Do You Create A Climate Conducive To Learning?

Donald M. Elkins

Many universities and colleges are experiencing an increase in number of urban and other non-traditional students in agriculture (as high as 75% in some agriculture classes at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale). This challenges instructors to the limit in getting the attention of students, motivating and teaching them effectively, and making lasting impressions for more permanent learning. This paper discusses some of the successful methods and materials the author has used to meet these challenges. Much of the information presented here relates to an introductory crop production course.

Love in the Classroom

I have heard several wise teachers speak about "love in the classroom"--that is, their love or concern for the proper training and welfare of their students and the joy they experience in their profession. Dr. Cecil Eubanks[1], Chairman of Political Science at Louisiana State University, spoke effectively at the 27th Annual NACTA Conference about the joy of teaching. He spoke of teaching as a calling, a passion, and a joy, and as something that becomes our own reward. In a recent talk, Dr. S.N. Postlethwait[2], the "father" of audio tutorial methods, spoke fondly of his botany students at Purdue University in the following terms: "Bless their hearts, I love them to death."

Precious Aggies

Showing love in the classroom is an important activity. Students should experience the feeling that they are important persons, that they are the instructor's number one professional priority, and that the instructor does have concern for them and their learning activities. I often refer to my students as "precious aggies." Perhaps most of us are aware of the problem we have in this country and on university and college campuses with the image of agriculture. Those of us in the profession have not done a very good job of public relations, and the only concept of agriculture that many people have is what they have seen on "Green Acres." Too often agriculture students are looked upon as second-class citizens being trained for second-rate professions. Thus, one of our first jobs in the classroom is to help students develop a sense of self-esteem and develop pride in their areas of study and in their chosen professions. I sincerely believe that those working in agriculture are the most important people in the world, and I try to instill that belief in "my precious aggies."

Breaking Down the Barrier

I find that some students beginning a course have constructed a wall of mistrust between them and their instructor. Often this has been the result of previous unpleasant experiences in the classroom or in life. This "you against me" barrier must be dissolved before effective teaching and learning can occur. I work hard to brush all the chips off the shoulders and create a climate conducive to learning.

It is shocking how many students fail to get to know their instructors. Some of my advisees cannot remember the names of some of their teachers in courses outside agriculture. I take a few minutes to tell students about myself (statistics about Elkins) and let them know something of my family, background, interests, and hobbies. This is a good start toward dissolving those barriers. A few slides of baby pictures or early childhood activities of the instructor never fails to get a few laughs and create a relaxed atmosphere.

It is equally shocking how few instructors get to know their students by name, particularly in larger classes. The first day of class, I photograph each student with a name plate, and also have each student complete a biographical and personal information card with such items as hometown size, farm or urban background, farm experiences, major, specialty, and even personal interests or hobbies. One copy of duplicate photographs is used to make a master chart, and the other is attached to the information card for a permanent record. Studying photographs with names and personal information supplied by students is a means of

Donald Elkins is welcomed to the podium by John Dunbar, Dean, Kansas State University, during the special session on "Improving the Learning Climate" at the 29th Annual NACTA Conference.

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[1] Eubanks, C.L. 1981. The Joy of Teaching. NACTA J. 25 (3):15-16.

2Postlethwait, S.N. 1983 (March 29, 1983). Speech at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

learning students on a first-name basis faster, developing more personal relationships, and establishing good rapport early in the term. The permanent cards with photographs are filed by course and term and serve as a useful "refresher" for writing letters of recommendation and similar activities.

Getting in the Mood

Introductory courses sometimes have large lecture sections which meet in the most spacious classrooms or auditoriums available. To create a warmer atmosphere in a large, impersonal lecture hall, my students are treated to a musical entrance and exit. I play country music (what other kind is more appropriate for agriculture students?), but other kinds of music can be used. While musical tastes vary widely, most students appreciate this effort to create a warm and pleasant learning climate.

Perhaps most of the readers have heard the joke about the old farmer who hit his mules in the head with a 2 x 4 board each morning to **get their attention.** One of my colleagues at SIU-C has been known to rush into class on the first day firing a pistol loaded with blanks. Both of these are extreme examples of getting attention, but some means of gaining students' attention is desirable and necessary if we are to get the job done. Instructors must devise their own strategy for specific situations, but I am not against a certain degree of "shock value," as long as the attention-getting activity is done in good taste and is not too far removed from professionalism.

A good attention-getter in my introductory crops course involves "living your subject matter." Wearing a "corn " belt, a soybean tie, denim or 100% cotton clothing or carrying corn and soybean pens or other appropriate "tools of the trade" at the appropriate times (depending on the subject matter) will "break the ice," gain attention, and identify you as a more enthusiastic, credible individual.

Staying in the Mood

Educational psychologists have determined that the attention span of the typical college or university student is only 15 to 20 minutes. It is presumptuous of us to assume that we can "drone on" for 50 minutes to an hour, or even two hours, and have our students enraptured by our every word. At least once in a 50-minute lecture period, I try to have a break or change of pace in teaching procedure. For example, a lecture can be interrupted with short films, displays or demonstrations, brief contests or awards, taste tests, or simply short question/answer period. Something dramatic may be desirable on occasion, but is not always necessary, while a change of pace is both desirable and necessary to hold the attention of students.

Other Personal Touches

Contests and/or awards can be used effectively. In the introductory crop production course, I give awards for such things as the most unique hobbies (from the student information cards), the high grades on quizzes or examinations, and the best denim or cotton outfit on "Denim Day." The prize or award may be garden seed, popcorn or some other item from our crops demonstration garden, pocket calendars, magazines or booklets, bumper stickers, "farmer" caps, or any number of other miscellaneous items. Many of these items are accumulated by instructors who are on the mailing or visitation lists of a dozen or more agricultural company representatives. Those of us who cannot use 10 pocket calendars from chemical or seed companies can make good use of them by sharing with our students.

Special days such as "Denim Day" may be scheduled to coincide with a lecture about fiber crops like cotton. Such events can add interest and enjoyment. Distributing samples of cereals or breads to all students can be an effective activity in conjunction with a lecture on grain crop utilization. I prefer to select and compare samples of widely-variable quality, such as a nutritious, "no frills" cereal vs. a high-sugar, "junk" cereal; or the cheapest white bread vs. a good, whole-grain bread. In a discussion of oil crops, it is interesting to make a survey of certain items on the grocery shelves as to the kinds of oils or fats contained in common products that we consume.

The Show and Tell Age: Visuals and Displays

Probably no instructor has to be convinced about the value of good visual aids in a teaching program. Selected pictures in the form of slides or overhead transparencies **are** worth a thousand words. Examples that could be cited include nutrient deficiency symptoms of crops, and photoperiodic response of soybeans located close to and away from a constantly lighted sign. Displays can be even more impressive. A normal corn ear as compared to N-, P-, and K- deficient ears can "drive home" these deficiency signs. Explaining displays or conducting demonstrations can offer a good break or change of pace during a lecture period. They also can help an instructor to make lasting impressions and allow better student retention of information or concepts. It is said that early Greek philosophers such as Aristotle had a unique method of memory retention. These philosophers believed if students were slapped hard when an important point was being taught, they would never forget the information. While such an extreme example of memory retention is not suitable today, effective alternatives are available. For example, prior to a lecture on "Pesticides and Human Health", I distribute samples of coffee, tea, cola, aspirin, highly-salted foods, and other materials whose consumption is not questioned. The only explanation given at the outset is that these are treats or favors for some special students. Later during the lecture, the term "LD50" is discussed in terms of its measurement of toxicity of pesticides as well as common household products or foods. At that time, a display or slides of some of these products, appropriately labeled with the

LD50 of each (or a component of each) as compared to several relatively non-toxic pesticides such as captan and simazine, effectively teaches the lesson that all pesticides are not "poisons".

Other Helpful Teaching Methods

The use of lecture outlines for individual topics, as well as an overall course syllabus, has been most helpful. Such an outline allows students to listen and think rather than trying to write down every word of the lecture. The first part of the outline consists of specific instructional objectives which enable the students to know what is expected of them. Testing according to these specific instructional objectives is a straightforward, above-board way of getting students to concentrate on the more important information and concepts.

Conclusion

There are many motivational aspects and instructional methods and materials that have been used by individuals to improve the learning climate. However, instructors must proceed with caution as to the methods they adopt and the teachers they emulate in their specific teaching programs. My best advice to newer teachers is to adopt (and modify) only those methods, use only those materials, and emulate only those outstanding teachers when these are compatible with your goals and objectives, talents and abilities, teaching budgets, and individual personalities. Although most of us can identify certain wonderful teachers who influenced our lives, our careers, and our teaching methods, we should go only so far in "teaching our students like Dr. X taught us." Also, in this high-tech age, we may get the impression that we cannot function without all of the latest "teaching machines." Never fear! Technology will never replace the warm, caring classroom teachers who let **their own personalities shine** through in their classes.

Communication Improves The Learning Climate

John A. Kline

Good classroom communication improves the learning climate; good communication takes work and planning.

As is true in most activities, the quality of planning affects the quality of results. Successful executives and professional people know that the price of excellence is careful preparation. A lawyer spends hours planning a case before appearing in court. A minister does not ad-lib a sermon but plans days or weeks in advance. In anticipation of the big game, the coach spends hours planning the plays and watching the team execute them. Should we attempt such a complicated process as learning with less attention than is given to other important activities? The answer is obvious: of course not. The effective instructor devotes much time and energy in carefully planning and preparing each lesson, whether the lesson encompasses one or several periods of instruction.

To ensure the greatest probability of learning, we must carefully select and arrange activities that will produce the desired learning outcomes in our students. Only through careful planning can we be certain that we include all necessary information and have our lesson properly organized to achieve the lesson objective.

Presentation by Kline, staff member of the Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL 36112, before the 29th Annual NACTA Conference, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, June 12-15, 1983. It is based on an earlier essay he authored for Air Force Manual 50-62, Handbook for Air Force Instructors.