

Engagement and Relevance: Meeting Students Where They Are

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Author Biography

Marsha Loda earned her PhD at Clemson University after a successful marketing career. She brings her practical experience to the classroom and to her research. She is associate professor in the Hull College of Business at Augusta University; in 2009 and again in 2019, she was presented the university's Outstanding Professor Award. She teaches digital marketing and recently initiated a Hospitality Certificate program. Her research interests include media credibility and Millennial marketing in tourism. Recent findings show significant differences between the younger and older segments of the Millennial cohort, especially concerning their use of Visitor Information Centers.

Goal of Activity

Teaching has always been important. However, depending on the type of institutions we serve, the mental energy of professors must often focus on disciplinary scholarship. Consequently, while we are contemplating the nuances of a recent academic symposium, our students are shooting pool at the student center and discussing the merits of the cafeteria's pizza. Suddenly, it is time for class and there is a meeting of the minds, so to speak. Or is there?

On what do our students' focus? When I was an undergraduate communications major, my focus was on my date for Saturday night, what my friends were doing, my ever-changing work schedule, and *then* school (and I was a magna cum laude graduate). I knew the importance of ethics, of voting and being reliable. Yet words like "terminal" and "significant" had very different connotations to me than to my college professors.

My point is that a foundational tenant of communication is to speak to your audience using *their* language. If knowledge were measured in feet and as professors we possess – say 100 feet of knowledge – do we expect that most people already understand 75 feet of what we know when they arrive in our classroom? They probably do not, especially if they are undergraduates. The goal of the following three activities is to help meet students *where they are*.

1. Remember what it was like when you didn't know

I am not suggesting we "dumb down" our lectures, but that we assume little background knowledge or subject lingo. Lecturing to students using terminal degree language is akin to a physician expecting you to understand your diagnosis of carotid endarterectomy in the same way he or she does - unless you are a doctor, of course...which is the point. Even *The New York Times* is written for the tenth grade level. (I asked my Notre Dame-grad husband to proofread this and he actually said, "What the @\$&# is a terminal degree." Yes, really.)

When explaining a new concept, picture yourself in your undergrad classroom and think, *what would have helped you understand at that time in your life?* I try to create examples the students relate to, and in their language. For example, on the first day of Consumer Behavior class, I take off my jacket to reveal a t-shirt that says "Cold Beer Makes You Smarter." The students snicker. I explain that the shirt succinctly summarizes the class: the importance of knowing your target market and constructing messages that resonate with them. (I include that if more than one beer is involved, the reverse action occurs!) Lastly, I pose this question: would a shirt saying, "orange juice makes you smarter" get the same classroom response? They get it. They remember it. They relate.

2. Guide students to teach themselves

Consumer trends tell us that younger generations spend a higher percentage of their discretionary assets on travel; they seem to crave experiences. So I give them the experience of “teaching” about half of each class period. With increasing technology, students sometimes question classroom relevance. If they need to know something, they can Google it or learn it online with LinkedIn Learning or other emerging, credible platforms. My role as professor is to make the textbook relevant. I do this by *requiring* their active involvement.

For example, for each chapter of a text, I lecture for approximately 20 minutes. I then turn the classroom over to three-to-five students who were assigned roles well in advance; all students turn in the assignments, but only 3-5 present formally. Assignments vary depending on the topic. Usually, all students must express the key point of a given chapter and why, with the understanding there is no right or wrong answer – just a key learning or “aha moment.” After one student presents his or her key point before the class, a discussion ensues about others’ key points. Next, the assignment may be to “assess the world around you, and find examples of chapter subject matter.” For instance, I lecture about television as one option for advertisers, including the criteria and appeals to increase a television ad’s success. Instead of showing great examples, students must find, show, and defend them. Who was the target market? What was the ad’s objective? Why was that creative approach used?

This, too, helps meet students where they are. Rarely would I pick their television ad examples, but because the students choose them, we spend class time on examples relevant to them. My job is to ensure their key points and examples are focused and accurate. Not only are students more engaged, they learn to see real life examples of academic subjects all around them. (Students often comment I have ruined their Super Bowl fun forever. They can’t enjoy the commercials for analyzing them.)

3. Think way outside the textbook

Textbooks are often written like academic journals by people with “terminal” degrees and with little appeal to college students. I not only supplement the text with relevant professional journals and industry certification materials, I even use (gasp) Hollywood. No matter your skills as a professor, no lecturer can help marketing students understand the Baby Boom generation better than the movie version of “Hair” (students say they think *very* differently about their grandparents!). Likewise, future hospitality managers are amazed at the complexity and nuances of wine after watching “Somm.” I am a good teacher, but I rarely *amaze* with my lectures. Carefully selected movies are another strategy to reach students where they are. When students are guided in advance of such an assignment with carefully crafted discussion questions, movies can deliver intelligent messages that resonate. Stay alert for any tools (even a t-shirt) that can drive home a message.

In summary, to better engage students in the classroom, let us meet them where they are. Remember, students only know a “few feet” of what we know. Feeding students with a firehose likely does not quench their thirst; rather, it probably just dampens their desire for learning. Because I observe that my students enjoy being active, I shorten my lecture and *require* their involvement in the classroom. Lastly, textbooks may be the backbone of my class, but the non-traditional materials are what make textbook concepts meaningful. I urge you to think about your end goal for students. What is the desired or usual outcome for an undergraduate degree in your discipline? Understand what students need to know to be successful after they leave your institution, then meet them where they are to propel their futures.

References

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