

In the Classroom 141

Making Your Instruction Personal

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast, it certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me, and I really do appreciate it. Hey, I have to tell you, I am tremendously sorry for missing last week and the week before. Two weeks ago, I came down with a bug and I was down and out, started feeling better, excited about knocking out this podcast. Then last week I went out and got the flu shot. Important to do, but it put me right on the couch. I was, once again, down and out.

Here I am. This week we are going to talk about making your instruction more personal. My inspiration for this came from Ruth Colvin Clark's book, Evidence-Based Training Method. I'm also inspired by these entrepreneurial podcasts that I listen to. They also try to make their content and ads as personal as possible. I think there's a lot that can be done in the classroom based on this. Let's dive in and talk about it. The question I have is, why are social media programs like Facebook, and Twitter, and Instagram so popular? Basically, they're personal. There is a social connection. The social piece is at the heart of this communication.

Now let's start looking at academic communication pieces. You're guilty of it, probably, and I'm certainly guilty of it, that if I look at these pieces such as assignment instructions, or discussion instructions, or even some of the emails I send, they can be devoid of human connection. If we want individuals to be more engaged in our instruction, we have to make sure that we are engaging them in dialogue and that we are making a connection.

In episode ITC 111, I talked about the community of inquiry with its cognitive presence, social presence, and teacher presence. Today, we're going to focus really on the social presence. The social presence is really the human element. This is where students and instructors get together in dialogue. There should be open communication to develop group cohesion, and build trust, make connections. You want people to get to know each other. In order to do that, you have to have communication, you have to have dialogue between people, you have to connect on a human level. The social presence is where the most dialogue takes place.

Ruth Colvin Clark, in her book, she shared a number of ways that you can make your course more personal. I'll tell you some of those elements, but also through my experience and through my research in a lot of other places, I've pulled some other things together. Why do you need to do this? First of all, according to the research, we pay better attention if the atmosphere is inviting to learning. If you feel that you are a connected part of that particular course or that class, then you are more inclined to participate. If you are more inclined to participate and you have higher

engagement, the research is indicating that you will learn more. If you feel welcome, you're going to be more relaxed and more open learning. That's why, primarily, we want to make it as personal as possible.

One place that you can start is in your assignments, in clarifying your assignments and your assessments. When we build assignments and assessments, we make a lot of assumptions. We assume that students know what we want to do, and our instructions are often sparse or incomplete. You have to put yourself in the shoes of your students and look at the activities with a beginner's mind. Pretend that you do not know anything about the inner workings of the assignments. Are you confident that you can complete it as written? That's the first place, is making sure that you provide all the details possible to help students go through your instructions.

When you create these instructions, use principles that enhance readability and accessibility. Making sure that you're using headings, you use lists, that your links are friendly, and that you're using white space. You want to make it so when you look at it design-wise, it's inviting. You want to make sure that you're using alternative text when you're using images and things like that, but on the personal level, you want to make sure that it's conversational. To do this, you want your messages to be heard, and part of that conversation is moving from third person to first and second person.

If you want your students to follow the instructions that you are putting down, then you need to talk to them as people. Using words like you, "I want you to do so and so," or "At the end of this lesson you should be able to do such and such." If we take out that second person, if we take out the you, and we make it such as the students should be able to do X, Y, and Z, that's making it third person, that's making it a little more stilted. We can make it a little more clear. If we're writing our objectives, we can say, "At the end of this lesson, you should be able to do X, Y, and Z." Now we're talking to them as people.

According to Clark, you can expect an improvement in learning of up to one standard deviation, which is pretty significant. The other thing that will happen is it will also positively affect your course evaluations. That's also what showed up in the research. When you start interacting with individuals as other humans, as people, then they appreciate this and they will reflect this in the course evaluation.

One of the suggestions that I have is go back to your courses and reexamine your welcome messages, assignment instructions, discussion prompts. How are they written? Can you make them a little more personal? Also, politeness counts. Look at your directives, how are you writing them? Are you barking orders? "Turn in your assignment, blah, blah, blah," like this, or you be a little more polite, "Please submit your assignment using the upload feature of your course management system." How you phrase it makes a huge difference, and being conversational is key.

Another aspect that Clark shared was that you should be a good host. Your job as an instructor should be to make everyone feel welcome in your class. Your job as a host is to be a storyteller. Rather than just knocking out facts, spewing out a bunch of

cold, hard pieces of content, share stories on how that content has affected you in your life.

When I was in the air force, I was responsible for a team of seven instructors. Each one of us had a book that would have lesson plans. Each of us got the exact same lesson plan because we wanted to make sure that we were covering the same content. Part of the way that the air force showed us how to build lesson plans, there was an opportunity to personalize it with our own stories. Because each one of these instructors had had different experiences, they had been to different bases, they have performed on different functions in the air force, they could tell those stories, stories that I could not tell because I had my own stories.

Our brains are wired for stories, and we will remember them far longer than facts. If you want to have an impact, tell more stories. Tell stories about the history of how something came about, what was the problem that individuals were facing at the time. You want to tap into something, an instance that is similar or at least believable to your students, that they could find themselves in the same situation.

Another thing about being a good host is how you dress, act, and speak. This helps set the stage, whether students will approach you or not. I, on more than one occasion, have been called intimidating. I really work hard to not give off that appearance because I want to help people get to the next level, but I know that it's there, I know that some people do not approach me. I heard about it the other day, that one of the faculty members is reluctant to approach me because she feels I'm intimidating. All the years that I've been doing this, I haven't figured out how to get past that. Something I probably need someone to coach me up on, but I know that's in my path.

The things that you do, how you present yourself, can have people approach you or not approach you. When you are providing online instruction, do you use a webcam, if you have a presentation going, or not? I have often told instructors not to have their webcam continuously running while giving a webinar or presentation. Fortunately, the research is on my side. The elements that you share in a webinar should be used to support learning. Everything else is a distraction. The images that you put on a presentation should help the learning. Otherwise, it's a distraction.

You should only keep your webcam running if it supports the learning, otherwise turn it off. Opportunities where it supports learning, it could be that when you're about to jump into the presentation, you may want to be up on the screen, to be able to talk to folks, welcome them into the course and let them know what you're going to get into before you flip to your presentation. Also at the end of the presentation, that's another good place to do it, or when you pause the presentation and you are part of the conversation. That is another place where it would be appropriate where you're on the screen and the presentation's not. That helps to focus at learning.

Another way to make your course a little more personal, is through the use of avatars. This is primarily for an online course. Part of your profile, you have an avatar, a reflection of yourself. Typically, you put your picture in there. Some folks

are not keen about having a picture up there, but they should be encouraged to put something up there, maybe that reflects them.

If you don't have a picture, you have an egghead. If you have a class full of eggheads, that's what it looks like, it is really hard to determine who is participating in the conversation. The avatars help to do a mental mapping of who's involved in the conversation, but it also makes it more personal. What you share, how you share it, how you present yourself is a glimpse into you as a human, into them as human. Definitely encourage avatars where appropriate.

Another opportunity is just to share about yourself so students get to you as an instructor. At the end of the course they should have a good idea of what your likes and dislikes are. Anytime you're communicating with your students, you can weave in just a little bit a glimpse of yourself, share your personality through all the different tools that you use. In my courses, I regularly share a bit about who I am in the discussion posts and the email messages that I send to them.

You can see in this podcast, I've done the same thing. I tell you about my experiences, I tell you about some of the things that I've done, and hopefully it helps me relate as a human being, hopefully to not be so intimidating. Share, let people get to know who you are, what your likes are, what your hobbies are. All that comes into play.

Throughout your course, you should be building activities that help build community, support open communications, help to establish trust. You want to create a place where students get to know each other, where they get to know you, you get to know them, they get to know each other. My students do it primarily through discussions. Because of the discussion format I use, they get to know a little bit about each other, what each one does, and what's important to them, and they share those type of experiences.

One of the things that you're trying to do is create opportunities for students to share related anecdotes, their experiences, their beliefs. The more we can tap into individual experiences, the stronger the link to the content material. Try to get students to share what they're thinking, how it relates to them, how they can apply, what they're learning. For me, this is woven tightly into my discussions. So far, I've been very happy happy with the results, and the students are also responding very positively and they're very much engaged in the discussions.

Building connections is central to the community of inquiry. Specifically, you're trying to strive to create this teacher presence and the social presence. Technology can help you facilitate these connections, but this also applies in a face-to-face classroom. When you're having students answer questions, try to draw out a little bit more about them. Get to know them on a human level. As far as online courses, one of the biggest complaints is students feel lonely and isolated. I believe this is due to course design and that you can change the course design to make this very much a community where students are engaged. The online courses do not have to be void of human interaction.

When you're looking at your course, making changes, getting ready for the next week, really go through your assignments, and discussion prompts, and email messages you're sending. Think about the language that you're using, how you're using it. Does it invite people in or push them away? Try to invite them in, try to be a good host, and you will find a more engaging class and a class that performs better. Those are my thoughts on making your class a little more personal, but before we go, here is a quick plug for my book.