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Random Memorandums

Deborah Bracke, PhD • October 3, 2014

There is nothing quite like a Friday afternoon. The hurry-up pressures of the week come to a halt, and I can catch my breath against the wide open space of a weekend. But Fridays are special for another reason too. They give me a chance to actively reflect on the teaching and learning that occurred (or didn't occur) during the previous five days in my classroom.

For the past seven years, I have been sharing these Friday afternoon reflections with my students via email. I've coined them my "random memorandums," and they incorporate a variety of observations about my task as professor, their role as student, and the interactions we share. At the outset, these ramblings appear quite arbitrary. (In fact, one student christened them my "stray thoughts.") However, a closer examination reveals that they are not random at all. On the contrary, these Friday messages are an extension of the school experience. In fact, some might even call them "pedagogy."

Following are some key features of these weekly conversations. I have also included some of my entries from past random memorandums.

- **They are reflexively honest about my teaching:** “. . . I have taken many notes from the feedback you provided. I know I need to make my directions more explicit for the next assignment, perhaps provide a better example, and articulate clear-cut gradations of quality on each criterion of the rubric. I appreciate your comments and will be able to use this information to ‘fine-tune’ a similar assignment next term . . .”
- **They reinforce sound principles and foster teachable moments after the school bell rings:** “. . . As you read the assigned chapters, remember to jot down the differentiation strategies that would benefit your clinical students. Continually ask the question, “How should I teach?” This is one of the most fundamental questions a teacher candidate can ask . . . and must answer . . .”
- **They introduce gentle reminders and good practices for effective study:** “. . . You might want to be looking ahead at the Clinical Evidence that is due on October 24 and the Performance Capstone that is due during finals week. You have some wiggle room right now, and it would be wise to get a head start on these big projects. I can always tell when you are ‘coming in on two wheels’ . . .”
- **They make connections to life outside the classroom:** “. . . You continue to be an awesome group of teacher candidates—a wonderful community of learners—and I appreciate your class contributions and enthusiasm for each assignment. However, I encourage you all to keep up with your readings! The responses to the ‘checkative’ today were very, very creative—but most of your responses were incorrect. I value your ingenuity and resourcefulness in trying to get the right answer. . . . But, it would have been much more prudent to valorize underrepresentation and overrepresentation with regard to students with disabilities. I understand that it has been a busy week with Homecoming festivities and Yell, but I remind you to re-identify your priorities as we progress through the term . . .”
- **They clarify expectations and articulate goals for the upcoming week** (In fact, I usually include a brief outline for the week ahead, including any changes to the syllabus.): “. . . We continue to move at a brisk (and very determined) pace. Please note a change in the syllabus and read Chapter 10 by Wednesday of next week. I have a hunch (based on evidence) that some of you are falling behind in the readings. I know you care about teaching. Chapter 10 is rife with instructional strategies . . .”
- **They are comfortable and chatty:** “. . . It is interesting that so many of you have family members and friends with disabilities! I hope you continue to feel comfortable contributing these personal stories to our class discussions. These experiences have great educational value.” On another note, I just received an email from a principal who wrote, ‘I just interviewed two outstanding Augustana graduates who blew me away.’ Keep up the hard work. There is life after EDUC 340 . . .”

We all know that teaching is a work in progress, and as we construct an image of the kind of professor we want to be, it is important that we are recognizable in our practice. One means of distinguishing ourselves is by communicating with our students in an open, honest manner. The random memorandum is one way of accomplishing this.

AUTHOR UPDATE (received 9/23/2019): I strongly believe that our learning spaces must be built on relationships and that random memorandums (RMs) nourish the humanity that exists between a teacher and her students. Acknowledging the successes of the week, along with the challenges, contributes to the honest and open atmosphere that promotes learning. I also often found that exposing the fact that I struggled with pacing or clarity during a specific lesson was a wonderful gift I could give to my students. They learned that absolutes simply do not exist and that teaching is full of decisions (trial and error) that often multiply faster than the teacher can respond. They also learn that our storehouse of instructional knowledge continues to evolve throughout our professional careers.

I think the RMs are easy to tailor to any course. They provide an additional avenue of communication, plus the opportunity to converse about pedagogy. All of us have afterthoughts when the session ends and we leave the room or log off. Sometimes these afterthoughts are more valuable than the lesson itself. They offer one more teachable moment we have with our students. It lets them know that what we talked about in class is still on my mind and I'm hoping on theirs as well. We learn and teach together—it's a humbling experience for both of us.

Finally, I found my Friday afternoons a perfect time for contemplation and solitude from the demanding pace of teaching; the RMs were an opportunity to take ownership of my successes and challenges and to let my students know that good teaching cannot be willed. It is a continuous stream of decisions and reflections—and both increase the probability of learning.

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