

Teaching Tips/Notes



Personal Biographies Used to Build a Learning Community

Learning is a social activity and enhanced when students are in a supportive environment (Johnson and Johnson, 1989). Providing the space and opportunity for students and faculty to become well acquainted is essential in the first steps of building a learning community. In workshops, courses on campus, and distance or blended courses, we have found that creating comfortable avenues for communication and building confidence can be achieved by students preparing and presenting a short personal biography of their experience, prior courses, personal interests, and motivations for participation in the particular educational activity. Sharing a personal biography is also an opportunity for the instructor to provide more background on her/his career beyond the typical resume of degrees, fields of study, and prior teaching or research experience. We have found that this space and opportunity provides a rapid and somewhat in-depth resume of what each person brings to the class, and is a good first step toward community building (Wiedenhoeft et al., 2003).

Learning Objectives for starting a class with personal biographies include: 1) providing space for people to learn about each other's prior classes, as well as professional and life experiences in order to build interpersonal interactions, 2) giving instructors a general overview of the composition of the class as well as individual expectations, 3) involving each individual in a presentation that can build ability to communicate and self-confidence, and 4) giving students a window on their instructors' backgrounds, expectations, and world views. Often students recognize shared interests with others that could easily remain undetected during a week-long course or an entire semester.

Methods can range from simple introductions of name, major, and expectations, with students and instructors sharing around a circle during the first class meeting. We have found that these are often cursory, provide only the scarce facts, and lack creativity, ie. The rank and serial number approach. A more robust approach is to provide a more in-depth introduction using visuals such as a flip chart of 50 x 80 cm paper and wide markers of various colors with instructions to write, draw, or otherwise illustrate individual backgrounds, experiences, and other information relevant to the course. As a basic minimum, we request name, major, home town or state or country, what each person brings to the course that will be useful to others, and expectations for the course or workshop. We generally provide up to 10 minutes for everyone including instructor(s) to prepare their biographies before they present their résumés to the learning community. Biographies could be posted around the wall of the classroom, and left up for at least that day or the first week so that people can get better acquainted. In short workshops, they may be posted and left in place if appropriate space is available.

Outcomes of this initial class or workshop exercise include 1) an in-depth acquaintance with other students or participants, 2) some familiarity with the background and interests of the instructor(s), 3) the breadth of experience represented by the people in the community, and 4) the diversity of expectations for the course.

The community building that can be achieved by personal biographies presented at the start of a course can be supplemented by activities outside the class, such as time together during travel, at meals, and informal sports or cultural events shared by the students and instructors. When students learn about the professions and backgrounds, courses, and research experiences of others, it becomes much easier to connect and to ask specific technical questions about areas in which they may need information. Students with strong experience in soils, for example, have organized evening seminars to help bring

peers up to speed on this topic. Knowing more about personal backgrounds can bring people together around common interests. For example, in one course in Estonia, half the participants had dogs at home as pets. This provided a rich context for extra-curricular discussions. One method used in longer courses is the community potluck supper, which can be organized around dishes prepared by everyone that represent their family, culture, or ethnic background, or around dishes made from only local ingredients. Another is to schedule waffle breakfasts with small groups of students together with local residents, held in a faculty home, to introduce students to a new culture. This has been especially useful in an international agro-ecology course in Norway (Francis et al., 2011).

For instructors, another outcome of the personal biographies is a more in-depth knowledge base about the backgrounds and capabilities of the participating students. This is often used as one criterion for forming student project teams, as we build groups that are diverse in academic majors, work experience, gender and age, and complementary knowledge and skills. Some of this can be gleaned from the application information or from pre-course essays submitted to the instructors, but a much broader picture including personality traits generally emerges from the biography exercise.

One key objective of most academic courses is building confidence and experience in oral communication skills. The ability to quickly summarize one's background into a summary biography requires a degree of synthesis of many years of experiences, and a need to quickly decide what is really important to share with the class. Although we observe that some students are quite nervous when first sharing in the whole group, the presentations help to establish a level of trust and acceptance that we are all in the learning landscape to undertake a shared journey, and all will contribute and learn from the experience.

Although students may have known their instructors from previous classes or reputations on campus gleaned from other students, the faculty is often perceived as a group of experts in forages, plant breeding, prairie ecology, or agronomic practices. Seldom have they been viewed as 'whole people' who also have a rich background of study, field experience, and interests outside their job. Learning about their instructors through the biographies – including family histories, job experiences, international travel and professional activities, hobbies – students begin to build a level of trust in the faculty now seen as 'real people' with both the joys and the challenges that all of us have. One of us (C. Francis) has shared the personal family tragedy of losing a son to suicide when this promising young person was 22 years old; a story that has a powerful impact on students of about the same age and an experience that has motivated this instructor to quality teaching and to the recognition of the importance of education and building confidence in the next generation. Although this is a rather extreme example of transparency, it is an illustration of one way to connect with students and reinforce the importance of every course they take – especially those where success depends on mutual trust and sharing.

In summary, we have found that sharing of personal biographies among students and instructors has been a powerful first step in creating a trusting and sharing learning community. This process has been used in conventional classes that will convene for an entire semester, in full-time classes that may last from one week to sixteen weeks, and in other group venues where it is important to quickly establish rapport and shared understanding. Some have suggested that this is a large investment of time – for example spending an entire 50-minute class period in a semester that includes only 45 classes – yet when success in a course depends on well-functioning teams working on projects and productive sharing in class discussions, we have found this to be a priority activity. In short courses of one week, this is a good way to jump start the course and demonstrate to students that they are important and that their information and experiences will be a key resources to be shared during the course. We strongly recommend that instructors try this type of class building exercise and to report their results as related to achievement and future value to students.

References:

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