

## **Sharing in My Students' Struggles to Foster Their Success**

Eric Reyes

*Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology*

“Sure, good instructional techniques are necessary for good teaching. But they are not sufficient. They are NOT the foundation.” – Francis Su (2013)

Why did I choose to pursue academia? I can assure you that it was not for the money or because I allegedly get summers off. In part, it was because I love sharing my discipline with others, and I wanted to make a difference. I am a teacher at heart, and I try to provide the best possible educational experience for my students. During the Spring of 2020, I rediscovered a truth that Su (2013) so clearly articulates in the quote above: my bag of teaching tricks is not sufficient. I rediscovered that good teaching is founded on a connection with my students.

I teach at a school in which we aim to provide education in an environment of individual attention and support. Frankly, however, by the Spring of 2020 I had stopped being intentional about creating a connection with students and had started relying on the small class sizes and easy access to instructors to create that connection for me. As a result, any connections formed were the result of student-initiated interaction. My lectures contained personal anecdotes so that students could get to know me, but a conversation with students only began if they asked a follow up question. While working through homework questions with a small group, I might ask about the exam they took in the class before mine, but only because I overheard them talking about it before class. I would stay after class to discuss a student's life after graduation, but in response to a specific question they asked. Essentially, I was available for students who took risks.

Having taught online for many years, I was prepared logistically for the shift to online education. However, I was not prepared to address the struggles my students were facing, like loss of income, illness, lack of a peer support network, and needing to care for family. Beyond remote learning, their world had shifted dramatically. Like many others, my school implemented an alternative grading structure across the college for the spring term. Within my class, I was also more flexible with assignment deadlines. I am sure these measures reduced student stress, but they did not address the root problem – these struggles are not limited to the spring of 2020 or the COVID pandemic. Students nationally have continued to wrestle with economic hardship, the consequences of systemic oppression, and extreme political tension. Beyond that, students regularly experience major life events that disrupt their academic pursuits. I have had students struggle with eating disorders, anxiety, depression, medical illness, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, and the loss of their home. The difference is that in the spring of 2020, these struggles were shared by my colleagues, family members, and students on such a wide scale that

they were brought to my attention without my students needing to advocate for themselves. I realized that moving forward, despite experiencing ongoing challenges, they would not be able to depend on alternative grading structures.

As I prepared for the fall term, I decided to be proactive in making a connection with students because that connection forms the foundation for the other teaching techniques I implement – the foundation for their success. I included an optional assignment at the beginning of the term with two questions:

1. We are all entering the class at a different place. Wherever we are currently, we each face a unique set of challenges. As you start this term, what are the challenges you are facing personally? What are you worried about? What is keeping you up at night? Unless deemed necessary for the safety and wellbeing of yourself or others, I will not share your responses with anyone else.
2. Regardless of the amount of time you spend on homework, studying, etc., you are more than your academic record. Tell me about something you are passionate about. That is, what types of topics get you excited, and why? What could you talk about for hours? Feel free to attach a picture or provide a link as you describe what you are passionate about.

As I read through each student response, I was amazed by their vulnerability; they shared personal stories, seizing the opportunity to just vent a little. I composed a short, personal, reply to each student. It may have been a short conversation, but it laid the groundwork for more. This was particularly true for those struggling in the class. Having listened to them share their struggles and passions, the lines of communication were already open. Instead of students feeling shame regarding their performance in the class and feeling the need to explain it away, we were able to discuss ways to navigate the course in light of those struggles and passions. I became available not just for the risk takers, but for all my students - those who felt marginalized and those who felt a part of the community, those in Greek life and independents, introverts and extroverts, majors and non-majors. The assignment humanized the students for me, and it humanized me for them, creating a foundation of trust from the outset.

I would be naïve to think that “returning to normal” in the coming years means my students no longer struggle. The reality is that I have always had, and will always have, students who are facing monumental struggles. It requires little to include the above assignment at the start of my courses moving forward. Those who complete these questions will earn an opportunity to revise a future assignment in the course (incorporating additional flexibility into my course grading). I often have the fewest commitments at the beginning of a term; investing that time to connect with students through this assignment will pay off. These two simple questions provide a small glimpse into my students’ lives; their challenges become a shared burden, their passions a shared interest. That connection forms the foundation that supports all the other teaching techniques I implement for their success.

## References

- Su, F. (2013, January 8). The Lesson of Grace in Teaching. *The Mathematical Yawp*.  
<https://mathyawp.blogspot.com/2013/01/the-lesson-of-grace-in-teaching.html>