

Making Your Classes Come Alive



PHOTO BY ROBERT ENESCO - FOTOLIA.COM

By Johnny J. Moya

WHAT MAKES MY COURSES COME ALIVE? That was a question asked of me this past spring. Having been selected as the 2008 Virginia Technology Education Teacher of the Year, I was asked to prepare a brief and present it to my peers at the 2009 Virginia Technology Education Conference. So, I pondered the question and asked myself why students liked to take my courses. After some consideration, it all became clear to me—relationships!

A successful teacher realizes that he or she must sometimes *trick* students into learning. That's why career and technical education (CTE) is so beneficial to students' academic success! Students learn science, technology, engineer-

ing and mathematics (STEM) as well as other core academics by completing project-based activities. The trick is to have students learn while they are busy having fun. People learn best when they feel comfortable with what they are doing. (Remember, students are people too.) Preparing lessons and activities is not that difficult, but establishing relationships takes a bit more time and effort.

Teachers need to teach the required curriculum as well as establish positive relationships with their students. Both of these areas are very important. Teachers continuously receive direction concerning academics, curriculum development, etc. Therefore, this article will focus on building teacher/student relationships.

Building Relationships

Effective teachers build positive relationships with students. Respect fosters respect. Barriers are removed once a student realizes that a teacher has the student's best interest in mind. Once comfortable, students will hold conversations with teachers that they like and trust. This trust is an honor and tremendous responsibility. What do you say when a student speaks to you about something on his or her mind? Of course, there are legal implications if a student reveals certain things; but mostly, students discuss their feelings about relationships with other students and concerns about life. A response may be appropriate, but just listening is the key!

It is very important to know your students. It is impossible to build a good relationship with people whom you do not know. Finding common interests such as sports and family are possible relationship building strategies. People appreciate it when others express concern for them. How do you get to know your students? One idea: on the first day of a course, you could survey your students to determine their interests and hobbies. If the students are on sports teams, attend their games. Speak to students about the games and refer to their performance during those games. If they are involved in other clubs, attend those functions. You could even volunteer to help organize and set up those functions. Students will appreciate the fact that you are involved in their lives outside of the classroom.

Some students act as if they do not want to be helped. Helping them anyway is another means to build positive relationships. All teachers know that it is sometimes easier to evade a confrontation by avoiding a problem student. However, there could be that one thing that you say or do that could change a student's life—really! While staying the course, other students will notice that you care for someone who acted like he or she didn't want your attention. Those attentive students will logically infer that you also care for them too.

Student Organizations

In Virginia, technology education teachers are required to involve their students in the Technology Student Association (TSA) student organization. If a teacher were to exert a little extra effort, he or she could use TSA (or any student organization for that matter) to develop student camaraderie, competitive spirit and compassion. By offering fun and challenging events, student organizations provide students with opportunities to improve and demonstrate their technological literacy. As you know, there are "techie" types of students who may not feel

comfortable participating in other school organizations. If properly used, CTE student organizations will help students enjoy learning and make them feel better about themselves.

Be Passionate About What You Do

A mediocre teacher can do a good job, but a teacher must be passionate to do a great job! A truly passionate teacher enjoys what he or she is doing and provides students with enjoyable activities. As previously mentioned, learning can be fun; this is how students can be tricked into learning. A happy and fun classroom atmosphere provides a great learning environment!

A passionate teacher puts their students' interests first. The sacrifice of one's time and effort is necessary, but students notice the teachers who care enough to make these sacrifices. If you don't believe this is true, listen to student discussions and you will hear it. Go the extra mile for your students and they will appreciate and respect you for it.

Time for Reflection

An excellent teacher reflects on his or her own performance. These teachers may not be overly concerned about being evaluated because they continuously evaluate themselves. A self-reflecting teacher will cherish his or her successes but will also be aware of and correct mistakes. Reflecting at the end of a school day is one method of self-improvement. Ask yourself questions like: "What did I do well?" "What could I have done better?" "How did I present my lectures?" "Were activities challenging and fun?" Consider creating a self-evaluation check-off list to remind yourself to evaluate your performance. Once you determine how you did, relish in your success and correct your deficiencies.

Reflections from the Sidelines

I ended my brief by giving the teachers my thoughts from the sidelines. I say

sidelines because I am no longer a teacher. I am a supervisor of teachers. I am no longer on the front lines (and I miss it!) My first thought was that a teacher who really cares for his or her students will do everything he or she can to ensure the success of those students. Yes, this will require extra time; but it is not such a big deal when we stop and remember that what we do helps to develop the lives of young people.

We all have success stories. We need to advertise them to our students, parents, other teachers and administrators. Teachers should capture their success stories and "go tell it on the mountain." Successes could be stated during open house events, Parent, Teacher, Student Association meetings, in local newspapers and education journals. What we do does matter, so we need to broadcast it far and wide!

This article illustrates a small portion of what I spoke about during my brief. I feel very privileged to have been a technology education teacher. I was passionate as a teacher and I maintain my passion as a supervisor. My thoughts are that I am now helping a crowd that is just a bit older than my previous audience. Looking back at my task to brief what made my courses come alive, I don't think I did anything extraordinary in the classroom; I just treated my students like *they* are alive! **I**

Johnny J. Moye, Ph.D.,

taught technology education at Hickory High School in Chesapeake, Virginia. He is currently serving as a CTE supervisor in the Chesapeake Public Schools System. In August 2008, Moye was named the Virginia Technology Education High School Teacher of the Year by the Virginia Technology Education Association. In March 2009, he received the International Technology Education Association Teacher Excellence Award. He can be contacted at moyejj@cps.k12.va.us.



Interested in exploring this topic further? Discuss it with your colleagues on the ACTE forums at www.acteonline.org/forum.aspx.