VIEWPOINTS

Faculty Members' Enthusiasm: A Blessing or a Curse?

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For the last 17 years, the art of teaching has been a balancing act: how much teaching do I do? How much prompting? How much facilitation? How much do I use active learning? And yes, how much *enthusiasm* do I show while I am doing all of the above?

Enthusiasm is defined as great excitement for or interest in a subject or a cause.¹ Other words used to describe an enthusiastic attitude include *passionate* interest, *eagerness* to do something, *lively* and *ardent*. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American philosopher, said: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm."²

People who are enthusiastic appear to have something extra or a certain spark about them that attracts people to them. For the most part, enthusiasm comes from within, but certainly individuals can learn to generate enthusiasm.³⁻⁶

For 17 years, I have tried to demonstrate an enthusiastic/passionate attitude in my classroom. However, it has not always been easy. Some students have commented about my enthusiastic attitude in class, using such words as: "Dr. Alsharif is very passionate about his subject and he really brought in the realistic applications into his teachings," and "He was very enthusiastic about his lectures which made it more engaging." However, other students have shared: "His enthusiasm is very intimidating" and "His enthusiasm was a distraction."

Admittedly, I have high expectations for my students. I am also very passionate when I teach. While my Palestinian heritage may have contributed to this, it is mostly my strong belief that demonstrating passion for the topic I am teaching positively influences student learning. At times, my high expectations and emotions about my teaching were misinterpreted by students, including: my attempts to engage them by asking them questions in class, challenging them to answer their own questions, encouraging them to participate in in-class and online discussions, challenging them on essay and case-based examinations, encouraging them to work independently and in groups on course activities, and inviting them to share my enthusiasm about the topic. As mentioned above, some students were intimidated by this approach or developed negative attitudes towards the course and the instructor. Many factors may have contributed to these reactions including student maturity, cultural issues, and student level of knowledge.

Through this, I have learned to define my expectations of the students early in the semester and to keep reminding them of these expectations throughout the semester. Also, I have come to understand more over the years that different students take different amounts of time to meet these expectations and need consistent help along the way. As an educator, I consistently and carefully revisit each expectation to make sure that I am not setting them too high to the extent that our students become frustrated. Further, I have learned not to show emotions that could be misinterpreted by the students as a lack of respect. Finally, as a general rule, I make myself readily available to both our campus and distance students, especially those who are struggling, and help them to transition to the higher level of thinking and shared responsibility required in my courses.

The literature is not clear about the importance of faculty enthusiasm, but the impact on intrinsically motivating students is discussed.³⁻⁵ I teach a course in culture competency and one of the models I use is by Campinah Bacote.⁷ She describes the journey to achieve culture competency in this framework: from cultural awareness, to cultural knowledge, to cultural skills, and finally to cultural encounters. However, she identifies the underlying detriment to achieving any of the above and the ultimate goal of culture competency as having the cultural desire to move up this continuum. Another important aspect of the literature on faculty enthusiasm is that it links faculty enthusiasm with jump starting the dormant energy or the desire for curiosity and energized interest by the students.^{3-6,8-11}

Therefore, as educators, I strongly believe that we need to demonstrate enthusiasm in what we do and to hold the students to a certain level of responsibility. I think this is even more important for faculty members teaching basic science courses where students' motivation seems to stop if they view the course as "not relevant" to pharmacy practice. The above sentiments were captured by the comment of one of my students: "He certainly has a presence within the classroom, which has been very helpful but also quite stressful at times. However, I certainly do appreciate his enthusiasm and passion for course material. Dr. Alsharif is certainly very warm-hearted and concerned for student

success and that is what is most important! He encourages free thought and challenges students, which is very good for us!”

References

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