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Be Personal, Not Perfect—A Special Guest Column from David Schary, PESH

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Winthrop University

Be Personal, Not Perfect—A Special Guest Column from David Schary, PESH

Guest Column from David Schary, PESH: Three weeks ago I was drawing a theory on the whiteboard during my Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity class. Being a theory nerd, I was excited, connecting circles and boxes with arrows going in every direction. After completing my work of art, I asked the class for an example of the theory from their own lives. A young woman in the front row raised her hand. Instead of sharing an enlightening example, she timidly said, “Dr. Schary...competency is misspelled...you forgot the second ‘e.’” Competency was the first word I wrote. My students had silently stared at my mistake for over 15 minutes.

I have never been a good speller, so I used that moment to teach my students a life lesson: never spell in public. The self-deprecating life lesson led to a shared laugh and several other jokes (usually at my expense) over the next couple class periods.

Instead of an embarrassing mistake, my inability to spell turned into a moment of much-needed comic relief while explaining a complex theory. It chipped away some of the social awkwardness of a new class, giving us a shared experience to connect us in a way my overly zealous passion for Sport and Exercise Psychology had yet to accomplish. These “natural classroom moments,” or shared memorable experiences, act like glue bonding a class together throughout a long semester.

These moments can arise in any number of ways, from a serious discussion to a light-hearted story. Classes that lack this bonding agent often fail to be enjoyable or memorable. I wish I had a simple formula for creating a natural classroom moment, but then I guess it wouldn’t be natural. Instead, I have two lessons based on my personal experience to help increase your chances of experiencing

your own special classroom moment.

Planning Spontaneity

Walking into a classroom without a plan is a recipe for disaster, but a plan can also prevent insightful off-script and memorable discussions. Natural classroom moments occur somewhere between complete chaos and rigid order. You are forced off the well-defined path of your class plan to follow an interesting comment, question, idea, or even a spur of the moment activity. Giving up control of the class direction can be nerve racking, but the spontaneity encourages engagement and leads to critical thinking.

To give myself the best chance of having these special moments, I try to keep Dr. John Bird’s “post-it note” class plan in mind. While I have not been able to whittle my plan down enough to fit on a post-it note, I have become more comfortable with just an outline. I view this pared-down version as a guide that helps me find my way to the

“Although I admittedly fail to follow all of my own suggestions, at the start of every semester I remind myself that each person staring blankly at me on the first day of class has his or her own story. Being privy to just a sliver of that story forges a relationship that leads to a better overall class experience for the students and myself. This is because knowing my students helps me teach in a more personal and effective way.”



Continued from page 1

destination—even if I detour through an unplanned idea or question. I have begun to worry less about filling every minute with new information and focusing more on helping my students think about and apply the material.

I also recommend applying the “post-it note” approach to your PowerPoint slides, if you choose to incorporate slides at all. Too often slides become a monotonous sludge through material that discourages engagement. The first time I taught without PowerPoint, I felt naked in front of the class. And although I still find it challenging standing in front of my class without any slides glowing on the screen behind me, it has allowed for more special classroom moments (even if it involves me misspelling a word). If you choose this route, be prepared for resistance from students; they are used to and expect PowerPoint slides chock full of information. The resistance does fade. My students learn that talking more and writing less often leads to deeper learning, especially if they can reference their textbook outside of class.

Promote Relationships

My best classes occur when I have built relationships with my students. When I say “best” I do not mean those in which the highest grades were achieved; rather, I am referring to the overall student experience as well as my own. Building relationships that extend beyond the classroom are key. I want to know my students as people. This is different than being friends with my students; instead, it is the ability to know each student as a unique individual full of potential, regardless of how he or she may act.

Over the years, I learned that awareness and listening were the keys to starting a relationship. I try to talk less and when I ask questions I make sure they are open ended. I also try to notice when a student looks abnormally stressed or is absent from class, and I ask them about their classes, jobs, backgrounds, and/or families. I also attempt (usually unsuccessfully) to use humor. Since relationships are a two-way street, I also share about my life. I want my students know that I am a human being and that I do not have all the answers.

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to follow all of my own suggestions, at the start of every semester I remind myself that each person staring blankly at me on the first day of class has his or her own story. Being privy to just a sliver of that story forges a relationship that leads to a better overall class experience for the students and myself. This is because knowing my students helps me teach in a more personal and effective way.

Personally Imperfect

When you strip away everything but the essential elements, instructors just need to be themselves. The classroom is a space to learn, not to be perfect. I guarantee being personal will lead to imperfections; you will make mistakes. But without the worry of perfection, you will become more spontaneous and connect with your students. Most importantly, you will have a classroom full of moments that are fun, engaging, and spark intellectual curiosity. And that is exactly the type of class our students deserve.

--David Schary, PESH

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

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Thought For the Week

"I never had any large respect for good spelling. That is my feeling yet. Before the spelling-book came with its arbitrary forms, men unconsciously revealed shades of their characters and also added enlightening shades of expression to what they wrote by their spelling, and so it is possible that the spelling-book has been a doubtful benevolence to us."
--Mark Twain