

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

(<http://m.chronicle.com/>)

ADVICE ([HTTP://M.CHRONICLE.COM/SECTION/ADVICE/66/?EIO=61142](http://M.CHRONICLE.COM/SECTION/ADVICE/66/?EIO=61142))

Sections

DO YOUR JOB BETTER ([HTTP://M.CHRONICLE.COM/SECTION/DO-YOUR-JOB-BETTER/72](http://M.CHRONICLE.COM/SECTION/DO-YOUR-JOB-BETTER/72))

It's the Little Things That Count in Teaching

Attention to the less 'serious' aspects can make you a more effective instructor

By Steven J. Corbett and Michelle LaFrance SEPTEMBER 09, 2013



Justin Renteria for The Chronicle

Line up course readings. Plan the syllabus. Design lesson plans and homework assignments. Those are some of the big-picture elements that we all fret over as college instructors preparing for the fall semester. But as teachers of writing and rhetoric, we've come to realize the crucial role of the (often overlooked) "little" things.

Attention to those peripheral details can lead to a much richer learning experience for

students and a much more enjoyable teaching experience for instructors.

Arrive to class early and linger afterward. Oh, the things you can hear and learn in just a few minutes before and after class. That is when important bonding and chat time can occur. A few suggestions:

- When you arrive in the classroom, check out the environment. If it is too hot or cold, adjust the thermostat, if possible. If you have windows and a decent view, let the sunshine in by opening the curtains or raising the blinds. (Steven often jokes with students that they've paid for that gorgeous view.)
- If you arrive early and have the technological capability in your classroom, have a fun YouTube or other video playing while students file in. (You can even start having them recommend "what's hot" or hilarious on the Internet.)
- Set the tone in the first few weeks by asking students what they do in their time outside of your class. Then remember to ask them about it: How is your job going? Is the broken ankle healing? Did you ace that chemistry test?
- Take your time packing up to leave. While most students are in a hurry to get out, some appreciate the teacher who sticks around. The stroll to the office with a student can be a valuable and efficient opportunity to chat.

Always perform with as positive an attitude as possible. Our words here are qualified and tentative. We say "perform" because all faculty members at some time or another in the classroom don't feel so great. (And some don't like teaching (<http://chronicle.com/article/I-Dont-Like-Teaching-There/139623>) at all but work hard in the classroom so that students don't realize that.)

But if you often come to class with an obviously negative demeanor, that can result in strained relationships with students and a poor learning environment.

Even if life happens to be handing us lemons at any given time, we should do our best not to let a sour attitude affect our teaching and our students' learning. Most students know that not all of us can be on our A-game all the time, but they appreciate our efforts not to let a bad day rub off on everyone else.

There's an interesting phenomenon we've witnessed again and again. How many times have you entered the classroom or begun a lesson plan and everyone appears languid, apathetic, or unmoving? That many? Us, too. But be patient. Entering the classroom is sometimes like entering a dark room with a lit candle. At first the room appears very dark and you cannot see much. But gradually the shadowy room fills with candlelight and objects become increasingly visible and identifiable. When you enter the classroom or start a new activity, give students a chance to warm up. Let the candlelight do its job.

Respond promptly to students' e-mail messages. We try to make our expectations clear in assignments and lesson plans, and we hold our requisite office hours, but we still get a great many questions through e-mail. Yes, the stream of messages can be irritating, if not overwhelming. But try to communicate with students in ways similar to how you would communicate with your close colleagues.

Adopt an e-mail policy that is as open and liberal as possible. Answering e-mail quickly and pleasantly is a great way to build rapport and trust.

Even something as simple as a quick reply that includes "Let's chat about this before or after class tomorrow" or "This is a great question that others in our class might benefit from, so ask it again on Thursday, OK?" can make students feel that you are listening to them and care about their concerns.

Surrender control from time to time. This is an important one. Students can often do more work, and complete it more autonomously, than we may give them credit for. Asking them to step up and take charge—to teach one another or share what matters most to them—is a way to connect with the knowledge and experiences they bring to the classroom.

It also brings benefits that we couldn't possibly orchestrate without these openings. Once, Steven asked if anyone would be willing to lead a class discussion. One of his more vocal students volunteered. The student who assumed the role of discussion leader also playfully assumed some of Steven's instructional demeanor and mannerisms as well—to the delight of the class. The humor that resulted may have facilitated a more memorable

realization of the goals for that discussion than Steven's more traditional, teacher-led orchestration. From then on, Steven often asked for a volunteer to lead discussion, with similar results.

(In fact, in relation to the bad-day advice, above, if you happen not to be feeling well for whatever reason, that's a great time to let the students take over and do some of the heavy intellectual lifting.)

A few other ways to consider loosening up:

- Allow students to eat or drink (and generally be merry) in class as long as it does not disrupt other students. (We frequently bring candy to class for motivational purposes.)
- Let students listen to music on headphones if the class is engaged in some individually focused activity. That may help those who have difficulty focusing in "public" environments or who need to control their own levels of stimulation.
- Rather than establish a no-cellphone policy, as so many professors do, have a "cell and smartphones welcome" policy, but with well-established ground rules. Many students actually take notes on their smartphones or use them to look up something that relates to the classroom activity. We have smartphones, too, and use them all the time (compulsive e-mail checking, anyone?).
- If you've covered everything you intended to in class, and you have some time left over, call it a day. Everyone loves to go home early on occasion.
- Similarly, if your class has collectively worked hard all term, take time to celebrate. Consider using the final day to acknowledge a job well done—perhaps a pizza party, a potluck, or some other lighthearted activity to go along with the final presentations.

Tell students what they have done well. It's often our goal to challenge students—to push them to excel in rigorous situations, to give 100 percent. When we focus intently on what they need to do better, we sometimes lose sight of what they are doing well. Little notes of recognition and encouragement go a long way toward keeping students engaged. Recognizing their efforts can help students feel capable of meeting the goals we've set.

Remember, sometimes it can be more work to be well-liked. If you try hard to create a classroom environment where people actually enjoy, or at least don't mind, coming to class, be prepared for more work. When students actually like you, they also begin to trust you. When you've earned that trust, they are much more likely to ask for recommendation letters or advice on classes, majors, and careers.

What sorts of memories do we want our students to have of their experiences with us? What do we reflect back on from our days and lives as teachers? If a big part of our jobs—and a sizable portion of our lives—occurs in the classroom, why not do what we can to make that time as fulfilling as possible?

Every so often, it's worthwhile to focus on the less "serious" aspects of teaching and learning—on the little things that, seriously, may not prove so little after all.

Steven J. Corbett is a visiting assistant professor of English at George Mason University, and Michelle LaFrance is an assistant professor of English and director of the Writing Across the Curriculum Program at the university.

Log In (<http://m.chronicle.com/account/login?goto=/article/Its-the-Little-Things-That/141489>)
Get Newsletters (</section/Newsletters/85>)

About The Chronicle (</section/About-the-Chronicle/83>)
Advertise (</section/Advertise/86>)
Contact Us (</section/Contact-Us/88/>)

Help (</section/help/87>)
Site Map (</sitemap>)
Privacy Policy (</article/Privacy-Policy/1612/>)
User Agreement (</article/User Agreement/47435/>)

Twitter (<http://twitter.com/chronicle>)
Facebook
(<http://www.facebook.com/chronicle.of.higher.education>)

Copyright © 2013 The Chronicle of Higher Education