Connect & Thrive: Perspectives of a Newly Tenured Professor

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CONNECT AND THRIVE: PERSPECTIVES FROM A NEWLY-TENURED PROFESSOR

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I. INTRODUCTION

„Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.‖ -- Albert Einstein

This essay encapsulates my perspective (newly-tenured and seven years into my career) on how average professors can become highly effective professors. The secret rests in the ability to genuinely connect with students. Connecting really matters - even if it takes some personality adaptation and thrusts academics out of their comfort zones. Many professors fail to connect with students in a meaningful way. My evidence for this assertion is simple and straightforward. In addition to teaching, I am blessed to travel the country and speak on college campuses. After extensive discussions on these trips, students consistently claim their professors are boring, non-relatable, and unable to connect. On the other hand, professors I speak with sincerely believe they connect in the classroom.

I remain convinced that: (1) these students are telling the truth, and (2) any failure to connect is generally unintentional. At the end of the day, academics simply fail to realize that no genuine connection is made. Similar issues plague the business arena when managers fail to engage with subordinates effectively and struggle to comprehend why morale is low. This lack of awareness makes this serious problem harder to solve.

Ponder how your colleagues and peers in the Academy would answer these questions: “Do you feel that you genuinely connect with your students? If so, do your students feel a genuine connection?” I believe most would defiantly answer, “Look, I’m not the problem. The real issue is that many of my students are lazy, unmotivated, academically dishonest, preoccupied, etc.” The discussion would then turn to administrators who are “unknowledgeable in crafting student evaluation questions and unsympathetic to the demands on my time.” Such observations certainly ring true with regard to some students and administrators, but pointing the finger does not remedy the connection problem, which we have the duty to fix.

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1 The original quote is attributed to Albert Einstein (1879-1955) - a German-born American physicist who won the Nobel Peace Prize for Physics in 1921.

2 Over the past three years, I have spoken in 80 cities and 25 states.

3 I must state that students always start by telling me about the “one great professor” they have each term. Then the conversation moves to their other three or four professors - not always from business schools - whom they find ineffective. A quick search for external information on boring professors returns a goldmine. For example, a quick Google search for “boring professors” turned up dozens of pages of relevant results. See, e.g., Matt Woo & Kara Woods, Students Contend Bad Classes Caused by Boring Professors, THE DAILY HELMSMAN, Jan 17, 2001, http://www.dailyhelmsman.com/2.14450/students-contend-bad-classes-caused-by-boring-professors-1.1854282. Facebook has many groups titled “Things to do during a boring lecture” or something similar. See, e.g., FACEBOOK.COM, http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2242113534#!/group.php?gid=7550816835 (encouraging bored students to: 1. Bring a blowhorn. Use it when you ask or answer a question; 2. Heckle the professor; 3. Hire a video crew to come to the class. If asked about it, say that you have to tape the lecture for a friend).

4 See, e.g., Laura Raines, Reengaging Workers a Big Hurdle for HR, ATLANTA J. CONSTITUTION, Mar. 17, 2011, http://www.ajc.com/jobs/re-engaging-workers-a-875915.html, (discussing how employers must engage with their employees in order to keep them from leaving).
The following stereotypes come from an online college guide and typify professors who fail to connect. Can you find yourself and your colleagues on this list?

- **DR. BURNOUT** - This professor has been teaching for way too long and secretly wishes he could run off to a tropical beach and sell snow cones for a living. He lacks enthusiasm and could care less if you learn anything. Dr. Burnout probably has tenure, so complaining won’t help.

- **DR. EGO TRIP** - Don’t you dare call Dr. Ego Trip by her first name or otherwise indicate that she is not a goddess. In all likelihood, something awful happened in the childhood of this angry professor to cause her overblown sense of self, but this is not your concern.

- **DR. PRIMA DONNA** - He would rather be doing research than teaching your class. If he’s at a liberal arts college, he is infuriated that he can’t get a job at a research institution, where he wouldn’t have to deal with peons like you all day.

- **DR. DRONE** - Brilliant words might be coming out of her mouth, but she may as well be reciting the telephone book. And Dr. Drone likes to talk, so she goes on and on and on and on. If you have to take a class with Dr. Drone, make sure it’s not an early morning class.

- **DR. DOGMA** - Dr. Dogma wants to indoctrinate you with ideas, especially political ones. Now, all professors are entitled to express their opinions, so just because a professor is open about politics doesn’t mean he is Dr. Dogma. However, if your professor refuses to politely discuss ideas with the class, or gives students lower grades if they disagree with him, you are dealing with Dr. Dogma.5

There are kernels of truth found in the personalities above. In fact, each of us can perhaps identify all five types among our colleagues. The idea that faculty members do not see themselves as Dr. Drones when they clearly drone on for entire class sessions or Dr. Prima Donnas when they act like they cannot be bothered causes tension with students. Like it or not, students across the country scream out on their evaluations and online that they expect their college professors to do better.6 The second part of this essay ponders how to remedy this problem by genuinely connecting with students and, thereby, thriving in the classroom.

### II. CONNECT & THRIVE

*The ability to relate and to connect, sometimes in odd and yet striking fashion, lies at the very heart of any creative use of the mind, no matter in what field or discipline.*7 -- George Seidel

Professors crave five outcomes from students: (1) achievement of disciplined-based learning outcomes; (2) development of crucial reading, writing, speaking and analytical skills; (3) effort; (4) professionalism and integrity (inside and outside of classroom, as students and alumni); and (5) the look in students’ eyes when they become passionate about the subject matter. Below average professors struggle to obtain any of these five outcomes. Average professors cultivate the first two and struggle with the final three. Highly effective professors, however, are able to cultivate all five in every academic term and with any cohort of students.

My perspective is that desired outcomes (3) through (5) above are the most important and also the most difficult to cultivate. In fact, these three outcomes are most likely to occur when professors establish genuine connections with students. Think about it this way: the majority of our students are only willing to plug in and give above average effort, consistently act professionally, ponder their character and wonder about our

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6. See, e.g., Rate My Professors, http://www.ratemyprofessors.com (last visited Mar. 20, 2011) (compiling student evaluations of professors in a less than professional, but still seemingly honest, forum). Although Rate My Professors (RMP) does not require rigorous verification before posting and many in the Academy might question its legitimacy, there is little reason for students to take the time to lie in an anonymous forum with little chance that their comments will injure the professors they comment on. In other words, it is impossible to prove why students make their comments on RMP, but that does not make a Web site with thousands of professor rankings and tens of thousands of student comments worth ignoring.

disciplines if they feel a genuine connection with their professor. Accordingly, I use the final three outcomes above to define what a genuine connection looks like:

To connect is to awaken a student’s desire and capacity to:
analyze information;
act with professionalism and character; and
appreciate that wisdom truly does begin in wonder.

The following seven suggestions constitute my perspective on how to generate genuine connections:

1. Discover whether you have a problem connecting and fix it - The first step in any recovery program is to admit you have a problem. Problematically, faculty have many forces working against their ability to analyze weaknesses in their teaching style and adapt. Teaching is an extremely fulfilling career because it places academics in control of their own destiny. Our schedules and employment requirements allow us to place more important priorities, such as family, religion, relationships, etc. on par with or even above work. In general, this is a good thing because people tend to find greater fulfillment in relationships rather than employment. When combined with reasonable job security and no boss looking over our shoulders, however, this freedom lessens pressures to improve teaching quality. One sometimes observes that that academics struggle to get hired, work very hard, receive tenure and then stagnate. While I strongly support the tenure system, it provides little accountability for average and barely above average teachers. Lecturers and clinical professors are not immune from the negative comments and evaluations from students either even though their job security is more closely tied to classroom performance.

Ultimately, I cannot imagine many in the Academy actually want to live in a world where professors struggle to genuinely connect with students for entire careers. Therefore, each of us has a moral duty to help remedy this problem. We must start by determining if we truly connect. To begin, answer the following questions:

• How often do you think about the connections you make with students - both inside and outside of the classroom?
• Are these connections genuine and, if you believe they are, how do you know?
• Do you consistently generate outcomes (3) through (5) above in your students?

Regardless of your answers, the following suggestions are meant to assist you in generating stronger and more genuine connections.

2. Be bothered outside the classroom - Too many professors act like they are too good to be bothered by students. They exhibit this arrogance inside the classroom by keeping the class completely on topic and rarely commenting on matters outside of the syllabus. They appear uninterested in current events, activities happening on campus and their students’ struggles with their majors, or the job market. They exhibit this attitude outside the classroom by treating office hours with disdain and rarely making any effort to get to know their students even on a professional level. Unsurprisingly, these same people tend to

8 In fact, I do not see many other attributes in a professor that can cause these three reactions aside from a genuine connection. Keep in mind that our top students (perhaps five of every fifty) will do these things regardless of any connection. Clearly, however, we are employed to reach more than ten percent of our students.
9 According to Plato, Socrates discussed wonder and stated, "Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder." THEAETETUS BY PLATO, 155d (trans. by Benjamin Jowett), available at http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/theatu.html (last visited Mar. 21, 2011).
10 There is a body of literature discussing connecting with students. See, e.g., KEN BAIN, WHAT THE BEST COLLEGE TEACHERS DO (2004); Pat Pattison, Janet Riola Hale & Paul Gowens, Mind and Soul: Connecting with Students, 28 J. LEGAL STUD. EDUC. 39 (2011).
11 Making matters worse is the fact that many faculty members across the country focus their efforts on research and enter the classroom only as an afterthought. Professors who take the time to read this journal presumably would not be in this group.
treat their colleagues and lower level administrators similarly. In no context—the classroom, the meeting room, or the faculty lounge—is such arrogance and lack of caring an asset.

This attitude must change in order for genuine connections to form. Most of the connections I make occur outside of class, one-on-one during my office hours. In fact, I strongly encourage each of my students to meet with me at least one time over the term. These meetings take time (especially with my larger classes) but the conversations are as rewarding to me as I hope they are to my students. These connections do not begin in my office hours, however, but rather in class when I sincerely encourage students to schedule a meeting. When I say, “Please come meet with me.” I mean it. Students understand that I want to be “bothered” in this way.¹²

3. **INTELLIGENCE ≠ GENUINE CONNECTION** - The professors I encounter are extremely intelligent. Such intellectual heft draws them to the profession and allows for wonderful streams of research and publication records. These same faculty are often up on the latest and greatest news and theories surrounding their discipline. Finally, many are dedicated to bringing these theories into the classroom. This sounds like exactly what our students need, right? My perspective is that these incredible talents are crucial, but none of them (standing alone or grouped together) are enough to generate genuine connections with students.

Instead, genuine connections require professors to translate information in a creative, informative and interesting manner on top of producing cutting edge research, keeping current with breaking developments and adapting new theories to courses. This type of translation brings the difficult topics we teach alive. Practice translating what you teach to people untrained in your field and ask them if you are any good at it.

4. **REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE TEACHING** - While graduate students pose their own challenges, undergraduates require more creative teaching skills. For the most part, graduate students do the reading, show up for class ready and willing to plug in and learn, effectively participate in teams and shy away from honor code violations. Many undergraduate students, on the other hand, do the reading when their social calendars allow, speak in class when participation is required, loathe group projects and tend to cheat in drastic numbers. This does not have to be the rule for undergraduates, however. In fact, I make it my goal to grab the attention of every student in every class session I teach. To this end, I use a bit of technology virtually every class period. I begin each session with a short, relevant, humorous and engaging video clip relevant to the assigned material.¹³ Later on, I often pull up relevant websites or pictures to make a point and quickly move on. Contemporary students expect professors to understand and implement the latest technology in the classroom. Too much technology or the screening of boring materials or entire films, however, appears gimmicky and is often a waste of valuable class time.

I grab students’ attention on first day and keep at it until as many people as possible are on board. This can be a daunting challenge but, once the tough cases connect, you have their attention long past the end of the term and they no longer bring down their groups in projects and their peers in class discussions. I love teaching undergraduates specifically because of these challenges and their reactions when they do connect.

5. **TELL YOUR STORY** - The professors I meet are interesting people and many have fascinating backgrounds. The problem is that no one discovers this information because such stories are rarely told. Think back to your time in college. I would have loved to hear how my Finance professor became interested in the stock market or how my Italian professor mastered five languages. With this in mind, I begin the first class of each term by telling my story. I talk about why I majored in business, went to law

¹² This does not mean that I want to be bothered by students all the time. However, I find that students respect me more after these meetings. For example, they tend to plug in and participate more in class after these meetings .

¹³ I tend to keep these humorous – via the Daily Show or YouTube clips – but still on point. The humor makes students listen and engage in the subject. This proves a wonderful opportunity to bring in the serious aspects of the material to perhaps a more open mind.
school and quit my law practice to run a small business and the moved to teaching. I then add to my story throughout the term. This does not take long and is not deeply personal, but it generates a worthwhile impact. Instead of a high and mighty business law professor, I become someone who: (1) once struggled with homework, friends, time management, etc. in college just like my students, (2) learned the hard way with many of my decisions in life, (3) found out what truly matters in my life (my family, my friends, etc.). This strategy does not require daily affirmations and recollections of intimate details. The idea is to let students know that you are a person too and, if you are willing to share a bit about yourself, perhaps students will feel comfortable sharing with you. The connection-potential of sharing a few bits and pieces of your life is extraordinary.

6. **Bring in Fun, Current, Real-World Examples and Laugh a Little** - I believe that people who consistently laugh at themselves (not at others mind you) live longer, healthier and happier lives. Too many professors take themselves far too seriously. Nothing kills a potential connection faster than an uptight, awkward, super-serious professor. My classes are not comedy shows by any stretch of the imagination, but I do try and add dashes of humor whenever appropriate. As stated above, I start each class with a funny and relevant clip from the news, a movie or the popular press. I make my class discussions current and applicable to the real-world. I also point out some of the less serious and humorous facts of my scenarios as well. I laugh at myself and we laugh as a group from day one. This helps me connect with students - especially students who are ready to tune me out from the start.

7. **Pay Attention to Student Reactions & Learn Everyday from Your Experiences (Including Your Teaching Evaluations)** - My teaching philosophy revolves around the idea of feedback, feedback and more feedback. I consistently want to know how well my students understand the material, enjoy the class and think about how to apply the information to their future. To this end, I distribute anonymous evaluations three times each term. These short questionnaires ask simple questions like, “What works in my class,” “What scares you the most about the class” and “Is Prof. C easily accessible?” These teach me how to improve (I make some suggested changes and ignore others) and cause my students to respect me a bit more for caring.

I also look closely at, but do not obsess about, my student evaluations. Student evaluations have many flaws, but I find them to be an accurate indication of my overall teaching effectiveness. I tend to take heart in the very kind comments and then set them aside. I also read the very negative comments and set them aside as well. The remaining comments tell me whether I have genuinely connected. I never ease my grades to obtain better evaluations nor do I bring food and other prizes to class. Every connection I make I want to be authentic and generated from my ability to teach effectively. Finally, after every teaching session I think about what I could have done more effectively. Sometimes these conversations with myself are short and other times they keep my up at night. Regardless, I find a way to learn from my mistakes and strive to be much better tomorrow than I was today.

III. **Conclusion**

We should take heart in Stephen Hawking’s astute observation that intelligence is rooted in the ability to adapt.\(^\text{14}\) Although professors are intelligent creatures, lamentably, we are a tribe reluctant to change. Adapt we must because studies show that as “new generations of students enter college . . . their needs and learning styles may change at a faster rate than do the existing cohort of faculty.”\(^\text{15}\) Highly effective professors establish credibility with students by genuinely connecting on various levels. A professor’s background,

\(^{14}\) The quotation “Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change” is attributed to the English physicist Stephen Hawking. ThinkExist.com, http://thinkexist.com/quotiation/intelligence-is-the-ability-to-adapt-to-change/1547345.html (last visited Mar. 26, 2011).

\(^{15}\) Sue Kraus & Sharon Sears, *Teaching for the Millennial Generation: Student and Teacher Perceptions of Community Building and Individual Pedagogical Techniques*, 8 J. Effective Teaching 32, 32 (2008) (discussing the Millennial Generation and ways to adapt teaching strategies to their different learning styles).
education, experience, intelligence, personality and teaching style provide infinite opportunities to connect. My perspective is that a professor’s ultimate goals should move beyond merely student achievement of disciplined-based learning outcomes and crucial reading, writing, speaking and evaluation skills. Instead, we should consistently strive to generate in our students the desire to plug in and try, professionalism, integrity and a passion about the subject matter we teach. Make these genuine connections and you can bask in the results and, more importantly, thrive in the classroom.