

ADVICE

How to Rebuild a Broken Connection With Students

What to do when they aren't responding to your tried-and-true teaching strategies.

By [Kristi Rudenga](#) September 25, 2024



JON KRAUSE FOR THE CHRONICLE

It's only September, yet I am already hearing a now-familiar lament from faculty members across higher education — especially, but not exclusively, at the midcareer and

senior ranks — who feel completely unable to connect with their students.

Frustration between the two parties runs higher than I've ever seen. This is not a matter of curmudgeonly researchers who can't be bothered by pesky undergraduates. I'm hearing this from experienced, successful teachers who care deeply about students, as learners and as human beings. And suddenly, they are flummoxed by a sense of acute disconnection, and by students who aren't responding to tried-and-true teaching strategies.

Intergenerational misunderstanding is a tale as old as time. But the tumult of the past five years seems to have supercharged the disconnect between students and faculty members, an especially pernicious effect when layered on top of what the U.S. Surgeon General has called "[our epidemic of loneliness and isolation](#)." *The Chronicle* reported on a "[stunning level of student disconnection](#)" in the spring of 2022, as students returned to campuses after higher ed's online pivot, and, a year later, published a report on "[connecting in the classroom and beyond](#)." But the parade of despairing faculty members looking for help continues apace.

I could catalog the sources of disconnect all day long, but what teachers need in 2024-25 are simple remedies. Human connection is essential, both for your own job satisfaction and as an important precursor to student learning. How can you revive flagging classroom relationships in the service of learning? Of course students must join you in that work, but the first responsibility lies with you as their instructor. Here are some practical first steps to help you bridge the divide.

Get personal. Faculty members need to start prioritizing human connection as a value in teaching. This doesn't have to mean upending everything you do in class, or trying to be someone you're not. It does mean finding concrete ways — that you're comfortable with — to create moments of human connection. For example:

- Once a week, [Paul Perrin](#), an associate professor of global development at the University of Notre Dame, sets aside a few minutes of class for students to share "celebrations." The cause can be great or small: finishing a stretch of midterms, landing

an internship, winning a race. It's a simple practice that pays huge dividends in building a sense of community in class.

- Make a concerted effort to [learn your students' names and faces](#), and acknowledge them outside of class. A [forthcoming book](#) offers advice on how to do that, even in courses with large enrollments. Students say that a smile and a wave from a professor passing by on the campus makes them feel valued. It's a small act of humanity that requires minimal effort.
- Do you already use name tents? If so, you probably let their use wane as you learn students' names. Instead, try using the name tents throughout the semester. Passing them out at the start of every class gives you a good reason to look students in the eye and greet them individually as they arrive. I've maintained this practice ever since a quiet student told me, late one fall afternoon when I welcomed him and handed him his name tent, "Huh, that's the first time someone has said hi to me today."
- In small or medium-sized courses, consider scheduling 10-minute meetings — in lieu of written feedback on their drafts — to interact individually with students and get to know them a little more. The net investment of your time is often less than with written feedback (especially once you factor in procrastinating), and the experience is almost always more rewarding. If your schedule doesn't allow for meetings, try offering [video feedback](#), to add a bit of personal quality to your communication.

This next idea is a big ask, but if your circumstances allow: Consider inviting your students to your home for a meal. During class cookouts, I've watched students connect over shared food preferences or yard-game strategies. I've seen students who rarely speak up in class display remarkable talents at connecting with children, and I've seen homesick undergraduates tear up at the chance to pet a dog. In our subsequent class meetings, I invariably find the dynamic to be strikingly warmer and more collegial. (If money is an issue, and it often is, ask your department or college if it has small grants to defray the cost of such gatherings.)

Ask what they think, early and often. As a faculty member you may expect students to reach out to you if they need help. It's easy to forget how daunting that can be, for any number of logistical, cultural, and psychological reasons. Part of the task of setting up a

classroom conducive to human connection is to create specific venues in which students can easily communicate with you.

From the first day of class, ask students about themselves. A [first-day survey](#) can reveal a lot about their motivations, trepidations, and experiences. This is a great way to learn more about your students, especially if you have hundreds of them.

To prioritize human connection, consider adding a question about students' hobbies or favorite songs. Then integrate their responses into the course here and there throughout the semester: Play a rotation of their favorite songs before class or draw connections like “since some of you mentioned that you enjoy knitting, let’s use the metaphor of a ball of yarn here.”

Collect anonymous [feedback](#) about the course during the semester. Give students a chance to tell you about their course-related experiences and concerns in a way that may not otherwise be possible. This is easily done with a Google form or a written response on a note card, and it can have an outsized impact on both your teaching and your students feeling heard and valued.

Many instructors use a “minute paper” (answering a question about the course in 60 seconds) or an “[exit ticket](#)” (so named because students complete it just before they leave class) as a strategy for assessing student learning or surfacing questions about course content. Besides asking about course content, you might also pose broader questions such as:

- What’s your biggest concern about this course right now?
- What is one thing you plan to do this weekend to take care of yourself?
- What would you like me to know about your life right now?

Such questions give students the opportunity (though not the obligation) to share about their current circumstances or disclose significant concerns.

Are you as clear with students as you think you are? My general advice for faculty members: Take what you think of as clear communication and turn it up about three

notches. Only then will students begin to understand what you're telling them.

[Mary-Ann Winkelmes](#), director and principal investigator of a national project on teaching in higher ed, describes a deceptively simple framework for designing “[transparent assignments](#).” The idea is to challenge faculty members to articulate — in terms their students will understand — three factors about their course assignments:

- **Purpose.** What skills will students practice in completing the assignment? What knowledge will they gain? How might it be relevant to their future?
- **Task.** What, precisely, are you asking students to do? What steps should they take to get there?
- **Criteria.** What might a successful assignment look like? Can you share a rubric or checklist so that students could evaluate their work?

Almost invariably, when I lead faculty members through the “task” portion of this exercise, they settle in front of their laptops with a bit of swagger as they begin to list the steps required to finish a course assignment they've designed. Within minutes, however, they start to look up with surprise and bafflement as they realize how many steps are actually involved in the tasks that they've so blithely assigned for years. When they later pair up to get feedback from someone outside of their discipline, the moments of shock continue. Things they've taken for granted as obvious about an assignment turn out to be unclear to colleagues — and no doubt even more so to undergraduates.

The longer we've been using a particular academic skill, the easier it is to forget just how many elements have to be pieced together to do it well, and just how much shorthand we use in assigning it. Even if you consider “solve the following system of equations” to be a perfectly straightforward instruction, students cannot read your mind about how to do so. Do you want them to solve it by hand or on a computer? Should they write out each step for submission, or just indicate a final answer?

Challenge yourself to think deeply about the steps that a novice would have to take to complete your assignment — no matter how basic it is to you — and articulate them to students.

Assignments are just one piece of transparent communication in the classroom, but they are an important one. Once you start asking yourself what you may be leaving out in your assignments that would be valuable for students to know, you're very likely to start catching other mistaken assumptions about how you communicate in the classroom.

Your goal here is to communicate in a way that's geared toward the students you actually have, rather than an imaginary roster of mini-yous. For students, your classroom will begin to feel more like a place for connection and learning, rather than isolation and frustration.

Resist the urge to trash talk your students. Many a professor lets off steam by ranting to colleagues or making aggrieved social-media posts about “students today.” But instead, the next time you find yourself feeling baffled, irritated, or frustrated by your students, take a moment to examine those feelings. Are they camouflaging some deeper worry you have about the meaning of your teaching, or whether you can still do it well? What small steps could you take — like some I've suggested here or others you will find in [this report](#) — to invite your students to meet you in the deeply human work of teaching and learning?

Will these steps make a difference? Last October, I met with an award-winning professor who came to the campus teaching center. I was expecting one of our usual upbeat conversations about teaching. Instead, her shoulders slumped as she said, “I've always been so good at this. And nothing is working anymore.” The despair was palpable. “I can't keep up with all of their extension requests,” she said. “They only seem to care about getting a grade and getting out of there. What am I even doing here?” We talked about connection, communication, and assignment design, and worked through the framework for one of her assignments.

A few weeks ago, I met that same professor again, and the conversation took a very different tone. She said that a deliberate reboot of her communication style in class (to be more straightforward and clear) has been a game-changer, and that her interactions with students feel closer to the way they used to feel.

No set of tips and tricks will ever form a complete answer to how to meaningfully reach your students. But finding concrete ways to prioritize human connection, gather input from your students, and communicate with them clearly can go a long way toward breathing life into a flagging classroom.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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