It's All in the Name: The Importance of Learning Student Names
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The subject of student engagement is a complex issue when one considers the various methods that instructors employ across multiple disciplines in an effort to deliver quality instruction to students. Instructors employ group activities, demonstrations, and active discussions that are as diverse as the courses in which these techniques are employed. This is all in an effort to have students invested into the course at hand. The present study seeks to examine what can be a common pitfall for instructors, the task of learning student names. While this may seem to be a trivial or obvious necessity, this simple act can help create an interactive classroom. Willemsen states: “When the professor engages the student in personal conversation, recognizes her by name and seems to include her in the domain of attention, the subject matter seems more accessible. The nonverbal message goes out that the student is a part of the community of people who can do mathematics, statistics, chemistry, or whatever the subject is.” (1995).

One strategy that will be tested for learning student names is a game suggested by a member of a listserv associated with the “Teaching Sociology” journal. The name of the game is “I’m Taking a Trip to Florida” offered by Michael Dixon of St. Ambrose University. In this game the object is for a student to take something to Florida that begins with the first letter of their name. For example, if the first student’s name was Michael. He would state: “My name is Michael and on my trip to Florida I’m taking a mat.” The following student would then add to the previous by stating: My name is Daniel and I am also taking a trip to Florida taking a dog along with Michael taking a mat.” The students are encouraged to ask for help whenever they are stumped and the instructor is also encouraged to ask for help as well. The idea is that it is important to create a community where the class is learning each others’ names in addition to the instructor learning the student names. Three areas of dynamics will be analyzed for change: the time it takes to learn student names from the instructor viewpoint, the use of student names during group activities, and the use of student names during at-large classroom discussions.

Update: Upon first conceptualizing this project I thought long and hard about what I should do. Rather than focus on something discipline specific, I wanted to do something that any instructor from any discipline could try in their own courses. So I settled on something I personally struggle with which is learning student names.

In the past I have used a variety of techniques that haven’t really worked for me or weren’t my style such as name cards on student desks, having students bring in pictures, or seating charts. What I currently use is I have students introduce themselves and share their favorite thing. This generally takes me a long time to really learn the student names. Often what ends up happening is that I learn the extremes in the class – the students that often have something to say or add in discussion or the students who rarely show up.
I know I am not the only one who struggles with because I am a member of a Teaching Sociology listserv and this is often a topic of discussion especially as new semesters begin. One suggestion was a game offered by a member of the Teaching Sociology listserv.

My thought process was that if it worked, great. If it was a massive failure, that’s the joy of what we do. It is okay because next semester, I can start all over.

I have back-to-back classes on a Tuesday/Thursday and Monday/Wednesday combination. The game was played during the second course meeting. To make things easier a PowerPoint slide offered instructions. Despite this, there was a great deal of confusion about exactly what I was looking for. Overall, I feel the game was a success but there were some pitfalls I had not foreseen. When actually carrying this game out, it was almost the tale of two classes.

In one course the students readily accepted the challenge of the game and even created a little bit of competition to see who could come up with the funniest or most creative adjective for their own name. This was not the case in the second class where the student composition was a little different. One of the first pitfalls encountered was resistance among students who did not understand or recognize the relevance of the game. I did have some students that were returning to school and felt that what I was asking of them was a little “silly”. Despite explaining to the students that this was a first time experiment and that it was because of my own desire to try to learn names more quickly, some students felt the pressure was on them to come up with adjectives. In one case it was almost on the verge of participation with contention. However, this allowed me to immediately identify a student who was having difficulty returning to school. I don’t think I would have identified this without this game.

The other major pitfall was for students who struggle with the language. As a result there was a difficulty in understanding the game. Unfortunately, this also happened in the same class where there was resistance from an older student which completely obliterated any momentum that had been built up to that point. It truly was a tale of two classes.

Another major pitfall is that the game itself is very time-consuming with a class of 36 students. I believe that this game in the current iteration may work best with a class of 25 or so students.

Despite the pitfalls mentioned I feel that I immediately saw success of the game. In the game version that I played, I went last. I feel that this sets a good precedent because one of the things I try to establish in my course is that I never ask them to do something I haven’t already done on my own or am willing to do. In sociology, I will admit I sometimes ask the students to do things outside of their comfort zone.

In class, I know a great deal of students but I also notice that outside of the classroom I was able to use the students name much, much quicker than I have been able to do in the classes where I did not play this game. Furthermore as I compare the Monday/Wednesday courses to the Tuesday/Thursday courses the dynamics are quite different because of the level of confidence I feel as instructor with remembering student names. I do feel that learning the student names faster also helped students feel that I was more approachable. I feel as if I know a little more about my students in the Tuesday/Thursday classes than my Monday/Wednesday.
This is perhaps the most interesting finding of all because outside of this game, it is the same course with the same course materials and yet the dynamics are slightly different. Now there are several other factors that could be in play so I cannot attribute this to this game but I feel that some version of this game could be more successful for me. I can also recognize not all instructors would be comfortable with this type of activity. I am particularly interested in look at student evaluations this semester to see if there is any sort of differences or even mention of this activity, positive or negative. Obviously I cannot make any certain conclusions but I have at least my initial observations.

All in all I think that we have great ideas as professors and this is fantastic. Sometimes I think that we forget how far learning student names and using these names can go. My students still giggle anytime I use some of their “nicknames” which has served a long way in setting the stage for more student engagement.