

Thriving *in* Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Rethinking Office Hours

How might you and your students move beyond office hours with passive, question-answering, superficial interaction, and instead use that time together to propel students to the next level in their learning?

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Like me, you have probably spent countless hours conversing with students in office hours. At my university, many are first-generation college and/or first-generation immigrant students, thus making it particularly helpful for them to practice talking to adults who will help them build social capital during their university experience. Over the years, the needs of these students, as well as others, have refocused my thinking about the use of office hours in student learning.

In my first few years of teaching, I simply answered questions or chatted with them, if that is what they appeared to need. I had many office hours free to catch up on email. Over the years however, I have become much more careful and circumspect in my approach to office hours and now overtly strive to make them a coordinated part of student learning. The longer I am a professor the more student visits I have; indeed, just over the previous semester, it was a rare office hour that I did not have a student in attendance, as well as many student appointments outside of office hours. Parallel to the increased attendance, I have been refining techniques which make it altogether worthwhile to students to visit my office.



Meet Kim Knowles-Yáñez



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Identify, specify and act

Are you one of the 76 to 83 percent of faculty who attend office hours faithfully (Pfund et al., 2013)? Do you encourage students to “come see me in my office” and talk in class about how certain needs are best addressed in office hours? Exemplary teachers make proactive use of office hours (Hativa et al., 2001) and the conversations taking place in office hours are more significant than generally realized (Limberg, 2007). Students’ visits can effectively focus on one pedagogical angle, depending upon the particular student. Use the first few

minutes of a visit to see what the student’s questions are and assess the student’s primary need, which may not necessarily be what the student initially asks about. Examples of pedagogical angles that could serve as a focus for the visit include:

- Developing critical thinking questions (CTQ). Most of my classes require students to devise an individualized CTQ for their class projects. This is often the biggest draw to office hours. It usually takes a few iterations for students to sort through their ideas and the class’ content before they can nail down their

research focus. This is often hard for them to do and, without having to require it, usually means talking with most students about their CTQ, whether in the office, after class or via email.

- Writing weaknesses. Going over students’ writing individually with them can help

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > WINNING WITH THE STUDENT ATHLETE

Many student athletes are fine students. Clearly, their athletic diligence is related to academic diligence and it is a joy to talk with them, receive invitations to their games, and see their engagement with the course, their sport, and the

university. However, there are athletes who have been encouraged to slide by in school and who are not prepared for college level work. For these students it is worth the time to personally explain in office hours that their work does not demonstrate college level

readiness, but that no matter what level they are currently at academically they can achieve more. In my experience, they respond to pep talks, and it is not unproductive to shift our discussions into more of a “coaching” mode. Trying to reach these students also

extends into the classroom, where fanaticism about a sports team can become an example of regional cultural geography (think the New Orleans Saints, whose “Who dat!” chant is about far more than football) and a map of team loyalty can become an example for my

border studies class. Indeed, almost all students become engaged and curious when they see a non-sports oriented person like me discuss the significance of the Saints winning the 2010 Super Bowl XLIV a few years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

to establish grammatical error patterns or show them content and logic problems, such as where their writing raises more questions than it answers. It also provides a chance to tell them personally how our campus writing center will help them. Conversely, heap high praise on the students who are able to communicate well in writing; the aim is to have them leave your office with a greater understanding of the value of this skill set so that they can raise their own expectations of themselves.

- Organizing class material. Particularly on class projects where outside reading and data collection is involved, it often helps students to talk about 1) what they have found so far in their research, and 2) ways to organize the material. Going over their class notes with them is another tactic to take when a student presents as disorganized in their approach.
- Study habits. Ask students how much time they spend on the class or how much time they took to perform a task. I tell them that if they have not spent the recommended 6 hours per week outside of classroom time for my three unit course, then they need to adjust their expectations of their grade or the amount of time they are willing to study.

Personalization

Before a student leaves your office, ask if they have any more questions so that their

self-perceived needs may be met. If they share a personal detail or their opinion about the material, show interest and ask a general non-prying question. This generation of students often share as a result of very involved parenting and because of their social media use, which emphasizes personal experience—the “selfie” generation. They have been acclimated to think that personal experience and opinion are important to express in all matters. My personal teaching philosophy is that they

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should learn the material before interjecting their opinions, but flexibility in my thinking is in order. Turkle notes that office hours are a good time for students to practice speaking face-to-face with adults, a chance they may have more infrequently given the virtual worlds they often inhabit. Avoiding in-person contact with professors in favor of emailing questions means the student is not receiving the support of

being with another human as they are trying to be understood (2015).

In addition to fulfilling their need for self-expression and practice with adult interaction, interpersonal conversations also allow students to share their opinions and personal stories, which makes them more memorable and helps me to follow their learning more closely. Note: Where you are concerned about mental health issues, consider that we may be the student’s first contact in a mental health crisis (Guest Pryal, 2015) and that it is your responsibility to notify your student of the campus health support system. Consult *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* online booklet, “An Epidemic of Anguish” (2015), for practical advice on handling students in emotional distress in your office.

Waiting and the Office Setting

These techniques often beget even more use of office hours, which sometimes leads to a line of students outside my door. Having someone waiting makes me uncomfortable and potentially not as helpful to the student actually sitting in my office; there are a few practical tools to address the wait. The physical setting of the faculty member’s office can prove helpful. First, by sheer luck, outside my door there is a bench under a window with a lovely view, also

■ BEST PRACTICES > IT’S IN THE SYLLABUS

Office hours are the rare opportunity to meet our students individually at the level they are currently at with the material. If a student asks a question answered in the syllabus, I immediately verbalize kind concern that they are not putting together the basics of the class, and ask them to pull out his or her copy of the syllabus so that we can go

over it. This reinforces that they clearly have access to the material under question and could choose to be more responsible for their own learning. This can be further reinforced through the technique of asking the student how this particular item could have been better expressed in the syllabus. If students cannot make a suggestion, this reinforces that they should have studied

the syllabus more carefully and not wasted our time, and it allows me to receive helpful feedback where indeed something could have been made clearer. This technique is an example of replacing what is usually an automatic frustration of faculty—“it’s in the syllabus”—with a personalized learning experience for the student that challenges them to think



about aspects of their own performance and guides them toward thinking critically about their own learning and class material. This is an example of how the “in the moment” nature of office hours can facilitate aspects of student learning not usually possible in the classroom.

next to an electrical outlet. It is common to see a student sitting at the bench with her charging electronic device in use. This is probably just what many students need to ease the wait. Second, when discussing something of general, but not personal, concern to the class, raise your voice just loud enough that the students outside the door overhear. Many meetings with students have begun with, “I just heard what you said to (the student who just left) and so that answers my question, but now I want to check something else out with you.” This is a wonderful timesaver and allows students more time to develop their ideas. As an aside, unless the students explicitly suggest it, due to privacy concerns I rarely meet with multiple students at once, even if I know they have the same general question; I don’t want to put the students on the spot and have them agree to meet with others at the same time.

“I JUST HEARD WHAT YOU SAID...SO THAT ANSWERS MY QUESTION, BUT NOW I WANT TO CHECK SOMETHING ELSE OUT WITH YOU.”

Rethinking office hours

It is also possible to use some of these techniques in those 15 or so minutes after class when students approach you with questions and/or in classes that include a lab component, where there is constant one-on-one interaction with students as they work through lab tutorials at their own pace and in your presence. Rethinking the pedagogical aims of office hours requires taking into consideration the needs of individual students, their generational mindset, the physical layout of your office setting, and the content-based aims of the course. According to Jenkins (2015), “Educational research shows teachers can build trust and rapport in common-sense ways...” In McGrath’s experiment with her psychology statistics students, office hours contributed to a measurable improvement in student outcomes (2014).

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

FOR WHOM ARE OFFICE HOURS VERY HELPFUL?

International students.

While often high achievers in their countries of origin, their English language skills may lag behind their peers here. I grade their work with sympathy for second language difficulties, but also keep in mind how their writing would be perceived in the workforce. Talking to these students can “free” them by adjusting their expectations of their grades so that they can focus on improvement. There are visible signs of relief on their faces as they realize that they cannot not always expect to perform at the same level as in their home language.

Students who write poorly.

Students sometimes arrive in college with poor writing skills. They tell me, and most are juniors or

seniors, that no one has ever critiqued their writing before. I do not quibble, but rather work diligently to direct them to our campus writing center. I discuss why writing is one of the most important skills they will take from the university and assure them that it is worthwhile to dedicate their energies toward improving their writing.

Advanced students.

Nothing is more delightful than to meet a student who has a fire in their eye for the class and who wants more challenging material. We discuss potential areas to research with the caveat that they might not have time to follow up during the course of a busy semester, but that the material will still be there for them when they do. This serves to reinforce skills for lifelong learning, which may be the most important tool we are encouraging in our students.

Potential graduate students.

Where I see active potential for advanced critical thinking and writing, graduate school becomes a part of office-hour conversation. Many students do not have exposure to others with advanced degrees and have not thought of themselves as viable grad school candidates. We discuss different kinds of advanced degrees that might help achieve their life goals. I demonstrate the kind of social capital they are collecting through their educational journey by telling them I will write a letter of recommendation. I hear from some of these students, sometimes years later, full of resolve after having thought it over a long time, and happily write them those letters.



Where previously you may have been content to use office hours passively, using the time purposefully produces positive results in students and their academic development. Our office hours engagement is propelled by a more meaningful starting point and focus, which then leads toward a more genuine advancement of intellectual and pedagogical outcomes.

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