in *all* their classes.

This is truly an empowering transformation!

For students to achieve this transformation, though, would depend on the instructor's motivation and ability to 1) help students gain and use learning skills they don't currently possess, and 2) help students *believe* that using the tools will empower their academic success.

To improve your ability to leverage this particular opportunity to transform as part of noncontent talk, you might:

- read *Teach Students How to Learn* (McGuire, 2015) for specific strategies you can share with your students to help them succeed in studying and learning;
- identify in your own past significant discoveries you made about your own learning — what they were and how you employed them to succeed academically; and/or,
- click here to view New Zealand instructor Thorsten Harms explain in four minutes a technique he's had great success with in helping students improve their learning via a simple process that forces them to meta-cognate about their learning.

Thus prepared, you can plan places in your noncontent talk (the first day of class might be a good place, or after the first test, for instance) where your newly acquired ability to help students learn how to learn might transform someone's life. Equipping a student with the tools for her to succeed academically, thereby

expanding her perspective of her relationship with self as part of meta-cognating about her own learning, is a transformative gift.

References

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