MENTORING NEW FACULTY: A STUDENT EXERCISE DESIGNED TO ENHANCE STUDENT-FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

An essential aspect of mentoring goes beyond just addressing the mental or scholarship dimension of a new faculty member. It involves providing guidance and suggestions for developing relationships within the university community. Specifically, helping new faculty achieve social/emotional acceptance by the students is an important aspect of mentoring. The current sensitivity to the diversity issue mandates that universities find new and effective ways to truly help new faculty members become assimilated into its community. Successfully doing so provides an atmosphere of trust and respect for new faculty members. In turn this facilitates their intellectual growth while providing an environment that encourages development as a competent researcher and excellent teacher. Mentoring on relationship development permits individuals of different race, color, creed, gender and ethnic background to freely express themselves. As a result, others can acquire a deeper appreciation and understanding of the diversity this individual brings to the university and how this diversity can enrich the academic community.

This paper discusses a method senior faculty have suggested to new faculty to develop student-faculty relationships. The method involves a student exercise developed and successfully implemented for new faculty members to gain preliminary acceptance by students in their classes. Students participate in an exercise called “Who Is This Professor?” Small student groups prepare several questions they would like to ask of the professor. The questions usually cover different areas to include the academic, professional, personal, and social background of the new faculty member. Each group then asks one of its questions and the faculty member extemporaneously answers it. After several questions students begin to develop appreciation for the professor as a unique human being who has more to offer than just excellent instruction on the course content. Candid and sincere responses by the professor begin the critical process of developing mutual trust, and respect so essential for success in the teaching component of the professor’s academic career.
Introduction

The successful integration of a new untenured faculty member into the university community requires mentoring beyond the traditional interpretation of that word. Mentoring usually implies offering guidance, advice and support in those areas necessary to secure tenure. The focus of such mentoring normally addresses the scholarship aspects and related activities required to enhance one's dossier so it contains the right credentials when the university makes the critical tenure decision.

Tenure stream assistant professors indicated that one of the main reasons they stay at their current universities is “good or positive work environment”. Developing good relationships with colleagues and students is an important component of a good work environment. Also “having a mentor” was the top answer to the question “what kind of assistance is appropriate to help you stay in your current position?” The mentor is expected to encourage, assist, cajole, and provide guidance as the new faculty member begins the journey to tenure.

If we want our new faculty to become productive in research and effective at teaching within their first 1–2 years, we should be proactive in helping them rather than allowing their development to proceed entirely by trial and error. Effectiveness in teaching is not possible without developing mutual trust and respect with students.

One paramount requirement for developing any meaningful relationship is trust. When trust exists between individuals and/or groups the result is a synergistic relationship capable of producing much more than the efforts of any one of the individuals in the relationship. Information flows freely between all parties and the ensuing dialogue promotes commitment, ownership, enthusiasm and deep interest in the topic(s) of mutual benefits.

To be an effective professor, faculty, especially new faculty, must take the initiative to find ways to establish trust with their students beginning on the very first day of class. Many times faculty are so intent on getting started with the course content they overlook the critical need to begin establishing a positive rapport with the students. Investing a small amount of time on the first day of class with the student exercise described in this paper can pay great dividends for both the students and faculty member. The specific exercise begins the process of establishing trust with the students by having them learn some interesting information about the professor teaching them the class.

For any relationship to successfully germinate a certain amount of "vulnerability" must initially occur on the part of one of the parties in the relationship. In a classroom environment it is natural for this "vulnerability" to occur on the part of the faculty member. Faculty are more knowledgeable, mature and at a minimum risk (not needing a grade for the course) compared to the students. Consequently, the focus of this exercise involves the faculty member taking the initiative to encourage the students to ask him/her several questions. This is accomplished following the format for the suggested exercise in this paper.
Concept Development and Implementation

The student exercise evolved, as the authors discussed, specific ways to "fast track" the relationship development aspect of mentoring new faculty. The concept is a derivative of the significant seminar presentation experience of the authors. Gaining immediate acceptance by an unknown audience is crucial for a presenter if he/she to effectively deliver their material. The same is true for professors in a classroom environment. An integration of various seminar techniques and trust building exercises led to the development of student exercise in this paper. Each author provided input into simplifying and modifying the original seminar approach making it fit into an academic classroom-learning environment.

One of the goals of the authors required the academic version needed to be simple, easily applied, and not intimidating to either the faculty or students. The title given this exercise is "Who Is This Professor?" with the acronym of "WIT-P" assigned to it. Students generally stand somewhat in awe of the professor and accord them the respect of their position. Similarly, many times the students have a certain amount of reservation and fear of the professor who ultimately has "position power" over them in the form assigning final grades for the course.

From an implementation perspective WIT-P works best on the first day of class. However, it can be administered any time during the first week of class as the schedule permits. On the first day and after going over the required organization, administrative, and grading requirements for the course the professor informs the students of the exercise. He/she does not elaborate on what is involved in it. The time to be allotted for this experience is about one half-hour but this is also a function of how many students are in the class. The professor tells the students they will be working in groups of three on a short exercise. The professor states it is necessary they know something about him/her and the exercise is designed to provide that information. The professor tells them of an additional benefit namely implicit in the exercise the development of an effective classroom environment conducive to the students learning the course material.

At this point the professor simply writes on the board "Who Is This Professor?" In clarifying this statement the professor tells the students that in order to obtain the answer to this question they must ask him some questions. The professor notes the questions can be either personal or professional in nature. The questions should also help satisfy the curiosity many of the students have regarding them. The student groups are given about five minutes to think of several questions they would like to pose to the professor. Once the time is up the professor asks one group to state their question. Upon hearing the question the professor repeats it so every one in the class understands it. The professor proceeds to candidly, honestly and openly provides their response to the group's question offering as much detail as appropriate.

After answering the first question of the initial group the professor asks them if the response was adequate or in need of further explanation or clarification. Once the first group is satisfied with the response the professor moves to the second group for their first question. The method and format for responding is very similar to that of the first group. This process continues until at least one question is answered from each group. This ensures all the students feel included in the exercise. Depending on the time available the professor can go back to the second question of each group. Many times the different groups thought of the same question to ask the professor as
was asked by a previous group. In those instances the second question or another one not yet asked is selected by the student group and presented by the professor. At the end of the session the professor thanks the students and asks them to complete a questionnaire.

The WIT-P concept has been implemented in two courses so far at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown (UPJ). The courses are Engineering Statics and Strength of Materials. The Engineering Statics is a sophomore level course taken by all engineering technology disciplines (Civil, Electrical, and Mechanical). The Statics class was taught by a senior tenured faculty and it contained fourteen (14) students. The Strength of Materials class is also a sophomore level course. Only Civil and Mechanical Engineering Technology students take this course and it contained thirty (30) students. The Strength of Materials class was taught by a junior un-tenured faculty member originally from the Middle East.

Concept Analysis and Evaluation

The questions addressed to the junior faculty covered different areas including the academic, professional, personal, and social background of the new faculty member as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Personal and Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What are your hobbies?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Where are you originally from?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Why and when did you come to the US?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What type of car do you drive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Are you married? Children?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What are the main cultural differences?</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· How are you and your family adapting to living in the US?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Where and when did you receive your degrees?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Why did you choose civil engineering?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· What do like about teaching?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· How different is it teaching here compared to teaching overseas?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Cultural Differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Popular sports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Treatment of women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· The Islamic faith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Weather and Food</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The events of September 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Your reaction to what happened on 9-11-01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· How do feel towards the ones responsible?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Do you support the US in its war?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· How did your life change since September 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· How do people treat you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. US-Middle East Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· How do Middle Easters feel about America?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Media perceptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Religion and The conflicts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows the general question categories and the most frequent questions asked. The following observations can be made:

- About one-third of the questions were of personal nature. This indicates the strong curiosity on the students’ part to learn more about this new professor as a human being and his life outside the classroom.
- The students were also interested in knowing information about the professor’s education including degrees received and experiences.
- One in every four questions had to do with the professor’s culture and country of origin and how those differ from the United States. Students seemed to enjoy this part the most since some of the cultural differences are surprising to some and at times seem funny.
- More than one-third of the questions were related to the events of September 11 and the US foreign policies and US relations with the Middle East. The professor gave his personal perspective as a human being hoping for peace to prevail all over the world. He stressed that he does not have answers to all the political questions because he is not a politician but simply a civil engineer.

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the exercise to obtain feedback from students on the concept and implementation of WIT-P. A copy of the actual form can be found in Appendix A. The questionnaire consisted of six (6) sections: the first section included two general questions about the students’ academic level (freshman, sophomore etc) and whether or not they had this professor in other classes.

Figure 1 shows that all students in the Statics course did not had the professor before in any class while about one-third of the Strength of Material class had the professor in another course.
Table 2 summarizes the students’ responses to the rest of questions in the questionnaire except question six (6). The percent of maximum score has been used to quantify this response. The maximum score is the number when all students select “Definitely Yes” which has a value of five (5) as their response in favor of the idea in question (i.e. maximum score = 150 for a class of 30 students). The number between parentheses is the average score on a scale 1 to 5 with (5) being the maximum score in favor of the idea in the same question.

Table 2: Summary of Students’ Response to questions 2 to 5 of the Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Question Statement</th>
<th>% Of Maximum Score</th>
<th>Average response on a 1-5 scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering Statics</td>
<td>Strength of Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Did you and your group find it easy to think of a question to ask the professor?</td>
<td>90 (4.50)</td>
<td>85 (4.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Did the various questions from the different groups cover a wide range of subjects?</td>
<td>79 (3.95)</td>
<td>95 (4.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Did the responses by the professor give you new insights and understanding of him/her?</td>
<td>97 (4.85)</td>
<td>97 (4.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-a</td>
<td>Do you feel you have a greater appreciation and respect for the diversity this professor brings to your class and the university?</td>
<td>93 (4.65)</td>
<td>92 (4.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-b</td>
<td>Do you feel this exercise will permit you to be more open with the professor in/out of class?</td>
<td>83 (4.15)</td>
<td>87 (4.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-c</td>
<td>Do you feel this exercise was important to begin establishing a rapport with you and the class?</td>
<td>86 (4.30)</td>
<td>82 (4.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-d</td>
<td>Did this exercise increase your confidence in this professor as someone who cares about you and the class?</td>
<td>96 (4.8)</td>
<td>91 (4.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-e</td>
<td>Do you feel this exercise increased the trust you have for this professor?</td>
<td>87 (4.35)</td>
<td>87 (4.35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following comments can be made on the results of Table 2:

- The majority of students (average score 87.5%) felt it was easy to think of a question to ask the professor. Thinking of a question to ask the junior faculty with different cultural background seemed a little more challenging.

- It appears the various questions from the different groups covered a wide range of subjects especially in the Strength of Materials class. The new faculty is closer to students’ age and that may have encouraged them to ask about a variety of subjects.

- Almost all students strongly agreed the responses by the professor gave new insights and understanding of him.
Students with a high score (92%) indicated they had a greater appreciation and respect for the diversity the new professor brings to their class and the university.

The majority of students also indicated the exercise will permit them to be more open with the professor in/out of class. The relatively lower score may indicate that students feel it takes more than this exercise to get them to become open with their professors. Time and approachability of the professor are perhaps among other factors involved in building honest and open relationship with students.

Again the majority of students felt this exercise was important to begin establishing a rapport with them and the class.

The vast majority of students (score 93.5%) indicated the exercise did increase their confidence in the professor as someone who cares about them and the class regardless of the professor or the class. In addition, most students felt the WIT-P exercise have increased the trust they have for the professor.

Students’ response to question six (6) of the questionnaire is illustrated in Figure 2. Overall, the majority of student indicated that “Yes” the time spent on this exercise was worth it.

The final part of the questionnaire involved optional written response by the students. Some students made written comments expressing their support for the WIT-P concept and its implementation. The comments can be found in Appendix B.
Conclusions

The development of the exercise “Who Is This Professor” by senior faculty members and the implementation by a new faculty, as described in this paper, proved helpful for the new faculty member to achieve acceptance by his students. This is an important, critical and successful aspect of mentoring.

The exercise promotes a cross-cultural understanding and valuing of the differences a new faculty member brings to the university. Mentoring new faculty in performing exercises such as this, assists new faculty members in their ability to develop relationships with their students.

The feedback from students revealed a strong reaction in favor of the concept and its implementation. The exercise achieved a number of important results. Students strongly agreed that the exercise

- gave them *new insights and understanding of the professor.*
- allowed them to have *a greater appreciation and respect for the diversity* the new professor brings to their class and the university.
- will permit them to be *more open with the professor* in/out of class.
- was *important to begin establishing a rapport* with them and the class.
- *increased their confidence in the professor* as someone who cares about them and the class.
- *time spent was definitely worth it.*

The results show that this exercise with a class helps the professor to establish the “connection” or “soft side” aspects necessary for the learning experience to be transformational rather than just transactional in nature. (5)

On a very personal note, the junior author felt an immediate acceptance, camaraderie, and positive chemistry with his students as a result of this exercise. The junior author enjoyed the opportunity of sharing his background and culture with the students. He felt the exercise helped significantly to eliminate many potential barriers between him and his students.

This exercise has also been an effort by the authors to address the challenge of creating a more inclusive and welcoming campus community in which everyone feels valued and accepted. The authors believe this exercise represents a concrete, tangible and practical manifestation of the spirit of UPJ’s diversity statement currently being reviewed under the personal direction and guidance of Dr. Albert Etheridge, President of University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown.
References


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Appendix A: WIT-P Questionnaire

University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown – Engineering Technology

"WHO IS THIS PROFESSOR?"

QUESTIONNAIRE

Course Name: ____________  Academic Level: ___ Fr. ___ So. ___ Jr. ___ Sr.

Please answer each of the questions below based on your perception of the value of this exercise. Please circle your response to each question. The range of responses are from "1" meaning "Definitely No" to "5" meaning "Definitely Yes".

1. Did you have this professor in any other class(es)?  NO  YES

2. Did you and your group find it easy to think of a question to ask the professor?  1  2  3  4  5

3. Did the various questions from the different groups cover a wide range of subjects?  1  2  3  4  5

4. Did the responses by the professor give you new insights and understanding of him/her?  1  2  3  4  5

5. After the professor answered all of the questions:

   a. Do you feel you have a greater appreciation and respect for the diversity this professor brings to your class and the university?  1  2  3  4  5
   
   b. Do you feel this exercise will permit you to be more open with the professor in/out of class?  1  2  3  4  5
   
   c. Do you feel this exercise was important to begin establishing a rapport with you and the class?  1  2  3  4  5
   
   d. Did this exercise increase your confidence in this professor as someone who cares about you and the class?  1  2  3  4  5
   
   e. Do you feel this exercise increased the trust you have for this professor?  1  2  3  4  5

6. Overall, was the time spent on this exercise worth it in your opinion?  1  2  3  4  5

Please provide any written comments you have regarding this exercise and its value in helping establish a positive rapport between you and the professor.

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Students Comments

“Exercise was good more professors should be encouraged to do it”

“A better relationship with the professor makes for better learning”

“Unlike most professors, he took time to be open with us and show us that he care instead of just starting class”

“I was surprised to see the professor make himself so vulnerable and answer our questions openly and honestly”

“The exercise was beneficial because it helped me look at the professor as a human being much like my self. This helps to establish some common ground between myself and the professor”

“I found it a very good idea. I think all professors should go through it—even the ones from our own country. I felt that it was a good start for both the professor and students”

“This exercise, for me, gave me a better understanding of Dr. Murad personal life away from school. Like his family and hobbies. I already had full confidence in him in his knowledge as a professor and he already earned my trust as a student”

“I feel better and respect the professor more in knowing some background about him. I also respect the diversity he brings to the class and the university”

“I feel this should be done with every professor. As a transfer student, a couple of years ago, I was just thrown into classes without knowing who is teaching me”

“I believe it helped myself understand him more as a person not just a professor that he is in no way different from the rest of us just because he was from another culture”

“I think this was very important and interesting. I have much better understanding people from the Middle East and I am eager to learn more. This was definitely worth it”

“I feel that this exercise was very worth it. It opens a lot of doors and made the atmosphere a more open one. It, I think, will bring better student teacher relationship”

“I learned a lot of interesting concepts from this exercise that I otherwise wouldn't have learned elsewhere”

“I believe this is a good method to establish a relationship with a professor you do not know”

“I feel this really helps people. I find that people are afraid of what they do not understand and this is a way for us to gain understanding”

“I had professor Murad before, but now I feel that I personally know a lot about him. Very good exercise that meant a lot to me in regards to learning more about my professor”