

The ToolBox

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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



Building Relationships with Students

Think back over your school career. Who were the teachers that had the greatest impact on your life — those who left an indelible impression that still continues to impact the person that you have become? It is very likely that this impression was made as the result of a relationship rather than demonstrated expertise on a particular subject or discipline.

In the book *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation (1983)*, Frederick Buechner describes his experiences as a seminary student. He reminisces about the fact that he was permitted the privilege of studying under some of the greatest theological minds of the twentieth century. Looking back on that experience, he made the following observation:

In the last analysis, I have always believed, it is not so much their subjects that the great teachers teach as it is themselves.... Though much of what these teachers said remains with me still and has become so much a part of my own way of thinking and speaking that often I sound like them without realizing it, it is they themselves who left the deeper mark. (p. 12)

If Buechner's observations are correct, what are the factors that contribute to being the kind of teacher who leaves a "deeper mark" in the lives of students? Let us consider three basic ingredients:

- One of the first ingredients is the quality of **transparency**. Teachers who exhibit this characteristic allow their students to see and feel the content through their own enthusiasm and passion for the materials and strategies that they are sharing and using.
- Second, it is important to let students know that **you care about them as individuals and as learners**. Not only do you value their acquisition of new and important content material, but you also strongly value their growth as a person.
- Third, your **personal commitments** are central to who you are as a person and as a teacher. What are the values, beliefs, and character traits that are not only a part of your conversations, but also play a central role in determining your actions, decisions, and choices? Your character counts!

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Frederick Buechner,
Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation (1983, p. 12)



Finding Your Own Way of Connecting With Students...



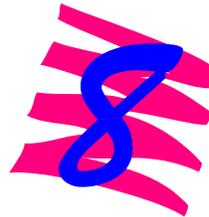
Consciously seek to build relationships with your students: As a starting point, our relationships with our students play a vital role in student learning. Make this a priority.



Sip some coffee: The next time that you have a series of advising sessions with students, hold your meeting in the Student Center over a cup of coffee. This adds a sense of informality to the conversation and opens the door to some real advising and mentoring.



Share your story: Each of us have a unique story to tell about the many paths that our lives have taken on the journey to our present location. As appropriate, and with discernment, share some of your story with your students.



Selectively apply instructional strategies: Promote opportunities for honest, open discussion on the "big questions" that are part of every instructional discipline. Share your thoughts and feelings, but be respectful of the opinions expressed by your students. Through this process, they are learning to work with new content and apply it to their lives.



Share a meal: There is no better way to get acquainted than to share a meal. In this informal setting, you will have opportunities to learn more about one another.



Say their names: Nothing shows interest in another person like the fact that you know and say their name when you have a conversation. It takes practice and effort but it is well worth it.



Send a note, card, or email: Share a word of encouragement with a student regarding participation in class, a test score, a birthday, or some accomplishment outside the classroom.



Serve together: Create opportunities to serve the community alongside your students.



Set limits and show compassion: As part of your relationships with students you will be required to make and enforce instructional demands and requirements. Clearly specify those requirements, enforce them, but do it with compassion.



**Relationships:
The glue that
holds together
the process of
learning**

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