
The Power of 4 Questions During a 5-minute Meeting

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Abstract

A challenge that exists in higher education is the lack of relatability between students and teachers. This disconnect likely prevents students from asking for help before, during, and/or after class. One way to increase relatability between students and teachers is by having a simple 5-minute conversation during an individual meeting, where I asked four questions and listened to the answers. The purpose of these meetings was to foster a relationship between myself and my students, in the hopes that students would feel more comfortable asking for help during and outside of class.

Students were offered a small amount of extra credit to meet with their human physiology professor during the first three weeks of the semester. To earn extra credit, students had to 1) Sign up for a five-minute meeting using a link posted on Canvas, 2) Find the office of the professor, and 3) Answer four questions. Students did not know the questions before hand which were- 1) Where are you from? 2) What is your career goal? 3) What is something unique about yourself? 4) What was the highlight of your break?

During the 2022-23 academic year, I had ~350 individual meetings with students where I asked these four questions. In a follow-up, anonymous survey, a common theme from students was these meetings were beneficial because they became more comfortable, and it made them more likely to ask questions in the future. These meetings appeared to be effective at increasing student engagement during and outside of class. <https://doi.org/10.21692/haps.2023.016>

Key words: relatability, education

Introduction

The perceived lack of relatability between students and teachers can be a stumbling block to student success (Cooper et al., 2018; Miller & Mills, 2019). Students often think of teachers as the “sage on the stage,” which can prevent them from voicing questions or concerns, because they don’t want to look dumb (O’Shea, 2020; Paciulli et al., 2022). However, there are many different strategies that can be employed to combat this disconnect and allow teachers to become relatable to students. Teachers can become more relatable by incorporating simple strategies such as talking about their lives outside of the class, keeping up on pop culture, incorporating analogies from everyday life into their teaching, and/or using humor (Cooper et al., 2018; Hsu & Goldsmith, 2021). The strategy I have found most effective is having a short, 5-minute, individual meeting with students.

I teach a large-enrollment (~350 students) introductory physiology class. During the first two weeks of class, students are afforded an opportunity to earn a small amount of extra credit by meeting with me in my office during the first two weeks of the semester, where they will answer four questions. Students are frequently reminded about this opportunity via daily Canvas announcements and

in-class assignments. Additionally, I ask students who have completed this activity to encourage their classmates to complete it. While I don’t share the questions with them, I assure them they know the answers. These questions are all “getting to know you questions.”

1. Where are you from?
2. What is your major?
3. What are your career goals?
4. What was the highlight of your winter/summer break?

This requires students to find my office and have a face-to-face conversation with me. Often, answers to these questions have led to meaningful discussions, where we learn about each other, and find that relatability that was seemingly missing. Ultimately this puts students at ease, which increases the likelihood they will ask and answer questions during class or office hours. After the two weeks has passed, I share with the class some general information I have learned to show the class that I do care about them as people.

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While this is a relatively easy strategy to employ, some considerations need to be made. Instructors must block time off in their schedule when students can come visit. Originally, I told students they could come by office anytime I was on campus. This led to frustration because of the constant interruptions, which made it nearly impossible to complete other tasks since students were dropping in every 10-minutes throughout the entire day. I now block off specific times for students to come (i.e., 12:00 pm – 3:00 pm), and students can schedule 5-minute appointments using a direct link provided in Canvas LMS to the Bookings app available through Microsoft OneDrive®. During the first two weeks of the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 semesters, I met with ~360 students (~50% of total enrollment over two semesters).

For this strategy to be most effective, instructors must be genuinely interested in learning about students. While it can get tiresome to continually ask the same questions, it helps to have a mindset that we are about to meet an incredible person and their unique story. For example, holding these meetings has allowed me to learn about students who-

- were excited because they had just been certified to drive forklift at their job.
- paid for college by being a surrogate.
- fear physiology more than anatomy.
- recently lost a child or spouse.
- felt like they had no support system.
- were first generation students with huge family support because they were going to be the first college graduate in their family.
- have plans of going to MD/PA/PT/OT/AT school.

As teachers we need to remember these experiences have shaped that student. These conversations often lead to more valuable, future discussions that likely improve student success. The individual relationship with a student that has been formed during this initial meeting in my office can be strengthened during conversations that have occurred in the few minutes before the start of class (i.e., how was it driving forklift this weekend?). This shows students I really did listen and do care about them and their success, which makes it more likely they will ask for help in and out of the classroom.

One of the most interesting parts of my conversations with students is the end. Since many students come to my office expecting the questions to be about physiology, they are a little confused when the conversation ends without discussing any physiology. Often, they ask if I can ask them the four questions for extra credit. I respond by telling them the “getting to know you” questions were the four questions. Students then realize my goal isn’t to determine their foundational knowledge. Instead, they recognize my goal is to get to know them and that they are important to me.

Perhaps the biggest benefit is this activity has allowed me to better understand students who are from underrepresented/underserved communities. Often these students are first generation, and/or do not have a support system in place. Many of these students feel like they are alone, and/or that attending school is ultimately pointless and might be expensive. While I can’t directly relate to their situations, I know I can support them. Conversations with these students have helped me understand their struggles, which demonstrates I believe in them, and makes it easier to come up with a collaborative blueprint for success.

Anecdotally, it appears that most students complete this exercise for the extra credit. However, I have received the following comments from students which suggest this meeting can have a very powerful effect.

- [Dr. Davis] was interested in his students and that he genuinely wanted everyone to be successful.
- I got to know Dr. Davis better and got more comfortable with being in his class.
- Dr. Davis felt more approachable.
- I became more comfortable, and it made me more likely to ask questions in the future.
- Honestly it made me more comfortable with [Dr. Davis].

Although the beginning of the semester, especially the fall semester, is extremely busy, I have found that investing this time at the beginning of the semester results in huge dividends throughout the semester, because it builds an individual relationship between me and each student, which increases the likelihood of success in the classroom.

Considerations

As described, this activity will not work for everyone. Instructors will likely have additional teaching, service, and/or research commitments, which might prevent them from setting aside large blocks of time to meet with students. One alternative would be to meet with students in small groups, instead of individually. While this might not be as powerful of an experience, it still provides the opportunity for students and the teacher to get to know one another.

Additionally, many classes are now offered in an online or hybrid format. It would be foolish to ask or require most students enrolled in these classes to come to campus and meet with the instructor. Many of these classes are composed of non-traditional students who might live in a different city, and/or have significant family and work responsibilities that limit their availability. However, there are alternatives that could be used. Instructors could ask students to meet with them via Zoom utilize a discussion board, and/or have a conversation via email. I believe there

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are two critical elements when setting up this activity. First, students need to see benefit in the activity. On its face, students will likely not see the benefit, which is why I offer a small amount of extra credit. Second, there needs to be a dialogue between instructor and student. It isn't enough for a student to answer these questions. Based on the answers the students provide, the instructor should be able to share something about themselves which will allow the students to relate to them.

Going forward, a study needs to be completed to quantify the benefits of this activity. This could be done via a short, anonymous survey that is given to all students regardless of whether they completed the activity. Data could be gathered to find out why students did or did not complete the activity, the grades of students who did or did not complete the activity, and what benefits came out of the activity (i.e., were they more less likely to attend office hours, ask questions in class). These findings would help determine how this activity could be modified to better accomplish its purpose.

About the Author

Jim Davis is an assistant professor in the Department of Anatomy, Cell Biology, and Physiology in the School of Medicine at Indiana University, Bloomington (IUSMB). Prior to joining the faculty at IUSMB in July 2022, Dr. Davis worked for 6 years as an assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology, Recreation, and Sport at Indiana State University. During these seven years, Dr. Davis has primarily taught basic human physiology. His education research interests include exam retakes, use of a flipped classroom model in a large setting, and student engagement.

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