Relationships

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Building positive relationships with students is an essential part of being a good teacher. Many students come to VCSU because we have a reputation for treating our students like they’re not just another number. Good teachers actually care about their students and want them to succeed.

Recently, some of the SEGS members read the book, “Teaching Strategies for the College Classroom: A collection of faculty articles.” Some the ideas listed below grew from my thoughts after reading the book, but really, they are key components that I believe build positive relationships with students.

• Be present.
  o Don’t lecture, tell a story and have a discussion for active learning. It’s easy to get into a routine of opening up a PowerPoint and talking at our students. A good lecture should be like a great story, with plenty of spots to stop and discuss as a group. Students enjoy hearing “real life” stories and applications that connect with the new concepts you present. I often have the opportunity to share what I’ve seen “real” teachers do while observing my student teachers.
  o What does active learning look like? It looks busy and it might even be noisy. Your classroom probably will get messed up and materials will be used. Just have your students DO something instead of sitting and listening.
  o I get nervous and sweaty before and during every class- because I care and want to do well for my students. I want my students to learn what I have to share with them because I truly feel like it will make them better teachers.

• Be vulnerable.
  o Let them know you. My students know about my family, my hobbies, my favorite sports teams, and probably much more. I share things with them so that they will trust me. Reciprocal trust is important for building a community of learners.
  o Trust them and they’ll trust you... so... When you give them assignments they will know you will be open to their ideas. I’m modeling the idea that classrooms should be a safe place to make mistakes and learn together.

• Be enthusiastic.
  o Bring energy to your classroom. I've started classes with “I’m super fired up to talk to you about this today!” My students kind of giggle, but I get their attention. Maybe a less direct approach is better for you, but say or do something that shows them you’re exciting every day to help them learn something new. Simply greeting them by name in a positive way will hook them into listening to what you have to share.
Body language is huge. We all know that walking around the room is good practice. My students and I often take time at the beginning of my Social Studies class to discuss current events while I drink coffee. In the beginning, they thought I was just hanging out and getting off track, but now they’ve picked up on what’s actually going on... learning.

- Interact.
  - The Name Game. Know the names of your students and pronounce them correctly. I take this personally since my last name is a nightmare. Ask your students where their name came from- is a family name, something their parents saw in a movie, or something completely different. There’s a lot of good stories out there that students love to share.
  - Morning meetings. This is definitely a cue from elementary schools. I get to model this but you can also do something similar in your classroom that is less... elementary. We discuss current events, recent and upcoming sporting events and performance activities on campus, and general cleanup of loose ends for the class.
  - Cheesy ice breakers. If all else fails, get them to stand up and do something cheesy together. You have to participate, too. It’s a great time to get together and quickly set the tone for your class. They need to know you’re actually a real person. Remember when you learned your teacher’s “real” name?

There are many more activities and strategies that help build positive relationships with students in higher ed, but above are just a few simple ways to create connections classrooms that will hopefully lead to active learning and higher levels of understanding.