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Strategies for Addressing Student Fear in the Classroom

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Upon setting foot in the classroom at the beginning of the semester, many students experience varying degrees of anxiety or fearfulness. As educators, we often sense nervousness among our pupils as we introduce ourselves and hand out copies of the course syllabus to review. Most students settle in shortly, but some may remain consistently fearful. Is it possible that their high levels of fear negatively affect their ability to learn in the classroom from week to week? In this article, we discuss the role of debilitating fear in some students' lives and identify ways that educators can help them attain success despite their anxiety.

Humans normally experience fear starting at an early age, and as we grow older, we develop resources to manage and overcome this feeling. Those who believe they are physically inadequate, for example, may work hard to excel in sports and other socially-sanctioned activities. After many years of schooling, however, some develop ongoing or chronic feelings of worry and apprehension, and this constant fear can hinder learners' attempts to understand the information that is required for academic success. Here are some examples of ways in which students experience fear in the classroom:

- They are overly fearful of their performance due to the perceived threat of failure. Even temporary successes are overshadowed by the apprehension of washing out on the next assignment or test.
- Some "choke" when comparing themselves to others. They may say to themselves, "These people are bound to do better than me in class," and feel excessively burdened by competition with others to achieve sufficient grades.
- Students may be overly shy or even terrified of being singled out in class. Some may suffer from a condition known as gelotophobia, or the fear that others will laugh at them.
- Cultural factors can play a crucial role in perpetuating fears faced by students from other countries. They can feel confused about the dynamics of American classrooms, a condition sometimes called "fear of foreignness."

Fear can cause students to experience adverse responses physiologically (e.g., shortness of breath), cognitively (inability to focus or concentrate, obsessive thinking, replaying in their minds problematic incidents that occurred in previous classes), and emotionally (easily agitated, overcome by excessive nervousness, frustration, and other negative feelings). Such levels of fear may result in inappropriate class behavior, poorly completed or missing assignments, frequent absences, or dropping out of courses at the first sign of trouble.

Here are six strategies for helping students overcome their fears:

1. **Educate yourself about fear and its impact on students.** Take time to learn about important biological effects of fear that include blushing and racing heart, and cognitive factors, such as

negative messages that students tell themselves. By learning more about how fear works, we can become more aware of important telltale signs and more proactive toward helping students feel more comfortable and confident.

2. **Recognize that some student fears may be associated with factors outside the classroom.** Many students take on multiple jobs, experience family challenges, and face other stress factors that keep them from performing well in the classroom. Engaging in dialogue with students about their challenges and discussing ways to manage them may help students feel more involved in your course and be more persistent to succeed.
3. **Help students become aware of their feelings of anxiety when they occur.** Students are often unaware of their fear-based responses and thus may feel helpless to control them. Plan to demonstrate simple anxiety management strategies, such as breathing techniques, stretching, or relaxation methods that can help students ease their feelings of discomfort. Research shows that these techniques are effective in promoting calmness during high-stress activities, such as quizzes and group discussions.
4. **Create a nurturing environment for your students.** Use learner-centered activities (e.g., small groups) and provide multiple means of student engagement. Clearly articulate instructions for assignments and assess their understanding so that you are confident students are well-informed and less fretful about the objectives of each lesson. Additionally, make it a goal to promote cultural fairness so that each student can feel safe and valued in your class.
5. **Be proactive in communicating with students outside the classroom.** Although busy schedules may inhibit our ability to form deep relationships with students, a quick email to your more fearful learners can be reassuring and helps promote better communication. Even sending a note to the entire class (“I just wanted to send a quick ‘hello’ to touch base with all of you ...”) can go far in easing apprehension among some individuals.
6. **Be aware of campus resources to help students.** A number of universities provide formal early alert systems, counseling services, and other interventions such as workshops for reducing stress and anxiety. Obtain or create a list of key resources and specific contacts that you can share with those who are exhibiting behaviors that may be driven by fear.

Many of our students are challenged initially with a plethora of emotions and jittery feelings that tend to dissipate over the semester. Yet often a small number of learners consistently experience problematic emotions that hinder their ability to meaningfully connect with the course-related content presented in class. As we work toward understanding the root of their stress and promoting a safe environment for learning, we will ultimately help our students successfully acquire the course content we work so hard to teach them.

References:

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