

THE PROFESSOR/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP: KEY FACTORS IN MINORITY STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract/Resume

Aboriginal university students in Alaska were in serious danger of failing an introductory course. The author, a clinical psychologist, tested the students for learning styles. She then instituted a remedial program with more of a social component than academic content. The results were dramatic and beneficial for the students.

Quelques étudiants universitaires autochtones en Alaska risquaient d'échouer un cours d'introduction. L'auteur, une psychologue clinique, a fait subir aux étudiants une interrogation de contrôle en styles de savoir. Ensuite, elle a institué un programme de rattrapage avec plus d'un composant social qu'un contenu scolaire. Les résultats étaient dramatiques et avantageux pour les étudiants.

Introduction

University courses, like public school curricula, are products of a macrosystem whose ultimate purpose is to transmit mainstream culture. For many minority students there is neither intrinsic value nor extrinsic motivation for learning the content material in university courses. As a result, for their motivation, many minority students rely heavily on the personal relationship that exists between themselves and the cultural agent who transmits the material.

This paper deals specifically with the issue of professor/student relationships in a study conducted at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. The study began in 1990 when I taught an ethnically and racially mixed group of 96 students in an introductory psychology course. We met three times a week in an overcrowded, impersonal classroom, where I attempted to deliver the course content through traditional lectures and occasional class discussions. Once a week student progress was evaluated through a short written quiz. From my records, it soon became obvious that at least twenty-three students were not grasping the material, and were indeed failing desperately. I invited these students to take part in make-up classes.

At our first make-up session, I discovered that twenty of the failing students were self-identified as either Alaska Native or Canadian Indian. The make-up classes took the form of informal early morning sessions over coffee, hot chocolate and muffins, where discussions focussed on the personal lives of the students and on me. In this social setting students became friends with each other and with me. *Course content was not discussed at all during these sessions.*

The exclusion of course content was not deliberate at first. However, as the group continued to meet, I soon found that there was a more desperate need for fellowship and affiliation than there was for course remediation. This informal agenda was in fact a means of enhancing academic performance.

During our first get-together I took time to introduce myself personally and I invited the students to ask personal questions of me. This was my first semester as a visiting professor in Alaska. I was far away from my home, from my children and from support systems that I had previously had. It was these personal areas that students focussed upon in this invited questioning of me and my life. They wanted to know if I was lonesome, if I was able to talk to my children on the phone, if I wrote to them regularly - all questions which I sensed were important in their own lives at that time. I soon found that not only were students interested in getting to know me personally, but they wanted me to know them in the same way. Drawing from my own background in confluent education, and from the work of

George I. Brown (1990), I began to facilitate a series of interpersonal communications exercises. I had students speak to each other in dyads, and then in groups of four. I asked them to focus on their personal lives. They were to interview each other about their families, their close friends and their communities. Members of each group then took turns introducing each other to the larger group.

For most of the students in these "catch-up" sessions, this was their first time away from home. Many of them came from small and isolated Alaskan villages, others from remote Canadian communities in the Yukon. They did not know other students on campus and they seemed to need this semi-formalized way of initiating new friendships. They showed excitement and enthusiasm for this process of interaction and asked that I continue the process. For the remainder of the semester we met from 7:30 until 8:30 every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning. Some sessions were structured with communications exercises, others were simply informal gatherings where students met in groups to talk with each other and with me. Students maintained an attendance rate of 100% for the duration of the sessions.

An obvious change began to take place both in the classroom behaviour of the "catch-up" students and in their quiz scores. As rapidly as one week after the early morning meetings began, students began asking questions in class, they could be seen working in the library and studying in the Rural Students' lounge area. Of the twenty students who attended the catch-up class, all raised their marks. In the 3 quizzes following the onset of these sessions, marks ranged from 13 to 15 out of a possible 15. By the end of the semester, not only did all Alaska Native and Canadian Indian students in the study meet the course requirements but all received grades of A.

These results prompted me to look more closely at the inter and intrapersonal needs of the students, and to begin interviewing them about their views on education. This resulting research further validated the findings that for many minority students, course content is learned almost as an aside to personal and human contact with the bearer of the message.

Background Information

The Alaska State Legislative Committee on School Performance cites a 60 percent dropout rate among Native students at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. In 1980, less than 4 percent of the Alaska Native population over 25 years of age had completed four or more years of college. This compares with 24 percent among non-Natives (Kleinfeld, Goruch and Kerr,

1988).

The *Report on the Status of Alaska Natives: A Call for Action* (Alaska Federation of Natives, 1989) states that "Native children... exit village schools with serious educational handicaps" (*Ibid.*:68). In a later report, Senator Hensley observes that "...too many of those [high school seniors] who do graduate... will enter upon college work, find that they are unprepared, and drop out in their freshman year (1989:1).

Non-Native educators on all levels have an easy answer when questioned about Native student dropout rates. Their response usually boils down to "They were not prepared before they came to us." The validity of this response is strongly refuted in Wilson (1989; 1991). In both accounts, Dakota students in Manitoba were shown to have been very adequately prepared in Reserve schools to handle competing academic roles. They were, however, unprepared to face racism, large classes, dysfunctional counselling, and lack of interaction with both their teachers and their mainstream classmates. Although standardized educational test scores and psychological testing showed Native students to be well prepared and well adjusted while at the Reserve school, this sense and display of well-being did not transfer with them as they encountered alien and often hostile learning environments. It appears that this same sense of alienation is present when Indigenous minority students move from village and rural high schools in Alaska and northern Canada to the University of Alaska in Fairbanks.

The Methodology

With the aid of a university research grant¹ I was able to use the background information that I had gleaned from the experience of working closely with the small group of introductory psychology students to look more broadly at the whole area of professor/student relationships and at the effects that these relationships have on minority student achievement (particularly in this case, on Alaska Native, American and Canadian Indian students). Through extensive interviews with 60 students, randomly chosen throughout the undergraduate program in the College of Rural Alaska - a department within the University of Alaska - I was able to gain valuable information which I believe sheds a great deal of light on the attrition rate of many minority students, particularly those of Indigenous or Aboriginal backgrounds.

Using the basic premises of ethnographic interviewing described by Spindler and Spindler (1987:18-20), I sought information from those most directly affected by and involved in the relationship, the students them-

selves. Although ample statistical evidence exists to support the need for intervention that will enable Native students to be heard, seldom have they been consulted. And as Jeffrey Schultz (1989) states, that omission signifies a large gap in the literature on anthropological and ethnographic studies on schooling. He believes that *the perspective of the learner is absent*. The ethnographic interviews in this study bring that perspective to bear.

In addition to interviews, I also administered the *Personal Learning Styles Inventory* (Kolb, 1976) to the sixty students (see Appendix). Very early into the interviewing, noticeable patterns began to emerge.

Differences Between Ethnic Groups

Of the 60 students who took the Learning Styles Inventory, 28 referred to themselves as Alaska Native, Aleut, Hispanic, Yupik Eskimo, or North American Indian. The remainder of the students referred to themselves as WASP, Caucasian, White, or American. Of the 28 minority students who completed the inventory, 23 scored highest in the category referred to as Active Experimentation (AE) (see Table 1). A high score in Active Experimentation indicates an active, "doing" orientation to learning, which relies heavily on experimentation. High AE individuals learn best when they can engage in such activities as projects or small-group discussions. They dislike passive learning situations, such as lectures.

Table 1: Distribution of Student Learning Styles Within Specific Racial Cultural Groups

Learning Style	Aboriginal Students ¹	%	Non-Aboriginal Students ²	%
Concrete Experience	5	17.85	8	25.00
Abstract Conceptualization	0	-	11	34.37
Active Experimentation	23	82.15	10	31.25
Reflective Observation	0	-	3	9.375

¹ Students who *referred to themselves* as Alaska Native, Aleut, Hispanic, Yupik Eskimo or North American Indian.

² Students who *referred to themselves* as WASP, CAucasian, White or American.

The second highest score for the minority group was that of Concrete Experience (CE). A high score on Concrete Experience, according to the inventory used, represents a receptive, experience-based approach to learning, which relies heavily upon feelings-based judgements. High CE individuals tend to be empathetic and people-oriented. They generally find theoretical approaches to be unhelpful, preferring to treat each situation as a unique case. The inventory claims that this group of people learn best from specific examples in which they can become involved. Individuals who emphasize CE tend to be oriented more to peers than to authority in their approach to learning, and they benefit most from feedback and discussion with fellow CE learners.

Of the 32 mainstream students who completed the survey, there appeared to be no one outstanding learning pattern. Eleven scored highest on the Abstract Conceptualization scale (AC). This indicates an analytical, conceptual approach to learning, which relies heavily on logical thinking and rational evaluation. High AC individuals tend to be oriented more to things and symbols than to people. They learn best in authority-directed, impersonal learning situations that emphasize theory and systematic analysis. They are frustrated by and benefit little from less structured/directed "discovery" learning approaches, such as exercises and simulations.

The results of these surveys alone appear to me to indicate that professors must look at teaching styles that will involve minority students in their classrooms in concrete experimental learning experiences. They must come out from behind their podiums and make contact with their students if they want to reduce the attrition rate of minority students.

The Importance of Relationships

The ethnographic interviews yielded a wealth of information and that information clearly indicated the significance of the quality of the interaction that students had with their professors. Although only 28 of the 60 students who were interviewed were self-identified as being Indigenous, every one of the twenty-eight referred to relationships with teachers and professors as important. A student from a small isolated northern community referred to a negative experience that he was having, "I don't really like the professor, I don't really care about him, and I don't like the distance and the big crowd in the classroom and so it just turns me off to the class." Another student interpreted the lack of relationship between professors and students as the professors' lack of caring, "In so many of the classes, I really have no relationship with the professor. It's very sterile. What I know of the professor is what I see up in front of the room and that's it. What you hear

is their lectures, you don't know anything about the person. It's so impersonal. But then I guess that's because they don't care."

Students spoke often of good relationships with teachers in their villages as a strong contributing factor in their decision to come to the University of Alaska at Fairbanks (UAF). In contrast, they saw limited relationships with professors as a contributing factor in their lack of success there. The description of relationships that students referred to can be divided into two main categories, those of accessibility, approachability and availability, on the one hand, and an ability to show genuine, human caring on the other hand.

Accessibility, Approachability and Availability

One of the students said, "Some of the professors say they are willing to help you, but for them that means simply posting office hours. They seem bothered or in a rush if you do go to see them and you can tell that they are uncomfortable. And that makes me uncomfortable and it makes me not care if I do well in their classes." Another added to this statement by saying that "I like a professor that I can stop in the middle of something and say, 'What are you talking about? I don't understand.' And she makes you feel that that is alright, that you don't have to be afraid, because if you didn't understand then probably others didn't either. The teacher has to be approachable for that to happen."

That same approachability was described in a number of ways. One student who had experience with her professors *not* being approachable described the approachability and accessibility that she would like to see as "someone who is willing to see a different perspective. Being open minded enough to see a difference and being willing to accept that or reject it, whichever way, I mean you don't have to be open-armed about it, but it sure makes a difference when a professor will at least hear someone with another point of view." Students said that they felt comfortable with professors who could accept more than one point of view. They said that this flexibility and accessibility to a variety of views put them at ease and made them feel more creative. "When I know that I can take risks, I try all kinds of different ways of expressing myself. But when a professor has a narrow-minded view and can only accept one way of answering or only one answer, it shuts down all the other learning that can happen."

Students spoke of times when they had tried to make the first move by approaching professors who seemed unapproachable, because they knew that making connections could make the difference between their success or their failure in certain courses. They described the difficulties that they

had experienced in trying to initiate these connections: "I remember walking to his office like five times, going to his door, and I couldn't knock. I couldn't do it. It was so scary. I didn't know what he was going to say. All I knew was that his name was Professor X, but I didn't know what kind of a person he was. He never did meet me, I never did meet him." This accessibility was also seen as availability; availability that could be shown in human ways. This was stated clearly by a student who said, "I would like professors to be more available, more willing to meet the students' needs. I don't just mean by having office hours. I mean by really being there for students." Still another said, "There is a big difference between a professor who is there physically, and one who is there physically, emotionally and spiritually. It seems like many professors sit at their desks just to fill in the necessary time. They don't really want to make contact with students. As soon as I can sense that, I make sure that the professor doesn't have to be bothered by me." This accessibility, approachability and availability was seen as manifesting itself through a modelling of genuine caring.

Genuineness and Caring

Being available for students was not, in and of itself enough without being accompanied by genuineness and an ability to show that genuineness by caring for students. One way that students felt that professors did not show genuineness was through the use of titles. Students saw titles as masks, masks to the real person of the professor. They said that often professors did not seem real, and as one of them said, "For me personally, being real is real important. Being human, not being above the students. Not being Doctor Somebody. Often even having to use the title makes a distance. I feel much closer to professors who don't *need* to use their titles but who refer to themselves by their first names and who let students know that they don't want that barrier."

The minority students interviewed placed a great deal of emphasis on that whole human element. They said that some of their professors seemed almost superhuman, without emotions, and that without those visible emotions it was hard for them to feel the connections to their professors which they so very much wanted and needed. Students looked for areas in the personal lives of their professors with which they could identify; areas which they could connect with in some way. If they could not find these areas, it affected how they learned and how much they learned from the professor, "Even just knowing the teachers makes me learn differently. Then they don't just seem like just another person. It makes a big difference, knowing them personally. When they are teaching to hear them talk about

little parts of their lives. It makes it so much more interesting if they relate it to their life. We get to know them and they get to know us and then we learn it better." Another student said, "If a professor comes into class and tells us about her little baby that is sick at home, I know that she is worried about her baby. Then I know that she has feelings. Then I know that she can care about me too. And then it seems worthwhile to listen to her, and learn about what she is teaching."

Making Connections

Not all student responses were negative. By obtaining access to student records I was able to identify professors whose classes appeared to have consistent success rates with Indigenous students. Still others had consistent failure rates. I was curious to see if student responses to the classes would contain any consistent answers. Again I found that students felt that their success in some classes was directly related to their relationship with their professors.

In many cases the Alaska Native, American and Canadian Indian students, both male and female, referred to female faculty who had shown their humanness and caring in ways that made students feel cared about, feel important. Because of these feelings they wanted to learn and wanted to succeed, "In a couple of my classes I have women professors who let you see their humanness. You see who they are. You know, what their fears are, what their life has been like. They are special, I don't get that in my other classes. For them I want to learn."

In some ways students appeared more at ease communicating with female faculty; faculty who could show their infallibilities, their human frailties and still maintain strict academic standards: "Not only would she talk to us but we talked to her and sometimes we argued or disagreed with her. We knew that she knew how to control it. And we knew that she expected the highest quality of work from us. It was just different, being able to really approach a professor." About this same professor, students went on to say "She made us feel like valuable human beings, that we had ideas and opinions besides what we're learning in university. She made contact with us." And of one of the male professors who was experiencing success with minority students in his classes, they said "There is a willingness for him to come close to the students. Not the buddy-ole-pal-type of close, but close enough where you can go and talk to him. He is a personable person, willing to let us get to know him and wanting to know us. It helps us to learn." Finally a very revealing statement that was made by many students and which indicates the importance of the nature of the

relationship between students and professors was stated clearly by one Aleut student who said, "I would hate to disappoint the professors that showed that they cared about me, by getting a bad grade, because if I got a bad grade in their classes, it will also reflect on their teaching."

Conclusion

I believe, as does Cross (1989), that the quality of student learning is directly related to the quality of instruction, and that professors need to know how their students can best learn in their classrooms. Hopefully this study will help professors (who teach not only Indigenous students, but all students) to look at the effects of their interactions with students and to make necessary changes or to feel confidence in a job well done.

Educators need to understand, to have the cultural knowledge and awareness to sensitize themselves into giving effective caring instruction, and to fit their knowledge into the value system of their students. Vygotsky would say that unless students are invested in the process, unless they have an active role in the process, and unless they perceive certain cultural values in the process, they will not learn. Learning, he would say, is grounded in the very culture in which people function (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). What better reason for linking instructional effectiveness with cultural awareness?

For many students teaching and learning is a reciprocal agreement. When professors really care about their students, and when they show that caring in respectful, humane and caring ways, their students, particularly those who have been steeped in the traditions of their Indigenous cultures, return that caring and respect in concrete and creative ways.

Note

1. I wish to express my gratitude to the University of Alaska Grants Commission for funding this research project.

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APPENDIX

The Learning-Style Inventory (LSI) is a simple self-description test founded upon experiential-based learning theory designed to measure an individual's particular strengths and weaknesses as a learner. Experiential learning is conceived as a four-stage cycle:

- (1) immediate concrete experience is the basis for
- (2) Observation and reflection;
- (3) these observations are assimilated into a "theory", from which new implications for action can be deduced;
- (4) these implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences.

The most effective learner relies on all four different learning modes of the Inventory:

Concrete Experience (CE);
Reflective Observation (RO);
Abstract Conceptualization (AC); and
Active Experimentation (AE).

That is, the person must be able to become involved fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE); must be able to reflect on and observe these experiences from many perspectives (RO); must be able to create concepts that integrate these observations into logically sound theories (AC); and must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE).

The LSI measures the relative emphases on the four learning modes by asking the learner to rank a series of four words that describe these different abilities. For example, one set of four words is *feeling*, *watching*, *thinking*, and *doing*, words which respectively reflect CE, RO, AC, and AE. The inventory yields six scores: CE, RO, AC, AE, and two combined scores, one indicating the extent to which the learner emphasizes abstractness over concreteness (AC-CE), the other indicating the extent to which the learner emphasizes action over reflection (AE-RO).

A high score on Concrete Experience represents a receptive, experience-based approach to learning, which relies heavily upon feelings-based judgements. High CE individuals tend to be empathic and "people oriented." They generally find theoretical approaches to be unhelpful, preferring to treat each situation as a unique case. They learn best from specific examples in which they can become involved. Individuals who emphasize Concrete Experience tend to be oriented more to peers than to authority in their approach to learning, and they benefit most from feedback and

discussion with fellow CE learners.

A high score on Abstract Conceptualization indicates an analytical, conceptual approach to learning, which relies heavily upon logical thinking and rational evaluation. High AC individuals tend to be oriented more to things than to people. They learn best in authority-directed, impersonal learning situations that emphasize theory and systematic analysis. They are frustrated by, and benefit little from, unstructured "discovery" learning approaches, such as exercises and simulations.

A high score on Active Experimentation indicates an active, "doing" orientation to learning, which relies heavily upon experimentation. High AE individuals learn best when they can engage in such activities as projects, homework, and small-group discussions. They dislike passive learning situations, such as lectures. These individuals tend to be extroverts.

A high score on Reflective Observation indicates a tentative, impartial and reflective approach to learning. High RO individuals rely heavily upon careful observation in making judgments, and they prefer learning situations, such as lectures, that allow them to take the role of objective observers. These individuals tend to be introverts.

It should be emphasized that the LSI does not measure learning style with 100% accuracy. Rather it is only an indication of how one sees oneself as a learner. Further information on experiential learning theory and statistical data on the LSI can be found in David Kolb's *Learning Style Inventory Technical Manual* (1976).