

The Value of Meeting Individually with Students Early in a Term

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of university instructors meeting individually with students early in a term to discuss the students' career goals and plans and how those may relate to the course. Two psychology instructors set up individual 15-minute meetings with students. Evaluation of the meetings involved evaluation questionnaires anonymously completed by the students. Responses from students in a psychology course at a public university in Australia ($N = 29$) and students in psychology courses at a private university in the USA ($Ns = 21$ and 28) indicated that almost all students who attended a meeting thought that the meeting helped establish rapport with the instructor and that the meeting provided them with useful information. The evaluation results suggest that meeting individually with students in courses leads to benefits for the students and is feasible, at least with classes of fewer than 30 students.

The Value of Meeting Individually with Students Early in a Term

Clinical psychologists have often stated the importance of establishing rapport with psychotherapy clients and building a therapeutic alliance (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Sharf, Primavera, & Diener, (2010). Rapport tends to develop when a therapist listens attentively and shows interest in the welfare of the other person, thereby creating the potential for greater mutual understanding and future positive interactions based on trust, interpersonal comfort, and shared goals (Martin et al., 2000; Rogers, 1995).

Educators too have noted the importance of establishing rapport (e.g., Buskist & Saville, 2001; Lowman, 1995) as part of what might be called building an educational alliance with students. There may be many ways for psychology instructors to establish an educational alliance with students in a course. This article is about the value of a rare instructor behavior that appears to have never been evaluated: Meeting individually with students soon after the start of a term.

We hypothesized that an instructor's meeting individually with undergraduate students would contribute to establishing rapport and provide students with valuable information. The meetings involved discussing with the students their career goals and plans and how these relate to the course.

Method

Participants

The participants in this evaluation were students in one of three courses. The courses included a third-year undergraduate course on multicultural psychology and a second-year course on social psychology taught by the second author, a woman. These two courses, offered at a private, non-profit university in the USA, respectively had 28 students (24 of them women) and 21 students (18 women) enrolled, with 3 students enrolled in both courses. The third course was a third-year course on behavior modification taught by the first author, a man. This course, offered at a public university in Australia, had 29 students (23 women). We did not collect age information about the students, but they were predominately young adults.

Individual meetings

On the first day of class we each invited our students to meet with us individually to discuss their career goals and plans and how the course might relate to those. We each distributed a sign-up form with potential meeting times of 15 minutes each over the following two weeks. We encouraged students to choose a date and time and to make a record of that. We also told the students how to find our office.

When the students arrived for their meeting, we shook hands and asked them open-ended questions about their career goals and plans. Next we discussed ways in which what they learn in the course might help them achieve their goals. We helped them to develop sensible plans to achieve their career goals if they lacked a good plan. We listened attentively when they spoke, nodded at times, and leaned toward them at times. As time permitted, we provided them with information or links to information relevant to their goals or plans, such as information on how to become licensed or registered as a psychologist or how to obtain

valuable work experience. We ended the meeting by encouraging the student to contact us again if he or she had any additional questions in the future.

Evaluation of meeting

We assessed the impact of the meetings by asking all students in the course to complete anonymously written questions about the meeting. The evaluation questionnaire asked whether the student attended an individual meeting with the instructor. If so, the student answered these two questions: “Did the meeting help establish rapport between us?” and “Did the meeting lead you to useful information?” Response options for each question included yes, no, and don’t know. For students who did not attend an individual meeting, the questionnaire asked what led to not meeting with the instructor. In the USA, the three students in both classes met once with the instructor and had one chance each to evaluate the meeting. In the USA classes, we collected the evaluation data in class sessions over two weeks after the end of the meetings. In the Australian class we collected evaluation data in class sessions two months after the end of the meetings.

Results

With regard to the USA courses, 29 of 46 different students (63%) attended a meeting and all 29 completed an evaluation form. All 29 students indicated that they found the meeting helpful in establishing rapport and that the meeting led them to useful information. Eight students who did not attend a meeting completed an evaluation and answered a question about what led to not attending the meeting. Five of them mentioned a schedule conflict; the other three gave vague answers.

Regarding the Australian course, 21 of 29 (72%) students attended a meeting, and 12 of those students completed an evaluation form two months later. Eleven of the 12 students who attended and completed an evaluation form indicated that they found the meeting helpful in establishing rapport and in leading them to useful information. The other student responded “don’t know” to both questions. Three students who did not attend a meeting answered the question about what led them not to meet with the instructor. The reasons included time restraints, an error about the meeting time, and misunderstanding the purpose of the meeting.

The meetings at both universities took, on average, 15 minutes. That amounted to about 7.25 hours at the American university and 5.5 hours at the Australian university. The meetings were in every instance pleasant and interesting for the instructor. We ended the meeting with a stronger sense of connection to the students and a greater sense of understanding their goals and what they did and did not know about developing their careers. The students generally looked pleased as they left. We noticed that the students spoke up in class discussions after the meetings, but we had no data with which to compare student engagement.

Discussion

Most of the students in the classes attended an individual meeting. Those who attended indicated in anonymous evaluations that the meetings helped establish rapport with the instructor and also provided the students with useful information. The positive evaluation results were similar (a) across countries, (b) in both private and public universities, (c) across three specific psychology courses, (d) across male and female instructors, and (e) for time periods of both two weeks and two months after the meeting. Similar to the students, we, the

instructors, felt an increase in rapport, along with an increase in awareness of student goals and plans.

We consider the meetings a success worth the instructor time required. Other instructors could experience similar positive results, but results might vary with the interpersonal style of the instructor and of the students and with the cultural context. Because individual meetings are easy to set up and to evaluate, other instructors can collect their own quantitative and qualitative evaluation data.

The courses in which we set up individual meetings with students had enrollment of fewer than 30 students. The more students in the course, the more time the meetings take, and we view courses with fewer than 30 students as feasible for individual meetings, considering that not all enrolled students attend. Meeting individually for 15 minutes with students in a course with fewer than 30 students will tend to take a total of several hours, which an instructor can spread out over a number of days.

Our evaluation method has limitations in that it was purely descriptive, with no comparison condition and no pre-meeting assessment to control for Hawthorne effects. Further, 83% (65 of 78) of the students in the courses were women, and the results might be different in psychology classes with mostly male students. Finally, the courses evaluated were second or third-year psychology courses in Western countries. The results might not generalize to much different courses, for instance first-year courses or courses in other disciplines, or to much different cultures. Positive aspects of the evaluation method include that students anonymously completed the evaluation questionnaires and that the evaluation included a variety of student samples, instructors, courses, and settings.

Future evaluation of individual meetings could examine whether they increase (1) student-engagement behaviors such as attending class sessions and answering and asking questions in class, (2) student satisfaction with the course and with the instructor, (3) student retention in the course, and (4) student learning.

References

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