

Running head: RESPECT: A PROFESSOR'S INTENTIONS VS STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

# Respect and Learning: A Case Study of a Professor's Instructional Good Intentions and Student Perceptions of Respect in a College Classroom

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Abstract

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This study analyzes student perceptions of respect in two nearly instructionally identical college classrooms. Students describe one classroom as respectful and they demonstrate a positive inclination toward learning. Students describe the second classroom as disrespectful and they demonstrate a negative inclination toward learning. This paper also offers suggestions on how to assess student perceptions of respect in the college classroom.

## Respect and Learning: A Case Study of a Professor's Instructional Good Intentions and Student Perceptions of Respect in a College Classroom

College classrooms are complex instructional spaces. Professors strive for instructional perfection while juggling a myriad of competing faculty and student interests. Students raise questions, some on topic others off topic. Academic texts often require demystifying. Lectures that hit too far or too below the knowledge base of students are refined on-the-fly. Increasingly, professors are responding to the instructional ebbs and flows of their classrooms by designing curriculum that intentionally places students at the center of learning. These instructional good intentions are supported by research showing that high quality faculty/student interactions tend to foster student learning (e.g., Wagner and Shumanis, 2000; Carson, 1999; and Kolitch and Dean, 1999). One salient characteristic of these day-to-day interactions is respect. Suzanne Young and Dale Shaw (1999) argue that classroom interactions characterized by a “genuine respect for students” and “concern for student learning” are two of only three universal qualities of effective college teachers (p. 683). It appears that when students feel respected they are more positively inclined toward learning.

Increasingly, college professors intend to make their classrooms both academically challenging and more respectful of students as learners. However, little is known about the ways students perceive and respond to the good intentions and well thought out student-centered teaching of professors. This paper uses a case study methodology to examine the divergent learning outcomes of students in two college classrooms where both professors espouse the value of student-centered teaching and positive faculty/student relationships. The data for this study suggest that student perceptions of respect, more than the professor's intentions or teaching, are the greatest influence on student inclinations toward learning. The paper concludes with a

discussion of strategies professors can use to more accurately assess student perceptions of respect and therefore build more effective bridges between teaching intentions and student learning.

### The intertwined nature of respect and learning

Studies of effective teaching in college classrooms advocate student-centered techniques including questions that stimulate critical thinking skills (VanVoorhis, 1999), active learning (Byer and Dana-Wesley, 1999), learning communities, collaboration and cooperative groups (Gamson, 1994; Felder and Brent, 1996), placing students at the center of interest on college campuses (Gaff, 1997) and attentiveness to student learning styles and multiple intelligences (Guskin, 1994). Although helpful in suggesting the range of teaching strategies professors could employ, this list is less useful in identifying underlying principles of effective instruction that link teaching with learning. Barbara Carson (1999) argues that at the core of effective instruction are three key teaching attributes, “Outstanding teachers love the subjects they teach; they respect and like their students; and they are committed to and skilled at connecting the two things they care deeply about—their subject matter and students” (p. 93). For Carson, effective college teaching is interpersonal and embedded in classroom interactions between professor, student and subject matter.

An important characteristic of this interpersonal space is respect (Carson, 1996 and 1999; VanVoorhis, 1999). Elaine Kolitch and Ann Dean (1999) argue, “Pedagogical presence begins with dialogue between teacher and student and is built of mutual respect and trust” (p. 37). Respect is so important to students that it appears to be the one universal yardstick by which students measure the instructional effectiveness of professors. Student evaluations of teaching

can vary on characteristics such as enthusiasm, ability to communicate, and course organization, but not respect for students as learners (Young and Shaw, 1999). Students are likely to overlook poor course organization, for instance, if they feel respected by the professor. However, exceptional course organization will rarely compensate for the negative effects of disrespect in the classroom.

After analyzing thirty years of alumni letters describing effective professors, Barbara Carson (1999) found that students were more willing to take the extra steps to fully understand a subject when they felt respected by the professor. For Carson, respect is a bridge between teaching and learning: “To be interested in the subject matter, ... students need to know that the professor is interested in them” [italics in original] (p. 100). In short, professors who establish respectful instructional relationships are more successful at encouraging students to develop positive inclinations toward the course subject matter.

The apparent link between respect and learning suggests a need for more conscious forms of student-centered teaching that are attentive to the quality of faculty and student interactions. The classroom mission for professors, according to Phillips (1999), is to attend to the “intersubjective world” of teaching (p. 179). This means approaching every course with a sense of “mindfulness” in an attempt to see the course as a whole, not as fragmented experiences with students around curriculum, content, or classroom management. When professors place students at the center of their instructional concern they demonstrate respect toward students as learners.

Despite the evidence suggesting the intertwined nature of respect and learning there is little grounded description of the degree to which student perceptions of respect influence their inclinations toward learning. Little is known about the interplay between a professor’s intentions to treat students with respect and student perceptions of respect in a classroom. Little is known

about the ease or difficulty of building and sustaining respectful relationships. How concerned should professors be with the actual nature of the teaching relationships they form with students? Is talking-the-talk and walking-the-walk of a student-centered professor enough to insure student learning? This study offers educators across the campus a more detailed look into student perceptions of respect in student-centered college classrooms and its impact on learning.

### Methodology

Sources of data for this study include a semester of participant observations of two classes, interviews with the professor of each class (Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace, pseudonyms) and interviews with six Master's level students who took courses with Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace. Data analysis followed a three-step process. Initially, all the data were sorted and analyzed for dominant themes associated with the types of teaching relationships evident in the day-to-day interactions of faculty and students (Spradley, 1980). The data were sorted a second time into a series of assertions about teaching and learning in each class using constant comparison techniques developed by Glaser and Straus (1967). Finally, case studies of Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace were written from the themes and assertions developed in early stages of data analysis.

Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace are the focus of this study because they are similar in their philosophical and instructional commitment to student-centered forms of teaching. Additionally, the same cohort of students was observed in each class, making it possible to more fully describe the link between teaching relationships, respect, and student inclinations toward learning.

It is important to note that the data presented in the following case study is a snap shot into the classroom lives of two professors. As a snap shot it captures for more detailed examination a moment in instructional time. It would be inappropriate to extrapolate from the case study a sense of which professor is more or less typically effective as a teacher. Like many college professors, Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace teach some instructionally easy classes and some instructionally challenging classes. However, during the course of this study, it is clear from the students' perspective that Professor Wallace, despite her good intentions, was less effective at facilitating learning. It is my belief that if as college professors we wish to enhance our teaching effectiveness we should be just as willing to examine our and colleague's teaching missteps for insights on enhancing student learning as we are willing to analyze our instructional successes. This study, which describes Professor Wallace's instructional misfortunes, is offered in the tradition of a friendly critic examining ways to enhance learning across all academic disciplines.

#### Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace

Both Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace are women and both are non-tenure track faculty in a School of Education. Both are relative newcomers to the college classroom, but Professor Shaw has ten years of public school teaching experience and Professor Wallace was a public school teacher for eighteen years. Both explicitly support a student-centered philosophy of teaching in their course syllabi, during interactions with students and in taped interviews.

Both professors model student-centered forms of teaching for purposes of showing their students an alternative non teacher-centered approach to teaching. An important goal for Professor Shaw is the "constant modeling of teaching practice." Her hope is to illustrate, via her

instructional practices, “a different perspective” on the teaching and learning relationship, one that is more student-centered. Professor Wallace also believes in the importance of modeling student-centered teaching: “My goal was to teach as I hope they will teach their students. I wanted to create and show them a [student-centered] approach to teaching and learning.”

Both Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace believe that the ideal faculty/student relationship is based on respect and collaboration. Professor Shaw captures her philosophy of teaching in this way: “I think that an [effective] faculty/student relationship is first and foremost based on mutual respect. Do they feel that they're respected? If the answer's yes, they're going to learn a lot more than if they feel demeaned or embarrassed or confused.” Professor Wallace strives for a collaborative “working relationship” with her students: “I like to talk a lot with [my students]. I like them to come to me and talk about what they want to do, things that puzzle them, things that don't sit right; figure it out together.”

Although Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace share many philosophical and instructional similarities they differ in student perceptions of respect and inclination toward learning in each classroom. Professor Shaw's classroom actions were viewed as respectful and students tended to act in meaningful ways by engaging the course material. Professor Wallace's teaching was often characterized as disrespectful and her students tended to act in meaningful ways by disengaging from the course material. To more fully understand how these outcomes are possible, despite the best instructional intentions of Professor Wallace, a more detailed description of the day-to-day interactions in both classrooms is necessary.



The Pedagogy of Professor Shaw.

Characteristic of many education professors, Professor Shaw models effective public school teaching by placing her students in the roles of elementary school students. Yet her language and teaching conveys the message that her students are not children but rather they, like her, are all members of the same professional community. As one student observed: “She taught her course like a professional seminar.” And as evident in the following field notes, her frequent use of the pronoun “we” includes her students in the professional circle of teachers:

Before continuing her lesson Professor Shaw asks: “Has anyone read this book and knows the answer?” Martha raises her hand: “Yes.” Professor Shaw lowers the book and looks at Martha: “You can be the expert then.” Professor Shaw pauses and comments on her response to Martha: “That is what we do in school. When a kid knows the answer we say, ‘you can be the expert [*italics added*].”

Her interactions with students are typically polite: “Please find a place to stop your conversation.” At the conclusion of small group discussions, Professor Shaw compliments her class on their level of academic engagement: “I noticed a high level of critical thinking and reflection in your conversation. You are not just taking the author for granted.” To support her claims she reads from a note card she keeps of “themes” raised by students in small group discussions and she offers examples that she feels are particularly pertinent to the day’s topic: “I want to comment on the themes I heard about equality and gifted education.”

During class discussions, Professor Shaw responds to student questions using an array of techniques that draw out the intellectual knowledge her students bring to the classroom. If she thinks a student knows the answer she will turn the question back on the student: “Can you

answer that question?” And if she is not satisfied with the depth of a student’s answer she will push for greater understanding: “No, really. How would you do this?”

Professor Shaw’s pedagogical relationships. Professor Shaw characterizes her instructional relationships with her students as “friendly and professional,” that is “friendly” in the sense of “mutual respect” and willingness to engage her intellectually and academically: “I felt that the students respected me, respected what I had to say. But they also felt comfortable challenging me, questioning me; ‘This is getting old. Can we do it differently?’” According to Professor Shaw her classroom is a teaching and learning space where she and her students examine issues of effective educational practice in a “collegial” professional manner: “They treated me as a professional, like a colleague in some ways that was mentoring them.”

Her students generally share Professor Shaw’s characterization of the faculty/student relationship as respectful and professional: “She treated us with total respect,” that is “respect” in the sense of intellectual competence, intellectual trust, instructional flexibility and honest listening. Her students offer the following comments on each of these attributes. Intellectual competence: “Professor Shaw respected our level of knowledge.” Intellectual trust: “She trusted us [with learning]. ‘It’s [our] education’ rather than imposing it on us.” Instructional flexibility: “She let you have some freedom within the confines of her assignments.” Honest listening: “Professor Shaw was responsive and listened to people’s ideas.

Student classroom behaviors. Professor Shaw describes her students as engaged thinkers and active learners: “[My students] were not just bumps on a log. They had things to say.” Her students’ actions support this claim. During class discussions her students clarify their

understanding of course subject matter by asking Professor Shaw questions about educational practice: “How do you encourage parent and child reading if you know the parent isn’t around?” And during small group activities her students analyze assigned readings and compare them to other readings or other courses in their degree program:

Professor Shaw finishes her mini-lesson and asks her class to discuss the questions she places on the overhead projector. Mary begins by comparing the reading to articles she read in other classes. She switches to a critique of the author: “I am annoyed that the author used the word ‘gifted’ in the title. These teaching techniques should be useful for all students, not just the gifted.” Mary asks about an article assigned in another course: “Did you read the Ogbu piece?” Beth: “Yes, I think it helps a lot with understanding the educational needs of African-Americans.” Sara recognizes the group is off-task. She points toward the overhead and asks: “How can we incorporate the readings into our own teaching? I like the way the author incorporated parental involvement into her class.”

As these field notes indicate, her students are engaged in learning but they also engage in off-task behavior during Professor Shaw’s class. However, most side-conversations are minor tangents and students self-correct their behavior and quickly return to on-task behaviors.

Student inclination toward learning. The “respectful” and collegial nature of the instructional relationship in Professor Shaw’s class appears to instill in students a positive orientation toward learning the course material. As one student remarked: “I learn from someone I’m inspired by much more than someone I’m just regurgitating information for.” Evidence for this activist orientation toward learning goes beyond student interviews and includes, as evident in the previous field notes, examples of the day-to-day classroom actions of her students. For the

students in Professor Shaw's class the interplay between the respectful instructional relationship and engagement in the course material had a positive effect on student learning: "Professor Shaw's class was fantastic. The interaction, the assignments and the respect she had for our level of knowledge. She gave us a lot of methodology." Professor Shaw tends to agree with this assessment of student learning: "I think they got it."

### The Pedagogy of Professor Wallace.

As the following field notes indicate, like Professor Shaw, Professor Wallace also employs the instructional technique of placing her students in the role of elementary school students to facilitate learning:

After introducing an activity designed to simulate the learning experiences of elementary school students, Professor Wallace asks her class: "What do you think would be the reaction of elementary students to this project?" One or two students volunteer answers and Professor Wallace continues: "I want you to keep track of your feelings as if you are a real student doing this activity. I want you to use those feelings to respond to students who are having difficulty with this activity when you become a teacher." She moves around the room checking with groups to make sure they understand the activity and to answer any questions they have about teaching this lesson to public school students.

Her goal is to create real world learning opportunities for her students. She intends to treat her students as professionals capable of independent thought rather than novices needing handholding: "I am looking for your ideas, what you think. There are no right answers to these questions."

Professor Wallace also tries to honor student learning by expressing her willingness to change due dates and the format of assignments to better fulfill the learning needs of her students. She offers her class the following explanation for changing an assignment: “I realized that the initial assignment might be too constraining for some students. I want to make it clear to you that you should talk to me if you have a better idea of how to make the assignment better meet your needs.”

Professor Wallace’s pedagogical relationships. Professor Wallace believes that her mission is to teach in a “student-centered” style anchored by a “working relationship” with her students that entails a shared examination of subject matter and teaching strategies. But despite her intentions the relationship in her classroom is distant and tense. In Professor Wallace’s words: “I certainly didn’t feel close to them. There was a lot of tension.” And contrary to her ideal of dialoging with students about course content and ways to make the course more meaningful she rarely engaged her students in conversation: “I didn’t have many conversations with my students.”

One of Professor Wallace’s techniques for fostering a student-centered learning environment is to ask lots of questions: “[the class] is constructed by them and questioning by me to fill in the spaces.” Her goal is to elicit thinking rather than some predetermined answer: “Instead of saying: ‘Now you need to do this.’ I always questioned them. ‘What do you think of this?’ And ‘What do you think’ doesn’t mean what’s the answer. It means ‘what do you think?’” However, despite her intent, Professor Wallace reports that her questioning process seemed to contribute to the tension in the classroom: “A lot of [students] didn’t like my questioning process” and “One [student] said it was intimidating.”

Professor Wallace’s students were also aware of the tense relationship in the classroom.

One source of disrespect according to a student is the way Professor Wallace responds to questions: “In Professor Wallace’s class we might ask a bunch of questions. But she wasn’t straight forward in her replies.” And in some instances, student perceptions of disrespect conveyed by Professor Wallace’s answers “made student [follow-up] questions hostile.”

A final element of perceived instructional disrespect developed around Professor Wallace’s belief, common among many education professors, that an effective way to model teaching is to place students in the role of elementary school students. Unfortunately, her students felt that many of her classroom activities “felt contrived” and somewhat insulting: “Putting us in the position of elementary kids was the worst thing. It was insulting.” Another student observed: “Most of the techniques Professor Wallace uses are treating us with no respect. I don’t like being treated like I’m in elementary school.” Despite her instructional good intentions, designed to respect student learning and her use of generally accepted teaching practices within her discipline, Professor Wallace’s students feel less like individuals capable of professional level thought and more like “novices” in need of simple instructions.

Student classroom behaviors. Contrary to her hopes, students in Professor Wallace’s class perceive her teaching strategies as disrespectful and this sense of disrespect also characterizes the ways students treat Professor Wallace. While explaining an activity, her students frequently engage in a range of off-task activities, e.g., talking, eating, filling out program forms, editing papers for other classes, talking about field placements, or just gossiping. Her students generally act somewhat detached and disengaged from the course. As one student noted, typical student behavior entailed: “Everybody off in their own world.” And two other students describe

their in-class actions as: “Looking into desk drawers to see what I might find” and “Writing things down and sliding notes to another student.”

Her students realize they are off task, especially during small group activities, but they often continue to pursue these counterproductive activities under the justification that: “Our time is more valuable than this” and “We do things [off task] so that we are productive.” A good example of being more “productive” is doing homework assigned in other classes during Professor Wallace’s class time.

Students also felt that another indicator of this “friction” is “nobody wanted to participate” in class activities or discussions, and any participation resembles a “half-hearted attempt to do what Professor Wallace was asking for.” Frequently, as shown in these field notes, this means doing only what Professor Wallace requests and nothing more:

I walk into Professor Wallace’s class and I pin on my nametag. Elizabeth comments: “Paul you are such a good student.” I’m a bit puzzled about her comment because we always wear nametags. Then I notice that I am the only person wearing one. In response to Elizabeth’s observation I reply: “I like to follow directions.” Elizabeth counters: “David follows directions and he doesn’t have a nametag.” David, who is sitting at the next table replies: “I follow directions. Putting on your name tag is not on the list.” He points to the list on the blackboard of tasks to be completed before class starts.

Student inclinations toward learning. The unintended disrespectful aura of Professor Wallace’s class has a deleterious effect on student learning. She tries to teach in a student-centered fashion that respects students as learners and many of her in class activities are consistent with this goal. Yet few of her students experience a sense of connection to the course

material. More common is a sense of being a stereotypical student rather than a developing professional. As one student commented: "I want to be a teacher and I am being a student. I have to fit the mold of what the professor's expectations are." And when students did talk about learning it was frequently in terms of learning how to teach in ways counter to Professor Wallace's goals. As one student observed: "I learned how not to teach. I learned that condescension is a control technique." A second student reflected on her active resistance to Professor Wallace's teaching and her learning outcomes: "I was always a great kid in my elementary and high school. I wasn't rude, now I am bad. That is what [Professor Wallace] taught me, if you treat kids like idiots, they will act like idiots."

Examples of the impact student perceptions of respect have on learning go beyond student reports of their behavior to include examples of their day-to-day actions in her class. Her students develop an orientation to learning that is characterized by one student as "give her what she wants with no intention of going back [to the ideas]. Just give her the stupid paper." This commodity orientation to assignments seemed to influence the way students valued their learning. As one student notes, the principle worth of knowledge is its exchange value: "By the end of the year I definitely knew that we were students rather than teachers. You have to pay your dues to those people who ultimately give you that piece of paper."

In her post course reflections, Professor Wallace observed many of these same negative inclinations toward learning. She was disappointed in the minimalist approach her students took to class assignments: "I think a lot of them just said, 'I'll just do it, damn it. What Professor Wallace wants, I'll just do it.'" And Professor Wallace was unsure but skeptical about her student's learning outcomes: "I don't know if anyone in this class got it."



Table 1

Instructional Summary of Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace

	Professor Shaw	Professor Wallace
Instructional intentions and strategies	student-centered, “mutual respect,” placing students in the role of elementary school students	student-centered, collaborative “working relationship,” placing students in the role of elementary school students
Pedagogical relationships	“total respect,” “collegial,” “intellectual trust,” civil	“no respect,” “teacher-directed,” “insulting,” tense
Student behavior	engaged thinkers, active learners, extending knowledge beyond class	off task, minimally engaged, “half-hearted” participation, “rude”
Learning outcomes	positive inclination, “they got it”	Negative inclination, “being a student,” few students “got it”

## Discussion

Professor Shaw’s success with meeting her teaching goals and fulfilling the learning goals of her students can be attributed, in part, to student perceptions that her teaching is respectful. Professor Shaw believes that “the respect that [her students] felt” was an important element of her instructional success. She treats her students as if they are fellow professionals separate from her only by her more extensive knowledge and experience base. In the collegial atmosphere of her classroom, she uses respect as a bridge to connect the two things she cares deeply about, students and subject matter. In the words of Barbara Carson (1996), Professor Shaw transforms her “passive students into academic activists” (p 14).

Like Professor Shaw, Professor Wallace is passionate about her subject matter and asserts the necessity of respecting students as learners and engaging them in the process of co-creating learning. These attributes form the core of why she embraces student-centered forms of teaching. Unfortunately, many of her students perceive her actions as hostile, indifferent and disrespectful. Given this student perception and response, Professor Wallace's main tool of respecting her students as learners and connecting them to her subject matter becomes a form of "negative pedagogy" (Colucci, 2000). The more she places her students in the role of elementary school students (a generally accepted form of effective instruction in education classes) the more her students perceive her actions as disrespectful. Her goal of providing her students with a visible example of how to teach is misunderstood by her students as a form of instructional paternalism. They respond by redefining the learning task to disengagement at best and at worst active disruption of Professor Wallace's teaching.

Professor Shaw also intends to create a respectful classroom climate. And she, like Professor Wallace, will place her students in the role of an elementary school student. Yet for Professor Shaw this technique is effective and keeps her class engaged and moving toward her learning objectives. The main difference in how students respond to the same teaching technique appears to be their perception of respect. In Professor Wallace's class this instructional technique is embedded in an aura of disrespect, while in Professor Shaw's class the milieu is respect. It is this difference that seems to explain why it works in one classroom, with the same group of students, and not in a second classroom. The different learning outcomes of students experiencing the same generally accepted instructional practice within an academic discipline raises important questions for professors beyond Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace's discipline of education. It suggests the potential value of all disciplines engaging in a critical

examination of their core instructional strategies and accepted practices through the lens of student perceptions of respect.

Although Professor Wallace was less successful with her current class she was successful with past classes at instilling a positive inclination toward learning. She describes her interactions with previous classes in this way: “I had that kind of open relationship with my previous students. We still have a relationship. We have conversations back and forth.” Additionally, many aspects of her current teaching suggest sensitivity toward the learning needs of her students. For instance, she was willing to adjust the structure of assignments and readily pushed back due dates to increase the potential of student learning. But in the following description of her teaching it appears that her students were unwilling or unable to hear her offers as genuine:

Professor Wallace turns to her class: “My goal is to move you along this continuum [from student to teacher]. I want you to start feeling like teachers. If there are ways to move you towards the teacher end of the continuum, that I am not doing, let me know. We can talk in groups or individually. Today is about thinking in the role of a teacher.” She dismisses her class to work in small groups. As Cindy’s group begins to tackle the assignment she comments to Elizabeth, “this is not going to help me become a teacher.”

One possible explanation is that students, because of the initial classroom context of perceived disrespect, have typecast Professor Shaw as disrespectful and now fail to fully appreciate the intent of her course corrections later in the semester. This makes sense given that college students can often evaluate the relative effectiveness of a professor in the first few minutes of class (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993). By her own admission, Professor Wallace was overly structured at the start of her course and may have inadvertently conveyed the wrong

message to her students: “I came to realize that I wasn’t as teacher directed as I see on a continuum. I was more in the middle. But that is how it started. I constructed the class and that pissed them off.”

This outcome of her early instructional misstep raises questions concerning the extent to which students are willing or unwilling to grant college professors the grace to move past their mistakes and into more productive instructional relationships. Professor Wallace’s story suggests the need for fuller descriptions of the relative rigidity or flexibility of student perceptions of respect in college classrooms. How certain are we as professors that the messages we intend to send, when we adjust our teaching in response to student feedback, are accurately heard by our students?

The findings of this study also raise questions about the role past schooling experiences play in student learning on college campuses. It appears that the role of student as disengaged learner may be an orientation to learning that college students develop in earlier educational settings and carry into higher education. When professors recreate, even unintentionally, the learning conditions characteristic of those past classrooms the old role seems to reemerge. The students in Professor Shaw’s and Professor Wallace’s classes note that the ability to act like a detached learner is a skill they acquired in elementary school, high school and previous college classrooms: “It is the kind of school behavior I have had since the beginning of time.” Another student observed: “Just because I’m going into teaching doesn’t mean I’m out of the mode of student behavior.” Since the majority of college students are educated in the same kind of educational settings as the students in this study it seems likely that this ability to shift into the role of detached learner in response to a professor’s negative pedagogy is an orientation to learning that is not limited to the students in this study. As Professor Wallace’s experience

suggests it is easy regardless of intentions and past teaching successes to stimulate the role of disengaged learner. This finding suggests just how difficult it may be for student-centered professors in disciplines across the college to teach “mindfully” as Phillip (1999) suggests given that the “inter-subjective” landscape of higher education may extend back in time beyond the confines of the college classroom.

For students in Professor Shaw and Professor Wallace’s class there is a link between their perceptions of the quality of the relationship they form with each professor and their inclination toward learning the course content. It is important to remember that this is the same group of students experiencing the teaching of two different professors and to note how strikingly different their actions and goals are in each classroom. It is almost as if they are different learners, which in many ways they are given the distinct instructional relationship characteristic of each classroom. As one student observes, the quality of the relationship she forms with any professor on campus strongly influences classroom dynamics: “No matter how much you learn, how much information you are given, there is always a personality equation that you have to deal with.”

The “personality equation” in each classroom is contrasting along the dimension of respect and influences the day-to-day patterns of interaction between each professor and her students. Perhaps the most important activity in Professor Shaw’s class is learning the course content. In Professor Wallace’s class, one activity that seems to dominate classroom patterns of interaction is learning to be a disengaged student. This finding suggests that a college professor’s ability to accurately communicate respect and student perceptions of respect are an essential factor in student learning. Given the disappointing learning outcomes experienced by Professor Wallace and the emphasis on respect in the literature on effective instruction in higher education, it seems

that professors across college campuses should pay closer attention to the types of instructional relationships they develop with students.

### Building respectful instructional relationships

As this study suggests, it is not enough for professors to espouse a student-centered instructional philosophy or to teach in ways that place students at the center of learning. Professors must also use respect to bridge the gap between intentions and learning. Without a sense of respect, students can perceive student-centered teaching as counter productive to learning. When learning goes astray and a climate of disrespect develops in a college classroom it is important to examine student and teacher responsibilities equally (Downs-Lombardi, 1996). Students in Professor Wallace's class are surely responsible for their "rude" behavior in class. Yet professors, given their status as the course instructor, should take more responsibility for errant messages and seek ways to build respectful instructional relationships.

Because Professor Shaw and her students felt that learning occurred in their classroom I will conclude by examining the ways she fostered respectful relationships with an eye toward strategies professors, across the campus, can use to improve their teaching. Respect can be defined in multiple ways and developed using a variety of strategies. As Carson's (1996 and 1999) work in particular suggests, what constitutes respect is open for individual faculty to define in cooperation with their students. Developing respectful relationships is highly personal, idiosyncratic and not reducible to standardized techniques. The suggestions that follow are only examples not instructional silver bullets.

One key to developing respect in the classroom, according to Professor Shaw, is effective communication:

Good communication is important. I think the basis of that is respecting people as human beings, to honor them ... by the way you talk to them, the way you interact, the way you listen, and the way you respond to their feedback and make changes and modifications in the way you teach. I felt good about [my] relationships. They were all different because all [my students] have different personalities.

Professor Shaw's description of "good communication" resonates with Allison Tom's (1997) description of developing a "deliberate" relationship with students. Tom suggests that teachers can more fully facilitate student learning by consciously observing and reflecting on the nature and needs of students instead of exclusively on curriculum. A deliberate relationship is fueled by the knowledge that learning is a two-way street: "We (teachers) learn and grow with students; as they learn, so do we" (p. 13). Professor Shaw consciously approached each student relationship with care and attentiveness. She often talked informally with her students before and after class. By fully knowing her students she was able to make micro-adjustments to her teaching and retain a sense of respect and to facilitate their learning.

A second strategy to enhance respect is to accurately measure student perceptions of the developing student/teacher relationship. As this study suggests, when describing learning outcomes, student perceptions of this relationship carry greater weight than faculty intentions. This finding is supported by the work of Andrea Giampetro-Meyer and Janine Holc (1997) who argue that one key to effective teaching is "learning to interpret what students are trying to tell us through their classroom behavior" (p. 95). The more professors know what students are thinking the quicker they can adjust their teaching strategies.

Professor Shaw regularly took the relational pulse of her class. Every third class session she distributed what she called "exit cards" to ascertain if her perception of how the class was going

matched her student's perceptions. She asked every student to write a few descriptive comments about her teaching, the content of the course, or questions still in need of an answer. She often shared her findings with the class at the next class meeting. If three or four students expressed similar concerns she would "spend five minutes talking about it" to make sure the issues were resolved. Additionally, every student signed their "exit card" thus allowing Professor Shaw the opportunity to follow up with individual students.

Finally, anything a professor can do to be "seen as a person rather than a lecturer" adds to the impression that the professor cares about students and student learning (Carson, 1999, p 99). Faculty efforts to connect with students in a caring and meaningful way do not have to be extensive or time consuming. Just acknowledging that students and faculty have a life outside the classroom is often enough to demonstrate an interest in students as people as well as valuable members of the classroom community. A frequent expression for Professor Shaw was: "How's it going," followed by a moment of honest listening to student concerns or satisfaction.

This sense of concern was a two way street and her students frequently inquired about her day as well: "They felt comfortable with me. They wanted to know how my day was." In the eyes of her students Professor Shaw was both a person and the professor at the head of the class charged with the responsibility of delivering content knowledge. For Professor Shaw, being comfortable with her students did not mean she was a "buddy." She was still the professor and her goal was to facilitate learning: "They didn't see me as buddy. But they saw me as someone who was there to listen and take action if I could. To advocate for them." She was fully willing to make her class more meaningful to students within the learning outcomes of her academic discipline.



Professor Shaw had her faults as an instructor. One student observed: “I thought she was a great professor. She wasn’t perfect, but I felt I learned a lot.” A second student felt that her assignments were unclear: “I loved the class but sometimes the assignments were vague. I was completely confused.” Yet despite these limitations, her students are willing to overlook Professor Shaw’s instructional faults: “Her assignment was confusing. But of course since it was Professor Shaw I think she was great even if she was confusing.” The willingness of Professor Shaw’s students to retain a positive inclination toward learning, despite instructional limitations, may in part be linked to the feeling of respect that her students felt. This observation is consistent with research (e.g., Young and Shaw, 1999) suggesting that students are more willing to view a professor’s teaching as effective even when he/she is instructionally weak in some areas, as long the classroom is infused with a sense of respect.

### Conclusion

This study suggests that for college professors developing and maintaining a respectful student/teacher relationship can be hard work and fraught with uncertainty. Respect doesn’t necessarily flow from a professor’s stated beliefs or use of student-centered instruction. It appears from the experience of Professor Wallace that it is far easier to lose respect than it is to regain it in the college classroom. Despite these challenges, it appears that college professors have little choice but to more fully understand the instructional relationships in their classroom. The findings of this study indicate an important piece of the learning puzzle for students is the perceived nature of the relationship between faculty and students. The way faculty use their power to structure and respond to the development of these relationships sends a strong message to students about the use of knowledge and skills in a given classroom. When college professors

maintain a respectful relationship, students are more positively inclined toward the knowledge and skills deemed valuable by the professor; the gap between instructional good intentions and learning is bridged. When the classroom environment is contentious, students tend to view knowledge and skills as a commodity to be exchanged for some other goal, typically grades. The findings of this study suggest that faculty should consciously examine the intended and unintended learning outcomes associated with the ways they interact with students in classroom settings.

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