When Liking Your Students Empowers Them: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper examines a group of first-year students attending a Historically Black University in the southeast who all took a course that utilized common teaching methods, resources, and assessments of student learning. A student course evaluation was administered in each section of the course which asked students to respond to statements regarding how they felt about their professor and their actions in the class. The results of the survey suggests that many students benefit in a meaningful way when they not only like their professor, but also when they feel that their professor respects and cares about them as both people and as students. These benefits include: greater academic confidence and self-esteem, higher levels of effort and time spent studying, and better grades.
“Because the professor cared, I think that’s why most kids tried in this class.”

-Anonymous student comment

**Introduction**

Right about the time that I was reading Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004) I was offered, and accepted, a position teaching at a well-known Historically Black University (HBCU) in the southeast. This was not my first encounter with this book. Back in 2005, two colleagues and I each presented a new, notable book on teaching and learning at one of those small college wine and cheese events. As one of my colleagues presented Bain’s book, I remember wishing that I had chosen it, especially since the one that I ended up with called for what I described as “a distance between faculty and students that was dizzying.” Hearing my own words shortly following a discussion of Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* has stayed with me ever since.

Once I got the opportunity to read the book I found it important largely because it called for a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that few other educators had ever proposed. However, I was still unsure how this kind of approach might help me when preparing for my new position. Moving from classes numbering less than twenty that were held in smart classrooms with moveable furniture to class sections where students numbered over one hundred and were held in classrooms that utilized all the technology that I could carry would certainly not help. Another concern of mine was of my own active teaching style; as such, I was concerned about the prospect of having to lecture more often than I was used to. Finally, I started to wonder about the HBCU thing. It was not that I expected being white was going to be a problem in a HBCU or any other classroom, but I was being *told* by many of my new colleagues that it would.

At the suggestion of a number of people, I read up on *how* to teach at an HBCU. I was eventually drawn to an edited volume by Frank W. Hale, Jr. entitled *How Black Colleges Empower Black Students: Lessons for Higher Education* (2006). Although there were a number of chapters that
spoke both directly and indirectly to the book’s organizing theme of empowering African American students, two in particular stood out to me.

One article by Lawrence A. Davis Jr. (2006) entitled, “Success Against the Odds: The HBCU Experience” cites self-esteem building as one important characteristic of the HBCU experience. Here, Davis notes that successful individuals have “a positive attitude, which is developed through experiencing success” (44). While this article directs its attention primarily to activities performed outside of class like student government, athletics, band, choir, and clubs, I wondered more about building a positive attitude in class and about academics. Why wouldn’t a similar formula work there?

Dr. Charles V. Willie (2006) wrote the second article “A Contribution to Higher Education: Mentoring Methods and Techniques Developed by Historically Black Colleges and Universities.” Here, Willie really helped me to visualize the atmosphere that I hoped to create with phrases like “giving ‘good’ for ‘good’” and “where there is respect, there is care, concern and consideration.” Willie clearly argues against creating distance between teacher and student and says, “I conclude that inspired teaching and useful learning are enhanced in school communities where there is admiration and respect between teacher and student because of their confidence and trust in each other” (77). Both of these articles ran parallel to the concepts expressed in Bain’s book—towards creating an atmosphere that empowered and nurtured all students.

As a result, I kept returning to Bain’s chapter “How Do They Treat Their Students?” There, Bain’s example of the brilliant professor who made the class about himself was helpful when considering the affects of how power is expressed in the classroom. While many of the students in this professor’s class stated how they had really appreciated the course, as many as half of the class ranked this professor as low as possible. In fact, Bain discovered that student after student said the professor “was arrogant, did not care about students, ridiculed some people in class, often bragged about the high numbers who flunked…and set harsh and arbitrary demands” (138). Like
some professors, he served as the self-appointed gatekeeper to the major where “the best students” would be the only ones allowed to move on in the major while the others would have to take a detour in another direction. For this particular professor, his self-image of being brilliant and demanding dictated a specific attitude toward his students and about the power structure in his classroom. Unfortunately, it was his attitude that cost the self-esteem and long-term success of many students.

For these gatekeeper professors, the students who ended up succeeding would likely have done no worse in anybody’s classroom; after all, in every classroom there is a group of students who will succeed regardless of the teacher. Based on past experiences, I found that these professors were usually the very faculty members who often complained that admissions needed to get their department “better” students therefore throwing the responsibility of teaching all of their students anywhere but on themselves. Thus, it became clear to me that I needed to reach all of the students in every class and accept the responsibility for the ones who didn’t make it. Bain (2004) expressed it like this:

> With the rejection of power came an equally important and powerful trust. ‘The most important aspect of my teaching,’ one instructor told us in a theme we heard frequently, ‘is the relationship of trust that develops between me and my students.’ That trust meant that the teachers believed students wanted to learn, and they assumed, until proven otherwise, that they could learn. That attitude found reflection in scores of small and large practices. It led to high expectations and to the habit of looking inward for any problems rather than blaming some alleged student deficiency (140).

As such, I started to see the classroom as a zero-sum game where the more power the professor had, the less students did.
Conditions, Methodology, and Data

The students in this study came from general education, social science sections at a HBCU in the southeast. Students were from the same cohort of first-time, first-year students in sections that ranged in enrollments from 75-155. There was a common syllabus, common learning goals and objectives, common texts, common assignments, common presentations, common course evaluations, and common formative and summative assessments. At the end of the semester, students from eight sections were asked to fill out an anonymous survey for the class. The survey asked students to evaluate a number of statements on a four-point Likert scale. The statements sought to reveal something about students’ perceptions of their professor, how much they studied, and their level of confidence in this specific class as well as other classes. Finally, some demographic questions and an open-ended written comment section were included. The data from the survey was compared by sections and then analyzed as a combined single file.

The target group consisted of two sections where the professor made additional non-academic efforts to connect with students. Some of these strategies included learning students’ names early in the semester, getting to each class early to shake hands and welcome students to class, and arranging to meet students in office hours to learn more about them and the challenges that they face. In short, these were things that many professors already do however; there was a conscious effort to make sure that they understood that they were important as both people and students. These strategies were also employed as early in the semester as possible.
Figure One: Responses to Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Group T:</th>
<th>Group O:</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like the professor that I have in this class.</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor in this class cares about me as a person.</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor in this class cares about me as a student.</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor in this class respects me as a person.</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor in this class respects me as a student.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel more confident in this class than I do in my other classes.</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of taking this class, I feel more confident in all of my classes.</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This class helped me to feel good about myself as a student.</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried harder in this class than I did in my other classes.</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have put more time studying into this class than I did in my other classes.</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This course has helped me to learn how to learn</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Responses: n=699

In figure one the survey asked students to evaluate statements on a 4 point Likert Scale. In this figure, T refers to the target group responses consisting of two sections, while O refers to other groups responses consisting of the other six sections combined.

Figure 1 compares the target group (henceforward group T, n=172) with all of the other sections (henceforward group O, n=527) combined mean per question. For the statements in Figure 1, the overall mean difference for the twelve questions was .68 on a four point Likert scale and ranged from a low difference per statement of .38 (“I have put more time studying into this class than I did in my other classes”) to a high of 1.11 (“I felt more confident in this class than I did in my other classes”).

When looking at the data for the statement “I like the professor that I have in this class,” the mean for group T was an extremely high 3.85/4.00; .76 higher than the mean for group O (Fig. 1). In this respect, it is understood that the term “like” is relatively vague and inexact; however, it is also a term that implies both a more horizontal relationship and a measure of closeness that many
other terms cannot. Finally, it is a term that students would find easy to understand, interpret, and respond to.

Concepts that have some overlapping qualities with “liking” are “caring” and “respect.” However, while the liking statement asked students how they felt about their professor, these statements asked students to respond to how they thought the professor felt about them. When asked to respond to the statement, “The professor cares about me as a person” and “The professor cares about me as a student,” the difference between the means for the groups of sections were .82 and .62, respectively. In addition, student responses to the statements, “The professor respects me as a person” and “The professor respects me as a student” produced differences of .66 and .61, respectively between the sections.

Students in each group also seem to have felt differently about themselves. For instance, student responses to the statements about academic confidence and esteem produced the means with the greatest differences between the groups of sections. Here, the difference between these sections was more than a full point (1.11) when responding to the statement “I felt more confident in this class than I did in my other classes” and .87 when responding to the statement “This class helped me to feel good about myself as a student.” This sense of academic confidence and esteem may have transferred into their other classes. Thus, when responding to the statement “As a result of taking this class, I feel more confident in all of my classes,” mean student responses between the two groups of sections were different by .57 (Fig. 1).

The idea that students who have developed a greater sense of academic confidence and esteem can become more successful is supported by some recent research regarding what has become known as the “Obama effect.” Along these lines, a recent study published in Science magazine examined the power of self-affirmation exercises for minority students (Cohen et al, 2009). Because students felt more confident in their abilities and better about themselves, they may have been more eager to try and may have realized that they could succeed. This sort of effect
may also be at work in this instance. Students seemed more willing to really try as a result, they were more successful. When responding to the statement, “I have put more time studying into this class than I did in my other classes,” the mean for students in group T was .38 higher than that for group O. Furthermore, when responding to the statement, “This course helped me learn how to learn,” the mean for students in group T was .76 higher.

**Figure Two: Student Response to “Liking” Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>C2:</th>
<th>C3:</th>
<th>C4:</th>
<th>C5:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The professor cares about me as a person</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor cares about me as a student</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor in this class respects me as a person</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor in this class respects me as a student</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt more confident in this class than I did in my other classes</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of taking this class, I feel more confident in all of my classes</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This class helped me to feel good about myself as a student</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried harder in this class than I did in my other classes.</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have put more time studying into this class than I did in my other classes.</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This course has helped me learn how to learn.</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses n=699</td>
<td></td>
<td>n=64</td>
<td>n=379</td>
<td>n=256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ii** The Strongly Disagree and Agree categories were combined because the very low number of Strongly Disagree responses. C2: Mean response of Disagree & Strongly Disagree; C3: Mean response for Agree; C4: Mean response for Strongly Agree; C5 Difference between Column 2 & Column 4.

Figure 2 lists the combined student responses from all sections according to how they responded to the “liking” statement. Here, it is interesting to note that the mean for the “Agree” (C3) response fell very close to the middle of the mean for “Strongly Disagree”/”Disagree” (C2) and “Strongly Agree” (C4). For example, when students responded to the statement, “I felt more confident in this class than I did in my other classes,” those who Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed (C2) to “I like the professor that I have in this class” had a mean of 1.90; the mean for students who Agreed
(C3) was 2.46; and, students who Strongly Agreed (C4) had a mean of 3.35—a difference of 1.45 from C2 to C4.

Other questions that referred to students’ academic confidence and esteem produced similar results. When students responded to the statements “This class helped me to feel good about myself as a student” and “As a result of taking this class, I feel more confident in all of my classes,” there were differences from C2 to C4 of 1.26 and 1.45, respectively. In addition, students who liked their professor responded that they put more time and effort into the class. This became evident from the responses to the statements “I tried harder in this class than I did in my other classes” and “I have put more time studying into this class than I did in my other classes” and the difference between those who responded Disagree/Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree was .55 and .67, respectively.

The written student comments about the relationship between liking their professor and learning supports this data. Typical of the many statements made by students to the question “Do you think that a positive feeling about your professor makes it easier for you to learn?” were as follows:

- *If you like the person teaching you’ll take in what they’re saying better.*
- *Because the relationship between the professor and the student is positive, it makes it easier to learn and be able to talk to the professor.*
- *I am more willing to listen to someone I feel good about.*
- *I strongly agree, positive thoughts equal positive actions!*
- *I think the teacher’s attitude has a great influence on our grades and performance in/out of the class.*
- *It makes the environment less stressful and intimidating.*
- *Because then I have a motivation to come to class and participate.*
- *It motivates a person to do better when you have such professors.*
I feel as though there is a personal connection, which makes me feel more as a student than a number.

Because your feelings about the professor reflect the feelings about the class.

Positive feelings about a professor makes you actually want to go to class and actually learn something.

Of course, it makes for a more relaxed atmosphere and learning environment.

Positive mind about the class helps a student learn.

Because the professor cared, I think that’s why most kids tried in this class.

In addition, the difference between the mean course examination scores for students in group T was higher on every examination than those for group O. In some cases the difference between mean exam scores for groups T and O approached twenty points per exam. As such, it is not surprising that the means for the final grades for the course were also higher. In addition, students who received a ‘D’ or ‘F’ grade or withdrew from the course (D/F/W) for the two group T sections was 8% while the rate for group O was 24%. This latter point supports the contention that a positive academic connection was made with the students who were at the greatest academic risk.

Conclusion

Much like the successful students in the example from Bain’s book, there are a group of students who will succeed regardless of their relationship with the professor. The proportion of these students varies in any given classroom, but there are many institutions whose students may have more than enough motivation yet lack either academic preparation or self-confidence. This seems to be the case at my own institution. In fact, data from recent national surveys and outcomes assessment instruments ranks this institution’s students among the most motivated to succeed; however, student retention rates remain relatively low. For my institution as well as many others across the nation, these are the students who must be reached.
In an article appearing in the *Journal of Negro Education* entitled “Confidence, Trust, and Respect: The Preeminent Goals of Educational Reform” (2000), Charles Willie states that “effective teachers have confidence their students can learn” and that this confidence, if felt by students, can help “subdominant people of power” succeed (256). Clearly though, this is only the beginning of the process of academic empowerment. The next step is to make students feel confident in their own abilities and thereby begin to develop a personal culture of academic success.

The results on the liking, caring, and respect statements of this study suggest that some important and positive results can occur when faculty and students openly like and respect each other. From an individual student’s perspective, feelings of academic self-confidence and a willingness to achieve correlate with meaningful and equitable student-faculty interaction and admiration. However, while most professors would surely state that they like, care for, and respect their students, many are also more comfortable with a measure of distance between themselves and their students. As a result, students may not understand the degree to which their professor really does like them and care about them. In this respect, for teachers who really do like and care about their students, it would help many of their students if they could find ways to let their guard down enough to allow students to see that for themselves.
References


