

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty No. 22

The Top 10...

Ways and Reasons to Be Vulnerable While Teaching

We put a lot of pressure on ourselves to know our discipline, be prepared for questions, and both establish and maintain authority and control of our lessons. We want to be right, and we want students to respect us. However, we can also be deliberately vulnerable in ways that demonstrate that we make mistakes, try new things, and admit what we do not know. By doing this, we can appear confident while modeling the very learning behaviors we want our students to adopt. Here are some ways to be intentionally vulnerable.

- ✓ **Admit when you do not know something.** Embracing the moment when a student asks a question to which you do not know the answer, admitting it, and asking the class for help demonstrates your self-assurance and that you value students' prior knowledge. It also demonstrates your openness to learning and that self-efficacy (*Top 10* #18) does not rely upon knowing everything.
- ✓ **Laugh at yourself.** Part of the reason why we try so hard to protect ourselves when we teach is because it's tough to stand before a class and never embarrass yourself. When you say something funny, pronounce something wrong, spit, sweat, drop something, or write the wrong thing on the board, laugh at yourself and invite students to join you. Laughing at yourself demonstrates security. No one is perfect, and your students already know this.
- ✓ **Teach something in a way you've never taught it before.** If you've ever found yourself thinking something along the lines of "it would be really interesting or fun to try X when teaching Y, but I'd never try it with an actual class," *do it. Try teaching it that way.* Tell students what you've done afterward, and ask for their feedback on whether it helped them learn or not.

- ✓ **Share something you struggled with when you learned what they are learning.** A brief, vivid personal story is a very effective Bridge-In (*Top 10 # 6*) for new material. You will be amazed by how long your students remember it and how much confidence it gives them.
- ✓ **Share with students which parts of your course are challenging for you to teach.** Invite them to partner with you to help you learn how to teach it better and better every time.
- ✓ **If you thrive on planning and order, try throwing out the plan for once.** Ten minutes before class begins, throw out your usual lesson plan (yes, this will be difficult). Begin class by writing the focus of the lesson on the board and telling the class that you need their help to figure out the best way to teach the lesson.
- ✓ **Mix it up.** Tell students that they will be responsible for determining the structure of the next class by suggesting in-class activities to help them learn the content. Emphasize the importance of flexibility when learning and modeling that flexibility by giving them a role in designing their own learning. Tie this back to self-efficacy (*Top 10 #18*) and show them how when they struggle with something new and ultimately do it, it builds their ability to handle new challenges.
- ✓ **Don't be afraid to try talking like a younger generation.** Teachers can score major points (and student engagement) by trying or even *asking* about the latest slang, especially if it's clear that youth culture's phraseology doesn't exactly roll off your tongue. Leaving your comfort zone and entering theirs earns their respect and attention. Begin a sentence with "yo" and you will have every student's attention.
- ✓ **Make classes own silence.** We naturally feel vulnerable during silence because we are the chief talkers in our classes, but silence can be a great teaching tool. Allow classes to sit with silence after you've asked a question. Don't fill the silence. Many students need time (10-15 seconds) to process the question. Train classes that the burden of silence rests on them, not you.
- ✓ **Ask students for anonymous written feedback.** Use a Classroom

Assessment Technique (*Top 10 #9*) to get feedback on your teaching and what you are doing that helps students learn. Share results with the class and explain how you are changing as a result of their feedback. This models an openness to lifelong learning like nothing else.

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