

Discovering Opportunities: Major Challenges Higher Education Instructors Face in Teaching Under-Resourced Students

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Abstract

High quality educators are interested in not only transferring information to their students, but also in helping them succeed in life and career. This is challenging in any circumstance, but those teaching students raised in poverty face additional obstacles in the cultural differences between their students and the middle-class world of higher education. This paper identifies two of these differences, examines how, if not addressed could hinder students' progress. The paper, also introduces ideas of how the educator might address these problems.

Sometimes, teachers have the honor of being students. Last winter, the staff and faculty at the Kansas City Community College attended a seminar given by Bethanie Tucker, co-author of *Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students*.¹ Since the population we serve includes a large number of students who come from poverty, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college, the information was especially relevant and valuable.

Tucker, spoke of the resources that people have in various quantities and forms that aid or detract from their ability to accomplish what they want in life. We often think of the resource of finances, and this is important, but there are several other resources such as emotional health, a support system, and mental/cognitive abilities.

One resource that is especially elusive is knowledge of hidden rules. Different classes (as well as cultures, genders, races, etc.) follow different rules that work well for those who know them, but can be a barrier to those who do not. Using a broad paintbrush, recognizing that these are patterns and not necessarily accurate for every individual, Tucker covered some of the hidden rules of the three major economic classes in the United States: poverty, middle class, and wealth. As educators, we need to recognize these hidden rules so that we can teach them to our students, not because any class rules are better than another, but because the middle class rules are the rules followed in college and most professional workplaces. If this is where our students want to be, they need to learn the rules.

One hidden rule, for example, concerns time. In general (again, a pattern only) the present is most important for those in poverty. Tucker calls this the tyranny of the present. Decisions are based on the current feelings, perceived needs, or crises, so that it is difficult to consider and work for far distant future goals. For middle class Americans, the future is most important, so decisions today are based on future ramifications.

Each of these mindsets has advantages. A life lived entirely in the present will never be able to enjoy future security or achievement, but a life lived totally in the future will never enjoy all the beauty and joy of the moment. To help our students become bicultural, to help them achieve greater education and exercise more control over their own lives, we need to teach them strategies for planning ahead, setting goals and working toward them.

Another hidden rule, or rather set of rules, concerns oral and written communication. Inspired by Bethany Tucker's presentation, one of the first lessons I give my students at the beginning of the semester covers this important hidden rule. I teach them that most languages have at least five different registers, or levels of communication. During the lesson, I focus on the "formal/academic" register, which is appropriate in the classroom and most workplaces, and the "casual" register, which is appropriate around friends and family. To give the students some practice working in the formal register in the classroom rather than the casual register, I give them an in-class assignment. In groups of 2-3 they write a list of 10 casual phrases, then exchange lists with another group. They then translate the casual phrases into formal phrases. This is always a fun hour of class, and I am usually impressed with how well they tackle this assignment. Here are a few of my favorite translations:

Casual

1. I'm post'd on the block
2. Bouta see what's crackn
3. Whassup wit it
4. I'm out the way-way
5. I'm in traffic
6. RU mobile
7. What's the deal with yo BM
8. I'm doin a bill
9. My cell phone pinging
10. My pocket's hurtin

Formal

1. I'm over at my mom's house
2. I am going to call to see what everybody is doing
3. Is there a situation?
4. I am very far away at this time.
5. I'm busy at the moment
6. Do you have current transportation?
7. What is the matter with your child's mother?
8. I am going over the speed limit.
9. I have a lot of incoming calls.
10. Every day I am struggling.

This is a fun and useful lesson, and as I reinforce it throughout the semester, I watch my students become more and more comfortable operating in the formal language register in the classroom. Once they are adept at formal register, they can potentially access a greater range of communication skills than I, since I still struggle with fluency in the slang that many of my students use. I would be a disastrous failure in many of the social situations in which they must navigate daily.

The more difficult hidden rule to teach is how time is viewed. The first requirement in teaching this rule was for me to broaden my own understanding of time, to learn that the value I place on punctuality, creating and sticking to a schedule, and setting long-range goals, are not universal values, but instead culturally based.

I spoke with a woman who, along with teaching Spanish, has been trained and worked as an interpreter for several years. I asked her about what challenges she faces in interpreting across cultures as well as languages, and the first thing she shared was about the differences in the understanding of time. "In English and in America and industrialized nations, time is money, so it's important to be punctual for events," she shared, "in Central America, the idea is 'there's more time than life,' so it's considered acceptable to be an hour or one and a half hours late to a party."²

To expect my students who have recently moved to the United States from Central America to intuitively understand this and immediately change a life-time pattern to fit their new culture would be unrealistic and frustrating for all of us. Likewise, to expect my students who have always lived primarily in the present to know how to set, plan for, and diligently work toward long-range goals without extensive one-on-one advising sets them up for failure.

In our department at KCKCC, students are required to attend a two-day long orientation where we cover many of the ground rules and expectations, including punctuality and daily attendance. We then talk through it again with the students in a one-on-one advising session, asking them which life obstacles may interfere with attendance. They then sign an attendance agreement that specifically states which days and at what times classes meet. Lest they wonder whether these rules are arbitrary, we also provide them with a list of advantages to arriving to class on time everyday. For most of our students, this is sufficient, and they arrive on time or early from day one. The few that still struggle with punctuality receive at least one more one-on-one advising session that is more conversational than lecture-style. The goal is to help the students

identify for themselves the problem and its root cause, and we come along beside them to discover solutions.

To help them plan for the future, each of our students is assigned an instructor advisor who meets with him regularly to identify long-range goals and develop a detailed plan to achieve those goals. We then help the student track milestones and reward her for achievements along the way.

This sounds like a time-consuming task, and indeed it is. The difference it makes in engaging, empowering, and retaining students, though, is well worth the investment.

If I see my job as extending beyond merely handing them fact-based knowledge about a class's specific subject matter and instead understand my role as one of many guides there to help them identify and reach their life goals, I must make the extra effort to teach them to navigate the cultures of higher education and business in the United States.

The more aware I am of the unconscious assumptions I make, the more effective I am at teaching and advising my students. Just as important, the more I develop relationships with my students, the more I learn about other cultures, other ways of viewing and understanding the world, so that I broaden my horizon and gain insight into the beauty and possibilities in life.

WORKS CITED

¹Karen A. Becker, et al., Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students: A Fresh Look at Economic Class and Its Influence on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. (Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc., 2009)

²Jeanine Noguera, Personal interview, 26 Aug. 2010.