

What Students Want: Characteristics of Effective Teachers from the Students' Perspective

By: Ellen Smyth in Philosophy of Teaching

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As an undergrad, I put myself through school waiting tables – a truly humbling experience that made me a better instructor. With a mission of 100% customer satisfaction and my livelihood on the line, the patron's experience became my highest priority.

Taking that mindset into the classroom, I strove for 100% student satisfaction – within the confines of academic integrity, of course – and achieved great results. It turns out, oddly enough, that students love feeling important, valued, respected, and honored. And through the resulting faculty-student connection, students willingly transform into vessels of learning.

My teaching career has not always been rosy, however. After spending months with mini-demons from a special place in Hell, though they claimed to be from behavioral remediation, I grew jaded, losing my respect for students and not coincidentally my effectiveness as a teacher.

Years passed before a colleague helped me rediscover that our attitude toward students makes all the difference. Back on the path to student satisfaction and effective teaching, I constantly ask myself what students really want from me.

Conveniently, I was able to watch faculty from the Memorial University of Newfoundland present a study on Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching in Higher Education at Wisconsin's 26th Annual Distance Teaching and Learning Conference. Researchers had asked their students this question: What characteristics are essential for effective teaching from the student perspective? Analyzing and combining reasonably synonymous characteristics, researchers isolated the top nine for online and for face-to-face students.

ONLINE	FACE-TO-FACE
1. Respectful	1. Respectful
2. Responsive	2. Knowledgeable
3. Knowledgeable	3. Approachable
4. Approachable	4. Engaging
5. Communicative	5. Communicative
6. Organized	6. Organized
7. Engaging	7. Responsive
8. Professional	8. Professional

9. Humorous	9. Humorous
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Respect is *numero uno*. How about that? More important than knowledge (than knowledge!!!) and the ability to communicate and engage, respect dominates all other characteristics in effective teaching, according to students. Faculty spend, on average, 22 years acquiring enough knowledge to teach at the university level. How much time do we spend on respect?

Students should be shown all the respect we can muster. We need to regularly analyze and question our attitudes. We need to empathize with students by imagining role reversals and by believing in them whenever possible. We need to humble ourselves so that even the least are worthy of our attention and admiration.

The same top nine characteristics are common between online and face-to-face students, with only the order for the two bolded characteristics changing. Responsiveness is more highly valued online, moving five positions. This jump explains why classroom faculty new to e-learning don't always realize the urgency in responding to email and discussion posts. These faculty have been operating under a paradigm in which responsiveness is not so critical – a paradigm that needs to shift for online learning.

The remaining characteristics warrant a more thorough examination than this article provides. I challenge you to explore ways of fostering all nine characteristics.

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Reference:

Delaney, J.G., Johnson, A.N., Johnson, T.D., & Treslan, D.L. (2010). Students' Perceptions of Effective Teaching in Higher Education. St. John's, NL: *Distance Education and Learning Technologies*