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Trust as a Cornerstone of Fostering Academic Belonging

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In my early days of teaching I wore suits to class. And heels. I wasn't all that young, already well into my mid-thirties, but I looked young and the clothes were a way to signal my status as a (newly minted!) professor. It was disheartening that sometimes even in my most respectable skirt suit I would be mistaken for a student around campus, but in the classroom it mostly worked. I wanted my students to see me as person of authority, to see that my expertise and my position were worthy of respect. That the person in the front of the classroom deserved to be there—or at least looked like she did.

That attitude characterized my entire approach to students in those days. My syllabi were crystal clear on what was required and when. I painstakingly listed my due dates, policies, and rules, as well as the consequences of breaking them. The message was clear: Be forewarned all of you cheaters and partiers and those who think you can skate by on excuses and re-takes. I am on to you. You will have to put in hard work to do well in this class. I am someone whom you will take seriously. End of story.

My syllabi look a lot different today. And I rarely put on a pair of heels, certainly not to teach in. I've been slowly packing away the ideas that came along with teaching in suits and heels too. My research on first-year students helped kick that into high gear. After 186 one-on-one interviews with students at two different colleges, I realized that students want us to show them respect just as much as I have always wanted respect from them. In the past I demanded that they show me respect by following my policies, my rules, and my assignment instructions. Funny thing about respect, though—you can't demand it. You can only earn it.

And I certainly wasn't earning it back in my early years. Students routinely lied and cheated in my courses. Sometimes I caught them and sometimes I didn't. I'm embarrassed to admit that in my first semesters nearly every final exam date in nearly every class I taught serendipitously coincided with the death of someone's grandmother, sometimes more than one. My students knew that a death in family was a sure-fire ticket to excuse them from taking an exam on time. As it should be! But they were pulling one over on me and we both knew it. I'm not sure why students never claimed they had to suddenly attend the funeral of a grandfather or an uncle or an aunt at the exact same hour of my exams. Poor grandma. Always grandma.

Knowing what I know now, I don't blame them. I made it very clear that I expected them to try and cheat, or at least consider doing it. I would remind them that I was on the lookout for it, wise to their tricks. Is it any surprise that so many of them lived up to my expectation? At that time, I didn't have a vocabulary to even think about teaching in any other way. That took a while to develop. But I have not had a dead grandma in I don't even know how long, so I know I must be doing something right.

Of course, I had been changing bit by bit as I got my teaching legs under me, shedding some of my own insecurities, becoming more comfortable in the classroom which allowed me to cling less tightly to the strict policies-and-punishments approach. But I didn't start a new way of thinking about teaching until after tenure. And it wasn't the security of tenure that made the difference. It was starting new research on first-year students that did it. The work that would become *College Belonging* (Nunn, 2021).

I'm a qualitative sociologist who uses in-depth interview methods for data collection. I loved sitting down with students who were just embarking on their college lives, hearing all about what made their favorite professors so great and what made their least favorite professors so disappointing. Every time I heard a student share some wonderful thing that a favorite professor of theirs did, I would take notes on the side, inspired to do that same thing in my own classes too. More importantly—and I share this with great humility—when I heard students complain about their professors doing things that I myself also routinely did, I wrote those down in my side notes as well, vowing to never do them again now that I understood how badly it could land. In fact, that's how *33 Simple Strategies for Faculty* (Nunn, 2019) was born. From the side notes of do's and don'ts that I kept for myself during the first round of interviews with students in 2015. I am deeply embarrassed by how few of the 33 strategies in the book I actually employed before those interviews.

I don't mean to paint a picture of myself as completely flailing in the classroom. By all measures I was doing just fine, in some moments even excellent. I consistently had strong course evaluations, even in those first semesters. Each year I received more and more gratitude from students for my mentorship and support. I felt I was building

genuine relationships with students and they seemed to delight in my enthusiasm for letting sociology enrich their understanding of the world around them. My favorite comment on a course evaluation still to this day is: “this class opened my eyes.” And I’m proud to say that I’ve gotten that comment dozens of times over the years, even those early years. What was missing in those days was something else: trust.

Trust wasn’t a concept that I even associated with teaching at all. It wasn’t in my vocabulary. Yet today I see it as the cornerstone of effective teaching.

I wanted my students to come to class, read the homework, write their own papers ethically and responsibly, turn things in on time, and take our exams closed-note. But I didn’t trust them to actually do it, so I threatened them with penalties for breaking the rules. Then I followed up on every single infraction as though it were my moral duty to punish them. As though I were doing them a favor by holding them painfully accountable to my (somewhat arbitrary) due dates and assessment formats. When I look back at my early syllabi, I shudder. The tone is so mean. It’s like I was yelling at them in advance for all the crimes they would surely commit over the semester.

I wrote things like: Late work **will not be accepted** unless prior arrangements have been made with the professor **in advance** of the due date. Exceptions can be made in the case of medical emergencies.

Today my syllabi say things like:

It’s important to turn your work in on time. I know sometimes life throws curveballs, so if you need an extension, please contact me. If you aren’t sure whether your situation deserves an extension, just reach out and ask.

and

Your wellness matters to me. We all sometimes need extra help navigating life. Our campus has many resources that are free to you, including: [I insert contact info for our wellness office, counseling center, food pantry, sexual assault advocate program, and learning difference center].

The difference is simple. Today I start from a place of trust.

In my syllabi I’m trying to signal that when you are absent or behind on your work, I trust that you are a good student and a good person. I assume that there’s a reason, probably something beyond your control. I don’t assume you are going to lie to me to get out of the consequences. Sure, some students sometimes violate my trust with some lying or cheating and I have to pull out penalties for it. But these days I am able to recognize most of my students’ moments of dishonesty as coming out of panic and shame of having painted themselves into a corner. It’s generally an act of desperation, not a calculated plan to see what they can get away with from the sloppy, naive sociology professor and then brag about it to their friends, like I used to imagine they were doing. I don’t let them off the hook when they lie, even today. But I don’t lose all respect for them over it anymore.

Beyond the syllabus, trust is the backbone of how I approach all the elements of teaching now. Here are just a few things I learned from those research interviews with students. Things that have radically reoriented who I am in the classroom.

- I now give students a study guide for exams or help them create study guides on their own that will be useful for the kinds of exams I write.
- I now write detailed instructions for assignments that include every single step. I include clear expectations for how I will grade each section so there are no surprises.

These things signal that I respect your academic starting point in my class, whatever it is. I don’t assume you already know how to do the kinds of writing and thinking I expect. Whereas before I would have assumed that if you turned in something inadequate it must be because you didn’t bother trying hard, today I trust that you are endeavoring to learn and grow your skills. Out of respect for your efforts I offer study guides, comprehensive instructions, and clear rubrics to help guide your progress.

- I now give as many opportunities as possible to choose among assignment options/formats or vote as a class on how/when/what an assessment entails.

This signals that I trust your judgement about how you learn best and how this class fits into your priorities and your calendar of life commitments. If you would rather write a longer take-home essay than do an in-class exam, I assume it’s because you do your best work without the stress of a time limit rather than assuming you want a take-home so someone else can help you write it. If you say that you would rather have the essay due at the end of the weekend

instead of Friday at 5pm, I trust that is because it will allow you the chance to give it your best mental energy. I don't assume that you are just trying to milk me for extra days so you can party or procrastinate. I regret that I used to have in-class exams and strict 5pm deadlines for exactly those reasons. Ugh.

- I now explain clearly and often why I ask them to do the particular assignments, readings, exams, papers or projects that are on my syllabus.

I want trust in return, so I offer lots of explanations trying to make it clear that I choose course requirements carefully with the intention of helping them grow into better thinkers, better writers, and better social scientists by the end of the course. I explain my policies too. For example, I know that students will do better in the course if they attend class. It's a fact. So, I give them small points for attendance with a week's worth of absences as freebies, no questions asked. I explain that my attendance policy is not meant to police them or treat them like children, but to reward them for being there. How could I not? Since I know that attending will improve their grade, and I know how easy it is to fall disastrously behind, what kind of person would I be if I didn't require attendance in the syllabus? I would be someone willing to just stand by and watch her students drown because they got out of the habit of coming to class. That's not who I want to be. Of course, not all students get behind the attendance policy after I say all that, but at least they know I have their best interests at heart.

- I now reach out to students who have been absent or missed a due date with one simple question: "Are you okay?"

This opens the door for students be honest about whatever curveball life has thrown them. I used to begrudgingly reach out—yes, even back then I knew it was the right thing to do—I'd send emails that gruffly alerted them that their paper was missing. Not surprisingly, the responses I got included shame-filled apologies at best and at worst elaborate mistruths explaining why they should be excused with no point deduction. Nowadays, when I email with the subject line "Are you okay?" their response generally includes an acknowledgement that things are indeed a little haywire in their lives at that moment. They almost never ask for an extension without suggesting themselves that they will readily accept any late penalty. More touching, they say "thank you" for reaching out. Every single time. Instead of lies I get gratitude. I like that.

My willingness to start from a place of trust has been a gamechanger. After 186 interviews about the dynamics of belonging in students' lives, I've come to recognize trust as a way that we as faculty can foster academic belonging for our students. We help them feel that they belong when we demonstrate to them that we are all members of the same campus academic community, side by side. When we make it clear that we are a community that supports each other while also holding each other accountable to high standards. When we make them feel that they are missed when they don't show up—not because they are disappointing us but because we value their presence, what they bring to the table. That's how students describe what it means to belong: feeling like they matter.

And of course, we benefit too. I feel a lot more respected these days. Genuinely respected. So, I am also receiving the gift of belonging in return.

References

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