



Featured Article:

Enhancing Teaching and Learning: 14 Strategies for Boosting Effectiveness and Joy

Joe Ruhl

Abstract

Educational research along with 42 years of classroom teaching have taught me that establishing meaningful, appropriate relationships with students results in minimized classroom discipline problems, increased student engagement and joy, increased learning, and enhanced job satisfaction, sense of fulfillment, and joy for the teacher! Positive teacher to students relationships are dependent on the teacher being intentional about demonstrating to the students that they are cared for as individuals. This article will summarize 14 ways to demonstrate teacher caring.

What's the most important thing I learned in 42 years of teaching high school students? What's the secret to happiness and fulfillment for the teacher in the classroom? What's the key to effective classroom management, increased student motivation and engagement, and effective learning? Building *relationships*!

Being intentional about building relationships in the classroom is huge, and it's built on a foundation of teacher caring. If the students perceive that we genuinely care about them as individuals, then walls of resistance to learning can crumble, creating positive experiences for the students and the teacher. Those days at school when I was intentional about remembering that "I don't teach biology. I teach *kids* biology," were the days when the students seemed to be most cheerful, most attentive, most engaged, and most on task. So, let's get practical. How can we show students that we care? Here are 14 practices that I have found to be highly effective.

1. Stand by the door and greet the students as they arrive at your classroom.

Beginning about the 6th year of my teaching career I picked up this idea from Harry Wong, an educator and motivational speaker, when I attended one of his work

shops at a convention of the *National Science Teachers Association*. On the first day of school, I would stand in the hallway outside of my door and greet the students with a smile, a handshake, and a warm "Hi, I'm Mr. Ruhl!" Thank you for taking my class! I am so excited to have you in my class!" (or some similar greeting). Throughout the school year, this practice can be difficult when we're busy, but taking the time and effort to greet the students as they enter the classroom can pay huge dividends, even if the greeting is no more than a thumbs up or a smile. Researchers have found that greeting "problem" students this way before class can increase their engagement from 45 to 72 percent (All-day & Pakurar, 2007).

2. Be real and smile on the first day of school.

I'll never forget the advice I received from a grizzled old, burned-out veteran teacher who sat down beside me at the table in the teachers' lounge during lunch time on my very first day of school when I was a scared, first year teacher. He told me, "Don't smile until Thanksgiving!" I listened politely, even though I was skeptical because it didn't seem natural and I've learned over four decades, that his suggestion just doesn't work. A smile is a universal, disarming expression of acceptance. Don't be afraid to use it. Be a person!

Full listing of authors and contacts can be found at the end of this article.



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3. Learn the students' names as soon as possible and remember and use them inside and outside of the class. Learn something about their interests outside of your class.

Since the students were so used to hearing the teacher talk about classroom rules and policies on the first day of school, they usually found this activity to be a welcome and unexpected break in the routine. I decided to wait until the second day of school to go over classroom rules of which I only had one: "Treat others as you would have them treat you." I did of course, elaborate a little bit on specific examples of how someone might mess up and not put that rule into practice. But on that first day, to introduce the get acquainted activity, I always told the students, "Welcome! Thank you for taking my class! (I loved the puzzled looks during this moment.) I love biology and I can't wait to share it with you, but more importantly, you are more than names and student ID numbers on this printout, so I first want to find out who you are as people. Then we'll get into biology." After that brief introduction I would then pull up the slide screen to reveal the following list that I had previously printed on the board:

1. Name
2. Birth date
3. Extracurricular activities
4. Hobbies
5. Part-time job, if any
6. Favorite food
7. Favorite movie
8. What do you want to be when you "grow up?"

Next, I would tell the students to take out a sheet of paper and then find a partner to talk to ("*What? We can talk in here?*"). I would go on to say "Take a few minutes to interview your partner, and to write down the above listed 8 pieces of information about your partner on your paper. After you're finished, your partner will interview you, and write down information about you on their paper. When everyone is finished with their interviews, I'll have you come up to the front of the classroom, one pair at a time, and introduce your partner to the rest of the class." The wide-eyed looks on the faces of some of the students at this time revealed varying levels of anxiety as many teenagers are self-conscious about speaking in front of an audience. I reassured the students and told them that such feelings are normal; everybody has them. I always went on to say something like, "In almost every career or profession that you choose, there will be times when you will have opportunities to speak publicly, so this is a good time to begin

practicing!" (*And why not let them share a little bit of the first day of school jitters that this introvert leaning teacher experiences!*) The important unspoken message to the students on this first day of school, was that they could expect this class to be student-centered rather than teacher-centered. The productive buzz that ensued during the next 10 minutes while the students interviewed one another was the kind of low-level classroom noise that teachers love to hear; the sound of students working together with purpose. This activity worked especially well for me because many of the students really did not know each other, since our school where I spent the last 36 years of my 42-year career (*Jefferson High School in Lafayette, Indiana*) is an urban high school of around 2500 students in the upper four grades. After all the interviews were completed, I made my way back to the front of the room and brought the class back together with an announcement something like this: "Before we start the introductions, I think that if I'm having you guys do this, it's only fair that I should go first, so I'll introduce myself!" Introducing myself to the students as I shared the 8 pieces of information about me revealed to the students that I was real and most importantly, approachable.

Before students began introducing their partners to the rest of the class, I had handed out a blank seating chart and told the students to note where they were in the classroom seating arrangement and to print their names on the seating chart ("*You mean we can choose where we want to sit in this class?*"). I also told them that when all the introductions were completed, that I would collect their papers and study them carefully so that I could learn all about who they were as persons. As I sat on a student desk or lab table to the side of the class during the student introductions I took careful notes on each student, noting especially the correct pronunciations of any unusual names. Having the students pronounce their partners' names during the introductions saved me *and* the students the embarrassment of butchering their names. That's not something that should be done to a self-conscious or insecure student on the first day of school. After each pair presented their partner to the class, I was able to interject occasional remarks such as "You're on the softball team? What position do you play? First base? That's what I played on the baseball team when I was in high school back in the Pleistocene when woolly mammoths roamed the frozen tundra!" Or "You're going to try out for the school musicals? I can't wait to see you on the stage!"

This first day of school activity took pretty much the entire class period and I would spend some time during the first couple evenings of that first week, studying the students' papers so that when I would see them in the school hallways, I could address them by name and ask them questions such as, "How's your after school marching band practice going? I've seen you guys out there after school marching under the hot August sun in the school parking lot!" Or "Has that restaurant that you work at given you a raise yet? No? Does Mr. Ruhl need to go in and talk to your boss?" As you can see, from the beginning I was trying to be intentional about establishing those all-important appropriate, firm, friendly, and fair teacher-student relationships. Relationship in the classroom is huge.

Every effective teacher stands on the shoulders of giants (*mentors*). I'll never forget one of those giants. His name was Dr. Sam Postlethwait, the creative innovative pioneer in science education at Purdue University – the father of the student-centered audio-tutorial method of instruction that he used in his freshman biology course, Botany 108. It was early in the fall semester of my freshman year of college. He saw me in the hallway and said, "Hello Joe! How are you?" I was floored and I felt valued! It was only the first week of school. He oversaw a course of hundreds of students and he knew my name! That was probably the best lesson that I learned on my path towards becoming a teacher.

4. Have a sense of humor. Be able to laugh at yourself.

It's important to find out and be aware of your own unique style of humor. I'm not a great joke teller, because my attempts at jokes tend to be "Dad jokes" so I will avoid telling jokes. It's just not my style. My humor tends to be a bit daffy, of the self-deprecating kind. This style of humor can show the students that their teacher is human, soften their hearts and help to create a sense of community. Be sure to find out what your style is and use it. Kids respond to humor.

5. Look prepared and be prepared. Have predictable classroom rituals and routines.

Being prepared is just basic professionalism. Think about how you have felt if you've ever dined in a fine restaurant. A professionally dressed host or hostess smiles, welcomes you and escorts you to your table. You sit down to a beautifully prepared table complete with pressed white table cloth, flowers, neatly folded cloth napkins, and carefully placed silverware. The presen-

tation of the food, when it arrives, is so immaculate, you may be tempted to take a photograph of your plate and post it on Facebook! You're made to feel like you're the only customer there, and you just know that this restaurant carefully prepared before opening their doors. Contrast that to the way you felt if you've ever pulled up to the speaker in a fast-food drive through lane and heard the employee announce, "Our chocolate shake machine is out of order." It probably says a lot about me, but for me that can be a real letdown, especially on a long road trip. Looking prepared and being prepared is just as important in education.

6. Be passionate and excited about what you're teaching.

Margaret McFarland was a child psychologist who happened to be Mr. Fred Rogers' mentor. Here's a quote from her: "Attitudes aren't taught, they're caught. If a teacher has an attitude of enthusiasm for the subject, the student catches that whether the student is in second grade or is in graduate school." (as cited in King, 2018, p. 138). I know we've all experienced this. I'll never forget my third-grade teacher Miss Hershey. She would take 10-15 minutes after lunch to read to us. There she stood at the front of the class each day in her flowered dress where she would read a small portion of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, to be continued the next day! Now we had entertaining cartoons on our black and white TV at home, but this was different! *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was a riveting adventure! And at the end of each day's reading, I couldn't wait for Miss Hershey to continue the story the next day. It seemed that Tom and his friends were always at a cliff hanger moment when she closed the book for the day! It was obvious to us that Miss Hershey was passionate about reading and loved to read to us! Looking back, I would have to say that she inspired me to be a reader. But Miss Hershey taught in a time before non-educators in state legislatures began mandating state-wide standards and standardized testing, so she, being respected by society for her experience and professional training, was free to teach and inspire.

7. Allow time for freedom of movement in the classroom along with small group, hands-on work requiring students to collaborate and communicate.

For the first few years of my teaching career my "go to," comfortable, teaching method was lecturing. After all, that was the predominant method of instruction

that I grew up with. I think most of us remember the “teacher-centered” classroom. Right? The teacher was up front and center. The students were in nice neat rows, not allowed to talk to each other and the teacher, the source of authority, downloaded information to the kids who regurgitated it back up on a test designed to measure how much content they could remember. The first few years of my career I was tempted to resort to that comfortable, familiar style, even if it wasn’t exactly inspiring for the students or for me!

I’m so thankful that, after several years of teaching, I finally transitioned from a teacher-centered approach to running a student-centered classroom. It takes a great deal of work and preparation on the front end but the rewards are so worth it! I discovered that the kids LIKE learning this way (“*We get to do stuff in here.*” “*We get to work together.*”). I remember thinking, no wonder kids like learning this way! That’s how our brains are wired. We are a social species. Our brains are wired to collaborate and communicate. I’m convinced that having students sit in nice neat rows where they’re not allowed to talk to each other is unnatural and counter-productive. A few years ago, some teachers and administrators who visited and observed my classes were amazed that “100% of the kids were on task 100% of the time in three consecutive 92-minute periods.” For me, teaching this way is not only effective but it’s fun. Most importantly it allows the teacher opportunities to informally sit down with small groups of students and work eye to eye and shoulder to shoulder, creating opportunities to mentor, nurture, and inspire kids – to work on building those all-important teacher-students relationships.

8. Allow time for project work. Humans enjoy being creative.

It takes a bit of courage and trust for the teacher to move off-stage and allow the students time for project work. Creativity is a uniquely human, pleasurable, self-satisfying activity. Since human brains are wired for creativity, students like to be given the opportunity for project work, and they view it as evidence that the teacher cares. Just as important, project work is pedagogically sound because it promotes problem-solving and critical thinking. Project work will involve students not just in basic memorization, or understanding thinking, but will move them up into those higher levels of

thinking such as applying, analyzing, evaluating, and ultimately to the pinnacle of higher-order thinking: creating.

In each unit of my 9th grade biology course, I gave students the opportunity to do a project (created mostly outside of class time) if they wanted to earn additional points towards a higher grade for that unit. I allowed them to design a project of their own choosing that would demonstrate in a nontraditional way their understanding of some concept or topic that they had learned about during the unit. One specific example was quite memorable. It was during the first three-week unit of the school year on the nature of science. I’ll never forget a group of four girls who decided to write a script for a 15-minute play about the conflict and subsequent trials that Galileo suffered at the hands of church leaders in the 1600s. They then acted out and made a video dramatization of Galileo’s discoveries, trial, and sentencing, complete with fake beards and make-shift attempts at period clothing! We watched their entertaining and educational production in class. I really believe that those four girls and their classmates will always remember key aspects of the nature of science taught by Galileo because of this project work. But beyond mere belief, I recall some empirical evidence that project work is effective. A couple of years ago at a high school football game I visited with Tenecia, a former student who is now a 20-year veteran of our town’s police force. She hugged me and said, “Mr. Ruhl!” I’ll never forget that cell cake I made for your biology class! I still remember that the mitochondrion is the power house of the cell, that the endoplasmic reticulum moves materials throughout the cell, that the nucleus contains the DNA and controls the cell’s activities, and that the vacuoles are storage bins in the cell, (*She went on and on, much to my delight!*) . . . I remember! She had baked a cake at home and decorated it with icing and different sizes and shapes of various candies to represent the different cell parts, creating a 3-D edible model of a cell. When she brought it to school, she gave a 5-minute presentation to the class, pointing out the various cell parts and describing their functions. Even though she and her police department co-workers over the years have likely not talked much in their daily conversations about the importance of mitochondria, the endoplasmic reticulum, the cell nucleus, or vacuoles, she retained that information for all these years thanks to project work!



9. Whenever possible, allow for student choice of learning activities.

Autonomy is a universal human value. Humans seem to like it when they know they have choices. Have you ever noticed people moving through the line in a smorgasbord restaurant, picking and choosing the food items to place on their plates? They usually have smiles on their faces because of the opportunity to make choices! In all aspects of life, humans like having choices, and that includes life in the classroom. The following are a few easy to implement, simple ideas that can be used to allow for student choice in many different grade levels and subject areas. I am certain you have used some of these and that you have other ideas as well. I believe it's important for us to be reminded to implement student choice whenever we can.

1. Allow choices on tests or quizzes. When I was a college student, I took a course in Cell Biology and the professor would often give us essay tests with the following instruction: "Do any three of the following five essay questions."
2. Choose which homework problems to do. When I was a high school student, I remember a math teacher who told us, "For homework, do either the odd or the even-numbered problems at the end of the chapter."
3. "Design and construct a project of your own choosing that would demonstrate in a nontraditional way, your understanding of some concept or topic that you learned about during the unit."
4. "Here are three activities that I have set up at three different learning stations throughout the classroom. When you have completed the work at the three stations, go ahead and hand in your work. You may rotate through the stations in any order you choose."
5. "Here are some practice genetics problems I would like for you to work on. You may either work alone or with a partner."
6. *(on the first day of school)* "You may sit anywhere you want (*I'll assess in a week or two to see if it works out!*), and I'll pass around a blank seating chart for you to print your name on."
7. "For today's group work, you may choose your lab partners."

Kids like a class in which they have choices. If you give them choices, they will believe and know that you care.

10. Recognize students for their accomplishments outside of the classroom.

Human beings have a desire to be successful in whatever passion in life they choose to pursue, and to feel a sense of pride in a job well done. I also believe human beings have an inherent need to feel valued and to be recognized. I have found recognizing students for their accomplishments outside of the classroom to be a powerfully effective way to show the kids that I care, and to strengthen those all-important teacher-student relationships in the classroom. To do this, whenever I had a student recognized in the local newspaper for some accomplishment in an outside activity such as Chess Club, the school play or musical, choir, Robotics Team, 4-H fair queen, Eagle Scout award, or athletics, I always enjoyed cutting out their newspaper article and posting it on the Wall of Fame in my classroom. It was a simple thing to do but so effective! Even if a student never made the newspaper, the unspoken message when they saw the Wall of Fame covered with newspaper articles, was that this teacher cared. I always loved it when a student would make eye contact with me and smile when they recognized their news clipping on the wall. I would normally say something like, "I was so excited to see that in the newspaper this morning! How cool! I'm proud of you! Please take a pen and, sometime this period, sign that newspaper article, because someday when you're famous, I bet your autograph will be worth lots of money and it will help fund my retirement!"

11. Recognize their birthdays.

I've known teachers who have all kinds of creative ways of recognizing students' birthdays. My method was actually very simple. My early morning ritual when I arrived at school included checking to see if any of my students had a birthday that day or, if it was a Friday, if anyone had a birthday during the upcoming weekend. As soon as the bell would ring to start class, after my usual "Happy Monday (or Tuesday, or Wednesday . . .)!" I would say to the student, "Happy Birthday!" and to the class I would announce, "Okay! Let's show (Insert student's name here.) some love! I'll leave the door open so we can rock the hallway on this floor!" The kids enjoyed and appreciated it when I led the class in loud, off-key birthday wishes! Sometimes the littlest gestures can make the biggest difference.

12. Praise students in public, but scold them in private. NEVER yell.

I've never viewed myself as the greatest disciplinarian, so I chose to use what I call preventative discipline. In other words, set up a learning environment that is such an attention grabber, so interesting, so engaging, (*and yes, maybe even fun*) that the students won't have the time or the desire to misbehave ("Mr. Ruhl, I love biology because we get to do stuff in here!"). Now, of course, occasionally I would have that kid who would still manage to find a way to act inappropriately. I learned that if I confronted that student in front of the whole class, he felt, knowing that his peers were watching, obliged to "save face" and demonstrate a defiant, argumentative attitude. As a teacher, it's next to impossible to win in that scenario. I found it best to calmly say, without emotion, something very brief and firm such as, "*(Insert name of student here.)*, please (*Notice the good manners modeling going on here?*) come and see me when we split up and begin the day's activities after these announcements. I want to chat for a minute." As the students got up from their seats and began moving to their work stations, I would look down at some papers I was holding while the culprit slowly and cautiously (*What's Mr. Ruhl going to do to me?*) walked up towards me. I would look up from that stack of papers and say something like, "Oh. Yes. I just wanted to chat with you for a minute. I know you have a lot of work to do, so it won't take long." We would then step outside the open door of the classroom, out of earshot, with the student out of site of the other kids and positioning myself so I could "keep one eye on the class." In those situations, reminding myself to be firm, friendly, and fair, I found that even the most annoying kid, without an audience, would act like a human being, carry on a respectful conversation with me, and come away knowing, in no uncertain terms, what my expectations were going forward.

13. Say "hello" when you see them outside of class in the hall during passing periods, in the lunchroom, or at after school events. Smile and act like you're genuinely happy to see them.

This one is so easy to do! But, as teachers, in our time-pressured, busy day this gesture sometimes requires us to be intentional about it. As mentioned before, a smile is a universal expression of warmth and acceptance and it can be one of your most effective tools. I've always counseled my young student teachers, "Just be a person." It's amazing how something as simple as a smile can communicate to students that you care.

14. Attend after school extracurricular events.

Whenever possible, this one is a must do! Kids will notice when you show up at their choir or band concerts, musicals or plays, science fairs or athletic events, and when you do, they will perceive that you genuinely care about them. Carving out time for such activities can be extremely difficult, given a teacher's busy professional and personal schedule, but I'm sure you will find that the time invested in attending at least a few of your students' outside of class events will result in increased student motivation and improved behavior in class.

One day not long ago, I had heard that our girls' high school softball team would be having a home game after school so I thought I would go, since several of my students were on the team. I made my way up the bleachers and found a seat above our home team's dugout along the third baseline. It wasn't long before I saw a student's head pop up and look up into the stands and then pop right back down again. A few moments later, I heard a voice in the dugout: "Mr. Ruhl came to our game!" I'm convinced that if you take the time to attend at least a few of their outside of class activities, that it will pay off. Having first-hand experience witnessing their home run, their solo in the school musical, their last second shot in the basketball game, or their march

ing band show during halftime of the football game, will give you even more material that you can use when you strike up those short relationship building conversations in the lunchroom, in the hallway, or as the students trickle into your classroom before or shortly after the bell rings.

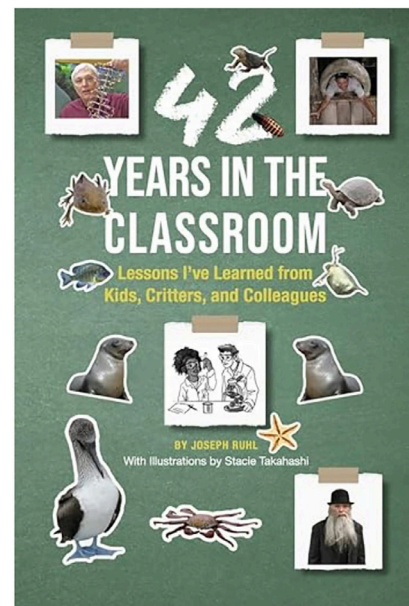
At about the 15-year mark of my 42-year teaching career, I started experiencing that dreaded teacher burnout. The kids weren't loving biology as much as I did. I'm so thankful that I had that "light bulb" moment in the school hallway during passing period years ago when I realized, "I don't teach biology. I teach **KIDS** – biology." The days when I was intentional about remembering that seemed to be, more often than not, the days when teaching **AND** learning were most effective and most enjoyable. The ideas that I have shared in this article reignited that passion, generating a wave of job satisfaction and joy that I was able to ride all the way through to the end of the last day of year number 42. Relationship building in the classroom is huge, and it's starts with showing the students that you care about them as individuals.

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Editors Note:

This article is adapted from Joe's 2022 book, titled *42 Years in the Classroom: Lessons I've Learned from Kids, Critters, and Colleagues*.



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