

## Mentoring in the Classroom: Making the Implicit Explicit

The "underprepared student," once uncommon on campuses, now seems omnipresent . . . not only in undergraduate institutions, not only in America. The British government ordered a 25% increase in university enrollment. Black South Africans will occupy a majority of places in previously white, apartheid universities. The Association of American Medical Colleges will triple minority representation in medical schools in their 3000 x 2000 campaign, drawing heavily on the urban areas that have been on the receiving end of the wrenching body blows of poverty, unemployment, and despair. These same areas have provided many of the current generation of underprepared students.

Or is it a matter of the "overprepared professor," one who understands the appropriateness of using the nominative case following the intransitive linking verb? There continues to be a professorate steeped in the academic tradition that values correctness in diction, precision in syntax, rigor in research, a foundation in liberal studies, and the ability to trade puns with a Shakespearean scholar. All right, some of our most celebrated researchers have agreed with Hemingway that plagiarism is stealing from someone who is better than you are. Perhaps not all are as well read as they might be. Moreover, an Ivy League supreme court nominee was heard to use the repetitive "what it is is . . ." And academic writers have been known to begin sentences with conjunctions. The point is not that academics have shortcomings. The point is, what happens when the underprepared student meets the overprepared professor? Who gives way? Who accommodates? And how?

### Accommodation

From the standoff between underprepared and overprepared has emerged an instructional medium designed to bridge the chasm that separate the two. Supplemental Instruction (SI), a widely used academic support program, has taken root in hundreds of U.S. campuses, dozens in the U.K., and

has received the endorsement of local university and government groups in such disparate places as Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein, Durban, Johannesburg and QwaQwa in the Republic of South Africa.

First used at the University of Missouri-Kansas City as a means of retaining students in the professional schools, SI has been disseminated domestically for nearly two decades with the aid of grants from the U.S. Department of Education. Relying on "field-based research," the staff at SI Central (UMKC) have accumulated a considerable repertoire of instructional techniques. They have not, however, previously addressed the question, "What techniques can the field of SI offer to the professor in the classroom?"

Let Deanna Martin, the program director, introduce the topic. SI has shown that students need mentoring. The statement applies not only to the students whom faculty typically regard as marginal, but others with much higher aspirations -- some of them aiming at the platinum professions -- for whom B is a marginal grade. Too many fail to meet their goals because they have no experience in the milieu of tertiary education. For example, they tend to interpret things they are told literally. The professor says, "You are not graded on attendance but you are responsible for the notes." Only after the student has failed the first exam and made a personal appointment does the professor explain. "Of course you are expected to attend the class. I only meant your course grade is not specifically lowered because you missed class. Furthermore I did not mean that you were responsible for the notes that your friend took. I meant. . ." This latter conversation is mentorship, but it comes too late. In an SI program, the SI leader can fill the mentorship role. Or the professor can do it for an entire class."

### Specific Suggestions for Mentoring Your Class

In case our idea of mentoring is out of synchrony with the ideas of others, let's define the term operationally. In our minds,

mentoring means telling someone how things **really** work. Not just what the rules say, but what the insiders know.

1. **Be explicit about why you value your subject and your course.**

Students want a reason to enjoy your course, not just an academic, theoretical, up town reason, but a down home, from the heart, personal reason. You are the person to provide it. Many high school counselors and college advisors give students the idea that courses are in the curriculum to be "got out of the way," as in, "This semester you can get biology out of the way." As mentors, we can remind students that this is the semester that they have the opportunity to learn what life is. . .to learn the actual difference between a frog and a rock.

2. **Be explicit about class resources.**

What seems perfectly obvious to you is often only vaguely familiar to students. For example, students don't typically know to value syllabi. Few high school teachers use them; therefore, students lack experience with this fundamental organizer. The way to emphasize the importance of the syllabus is to refer to it at the beginning of each lecture, each week, or each unit. We teach our own children to read maps so that they can answer for themselves the question, "Are we there yet?" The principle is the same for students.

3. **Be explicit about campus resources.**

Don't miss an opportunity to personalize resources that you want your students to access. If Marilyn C. is the most responsive research librarian, send your students to Marilyn C., not just to the research desk. Better yet, have Marilyn C. come to your classroom for a personal introduction.

4. **Be explicit about the intellectual tools of your discipline.** Help students develop strategies to organize information. Simple visual matrices allow for organization of some kinds of information. Differences among bacteria, for example, fit this kind of organization, as do differences among national or local governments with respect to a finite number of characteristics. Students need to see discipline-specific information patterns.

5. **Be explicit by modeling your thinking.**

Underprepared students need a window into your mind. For many, their idea of intellectual mastery of a subject is the high school history teacher who knows her textbook so well that she can tell you from memory the page where a picture may be found. "She has the textbook memorized," they say, in awe of such learning. And, until they learn otherwise, they believe the same is true of their professors. Therefore, when you answer questions, lead off with something like this: "Let me tell you how I think about that." Then tell them.

6. **Be explicit about expectations.**

Students need to know more about the performance criteria for your course than the number of exams scheduled and how much each counts. They need to know both what objective measures constitute excellent work, and what excellent work looks like. Show them the difference between a paper that received a grade of A and one that received a C and one that was unacceptable. Tell them how you would prepare for an exam like the one they will face in your class. . .and why. In the process, encourage them to form study groups. Administer a minimal impact examination as soon as possible after the beginning of the

semester. If the exam covers only two weeks of lectures and determines no more than ten percent of the grade, the students who do poorly will not be beyond redemption. Include a demonstration of exactly how you calculate grades. Finally, communicate to students that you expect them to do well in your course.

The above are offered as examples of high yield activities that consume minimal classroom time. We would suggest that the days are over when professors can expect others to take responsibility for preparing students with the intellectual skills needed to succeed in college. Professors must now assume at least part of the responsibility themselves by providing direct assistance within the classroom. Other responsibilities can be assigned to designees. That, of course, is what SI does, i.e., becomes the professor's designee and does for the professor what he or she would like to do if time in the classroom were more abundant.

### **Mentorship in the SI Model**

In the SI model, mentorship stands at the center of students' relationship with the SI leader, a peer or near-peer who has previously done well in the class. The leader assumes the mantle of the model student who attends all lectures, takes exemplary notes, and in every way demonstrates the qualities which will assure success in the course. The leader convenes sessions outside class hours. Students attend voluntarily. The sessions blend what-to-learn with how-to-learn-it, artfully mixing study skills with content in ways that empower students in both. SI produces the most dramatic results in the traditional high risk classes where assistance is available to all students in the class. Improvement in student performance and reduction in attrition rates attest to the overall success of the SI model and the mentorship it embodies.

### **Selected References**

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