

20 Things Students Say Help Them Learn

By Anne Curzan

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Near the end of August, the 2014 *Business Insider* article “10 Things Every College Professor Hates” started circulating on Facebook again. I had just finished the syllabus for my introductory English linguistics class and was feeling excited to be headed back into the classroom. Yet here was this article, which felt so negative. It didn’t come across as entirely respectful of all that students bring to the table. And the piece, aimed at students about “interacting with your professor or teaching assistant,” seemed to give more attention to pleasing the professor than to real learning.

I wondered: What would happen if you asked undergraduate students not about how to please the professor but about what promotes good learning, for all of us, together, as participants in a learning community? I talked it over with the graduate-student instructor working with me, and we decided to do just that in the first discussion sections for the year. What better way to think together about what kind of learning community we wanted to build?

So that first Friday students read and discussed the *Business Insider* article, and then we asked them to create lists: (a) What students can do to promote good learning; and (b) What instructors can do to promote good learning. Here’s what students had to say, to each other and to me and my graduate assistant.*

Ten things students can do to promote good learning:

1. Expect to learn every day. That’s on you. Don’t worry so much about whether you’re doing enough to get a good grade — focus instead on what you are learning and what you want to learn. If you’re doing that,

the “good grade” will often follow. (Not always, but often — we want to be honest about that! But the same is true if you’re just focused on getting a good grade. ...)

2. Feel empowered to — and make the effort to — participate. Trust that other students and your instructor care about what you have to say. (And see No. 4 for how to help out here.) Be willing to be vulnerable and open in discussions, because that’s how learning happens.
3. Ask questions. Ask questions. Ask questions. (And while we’re on this topic, don’t disparage other people for asking their questions.)
4. Listen to one another. And please don’t distract other people. If for some reason you have decided not to pay attention, don’t make it a group thing!
5. Come prepared for class. This means leaving yourself time to get assignments done, which much of the time means getting started earlier than the night before, which means being organized, which means probably getting a planner.
6. Acknowledge when you’re falling behind or need help. And then get help immediately! It will just spiral if you wait. (If that hasn’t happened to you yet, trust us on this one.)
7. Go to office hours even if you don’t have questions or need help, just to make a connection with your professors. They sit in their office waiting to talk to students about the subject they’re so passionate about!
8. Know what you need, emotionally and physically, to succeed. Allow yourself to make mistakes. And remember that learning can be uncomfortable (and we’re not talking about the uncomfortable classroom chairs).
9. Talk to classmates you don’t know and try to support other students. That means sometimes just taking the time to introduce yourself to a student you don’t know who is sitting next to you.
10. Remember that your instructor is a human too.

Ten things instructors can do to promote good learning:

1. Know that it’s OK to humanize yourself (e.g., it’s OK if you’re having a rough day — we get it).
2. Know students’ names. We get that this is hard if it is a big class, but it matters.

3. Know who students are (e.g., Are some of us shy in class? Do we work or play sports or play in bands or lead extracurricular groups or sing or dance or juggle parenting and school or a hundred other things? Why did we decide to take this course? What do we hope to learn?).
4. Assume students want to be there and are prepared.
5. Create and foster mutual respect in the classroom. And really, doing No. 4 is a big part of No. 5. Well, actually most of this list supports this one.
6. Recognize that sometimes life can get in the way of learning for students, so take the time to diagnose the problem (e.g., if a student is having trouble staying awake in class, it could be because they had to work overtime last night, not because they were out partying).
7. Hold all students to the same rigorous expectations.
8. Refrain from interrupting students to get a point across. We know that sometimes one of us can get long-winded and you may need to redirect; but we try not to interrupt you and it's really nice when you don't interrupt us.
9. Please don't feel you need to comment all the time in a full-class discussion. Sometimes we need you to guide the discussion, and sometimes we really don't need you every turn.
10. Listen to what students have to say.

I am so glad we took this chance to listen to what students had to say. There are heaps of wisdom here.

Of course, a different group of students would create a different list, and that's great. The point is that by talking together, and listening, the students, the graduate-student instructor, and I now have this framework to think about and work to create the kind of learning community we want to be.