

TEACHING AT ITS BEST

{ **A Research-Based Resource
for College Instructors** }

THIRD EDITION

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regulations. If you set up or have them set up a code of classroom conduct (see Chapter Seven), they will generally honor it. If you promise that you will answer their email at two specific times each day and you follow through, they will not expect you to be available 24/7. Whatever course policies your syllabus states, as long as they are clear and airtight, the students will generally respect them, though a few may try to pressure you to bend your rules. Even their parents will usually withdraw their demands for grade information if you clearly explain any applicable restrictions under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. What millennials consider unprofessional is an instructor's (apparent) disorganization, ill preparation, or inability to stick to her own syllabus.

Of course, blanket statements about an entire generation always apply to only a portion of its members. Biggs (2003) has another take on it. He describes an undergraduate profile applicable to both the British Commonwealth nations and the United States, and he puts a face on it—two faces, actually. There is “Susan,” the archetypal “good” student—intelligent, well prepared, goal oriented, and motivated to master the material. Susan came to college with solid thinking, writing, and learning skills. While about three-quarters of today's college students were like her in 1980, only about 42 percent are like her today (Brabrand & Andersen, 2006). The rest (almost 60 percent) are like “Robert,” who is much less academically talented, college ready, and motivated to learn (Brabrand & Andersen). He just wants to get by with the least amount of learning effort so he can parlay his degree into a decent job. He will rely on memorizing the material rather than reflecting on and constructing it. “Good teaching,” according to Biggs, is “getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously” (p. 5)—that is, changing Roberts into Susans.

When you divide the student population the way Biggs does, the millennial generation doesn't look so monolithic, and no matter where we teach, we find both types of students in our classes. A sizable minority of them are interested in learning

and know something about how to do it, even if they are also materialistic, tied to their parents, and on Facebook. While we can generalize about millennials, we must not forget that they are the most diverse generation—economically, politically, ethnically, racially, and culturally—that North American institutions of higher learning have ever welcomed.

THE ADULT LEARNER

Adults learn the same way as traditional-age students, but they respond somewhat differently to certain instructor behaviors, teaching strategies, and content emphases. They are less forgiving about an instructor's shortage of experience, expertise, teaching savvy, and suitable supplementary materials. For good reason, they value their own life experience and want to share and apply it in class, assignments, and group work. They know the world to be complex, and therefore they expect to learn multiple ways of solving problems and to have discretion in applying the material. They need the opportunity for reflection after trying out a new application or method. Rote learning just won't work with them. Finally, adult learners are practical and usually quite disinterested in theory. They demand that the materials have immediate utility and relevant application (Aslanian, 2001; Vella, 1994; Wlodkowski, 1993). None of this implies that they are difficult learners. In fact, they are often highly motivated, eagerly participatory, and well prepared for class.

INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTING

Age is but one variable on which students vary. Add gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, and religion. Time was when only well-to-do white males attended college in the United States. But now over 60 percent of all undergraduates are female, and in 2003–2004, only 63.7 percent were white, 14.1 percent African American, 11.9 percent Hispanic, 5.4 percent Asian American,

0.9 percent Native American, 0.5 percent Pacific Islander, and 2.1 percent multiracial. In addition, 11.3 percent had a disability (“Profile of Undergraduate Students, 2003–4,” 2007).

While all people learn by the same basic processes described earlier, some of these groups educationally thrive under circumstances that are not always typical in the American classroom. In addition, they often share distinctive values, norms, background experiences, and a sense of community that set them apart and make them feel set apart—and not always in a positive way. Traditionally underrepresented groups are more likely to struggle emotionally in college and to leave before attaining a degree.

As an instructor, you are also an ambassador of the academy to these groups, and you are close enough to them to reach out and include them. How you relate to these students has a powerful impact on their performance and retention (Ferguson, 1989; Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997; Guo & Jamal, 2007; Jones, 2004; Kobrak, 1992). Here are some guidelines, and you’ll find more in the section “Equity in the Classroom” at the end of Chapter Five:

- Assign and mention the scholarly and artistic contributions of diverse groups where appropriate (Toombs & Tierney, 1992).
- Call a group by the name that its members prefer.
- Develop a personal rapport with your African American, Native American, Hispanic, and female students. Their style of thinking and dealing with the world tends to be relational and interpersonal, which means intuitive, cooperative, holistic, subjective, relationship focused, motivated by personal loyalty, and oriented to socially relevant topics (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Baxter Magolda, 1992). This style contrasts with the analytical, which values analysis, objectivity, logic, reason, structure, sequence, the abstract, debate, challenge, competition, and economic practicality. It is prevalent among European and Asian American males and in the academy in general (Anderson & Adams). How closely and easily you relate to your diverse and female students will strongly affect their motivation to learn, their trust in your intentions for them, and their overall satisfaction with college (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Gonsalves, 2002; Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997; Kobrak, 1992; Nettles, 1988).
- Be aware that most international students stand physically closer to others than do Americans, that many Asian American women are taught to avoid eye contact, and that many Asian Americans and Native Americans have learned to listen quietly rather than jumping into discourse.
- Don’t avoid course-appropriate topics related to diverse groups because they are sensitive, controversial, or applicable to only a minority of people. Some students will see your avoidance as prejudicial.
- Don’t avoid giving timely, constructive feedback to diverse students about their work out of fear of injuring their self-esteem or being accused of racism. Indeed, diverse students may interpret your criticisms as racially motivated disrespect, so you should bring up this possibility yourself and explicitly ask them rather than sweeping the issue under the rug. Be very sure that the students really understand your criticisms and recommendations for improvement (Gonsalves, 2002).
- Don’t make so much of their successes that you imply you didn’t expect them to succeed.
- Don’t let any students get away with insensitive remarks in class. Such incidents open up teachable moments for you to lead an open discussion about cultural differences and stereotyping. Before launching a potentially controversial discussion, it is also a good idea to explain what a civil intellectual discourse comprises and to set up ground rules for it.
- Don’t ask diverse students to speak in class as representatives of their group. Whatever the group, it is too internally diverse to be represented by one or a few members.