Beyond the Classroom:Developing Students' Professional Social Skills

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Have you ever encountered students whose academic performance is excellent, yet their attitudes are not? For example, you may have known a student who performed exceptionally on assignments, but was habitually late to class, argued over class points, and demanded personal exceptions to class policies. One of the reasons students might fit this description is poorly developed social skills.

As teachers, our obligation to help students learn factual information about the field of psychology and to develop cognitive skills is clear. Teaching students critical thinking, written communication, and time management skills also has value. Less attention is given to developing students socially, although social proficiency can be equally critical for future academic and nonacademic success. Most occupational settings require personal interaction, where both performance and personality impact perceptions of employee value. In addition, education is more than the transmission of facts – it is about helping individuals maximize their potential, both personally and professionally. Perhaps the lack of attention to social skill development is because the task is more individually based, more challenging, and less reinforced.

What Are Professional Social Skills?

Professional social skills are those that facilitate interpersonal interaction between individuals or in a group setting. Ideally, professional interactions require having an awareness of the respective positions of the persons involved, the relationships among persons, and the task at hand.

One reason that students may have poorly developed professional social skills is the lack of emphasis on them in a traditional educational setting. A second reason may be that students have not had previous role models of professionalism, either because of limited personal work history or lack of modeling in the home. Third, faculty may feel uncomfortable or have little experience with providing this type of feedback to students. In addition, students who do not realize the costs and benefits of social professionalism may not be motivated to develop those skills.

To clarify which skills are most valued in the workplace, we asked professionals in government, private, and non-profit industries to list the skills they most want to see in their college-educated employees (listed from most frequently to least frequently mentioned).

- Monitoring one's own emotional expressions and responsiveness (e.g., showing interest in and motivation toward the task at hand)
- Maintaining composure when challenged
- Speaking and writing in a manner appropriate to the audience (e.g., different levels of formality in different contexts)

- Being receptive to feedback and constructive criticism (e.g., a willingness to learn and improve)
- Awareness of personal responsibility as a listener or audience member
- Respecting others' professional position, particularly those in authority (e.g., referencing people formally unless instructed otherwise)
- Being on time
- Being prepared for the task at hand
- Being courteous to everyone, regardless of rank or position
- Appreciating services received and expressing that appreciation
- Making proper introductions
- Dressing appropriately

Landrum and Harrold (2003) recently surveyed employers across the United States. They found that five of the top 10 most desired skills for psychology graduates related to social relationships (i.e., listening skills, ability to be work in groups, getting along with others, focus on customer or client, and interpersonal relationship skills).

Benefits Of These Skills

Many of the benefits of these skills are obvious to those of us in professional circles, and people who behave appropriately are more respected and trusted. More responsibility is given to those who prove trustworthy and reliable. People who express appropriate thanks are, in turn, appreciated. Finally, people often model the respect they receive.

In addition, teachers often learn of opportunities (e.g., internships) that can be extended to students. Who do we select for these opportunities? If you are like us, you select the students who are capable, but also the students who can create a positive impression. Thus, socially skilled students open themselves to additional educational experiences.

On the other hand, a lack of social skills may be a contributing factor in student-faculty conflict. In one study, students' perceptions of faculty behavior and their own self-reported behavior during disagreement reflect a need for improved interpersonal skills (Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, & Gokee, 2002). Understanding and promoting student professional social skills may be one way to prevent, minimize, and resolve conflict.

Developing Social Skills In The Classroom

We can help students both develop skills and appreciate their value through slight modifications to the classroom, resulting in ongoing benefits to the student.

Syllabus Construction

When we see students failing to meet expectations, the first question we must ask is whether the expectations were clearly conveyed. The syllabus is an ideal place to formally present expectations, emphasize valued skills, and initiate relevant discussions.

On their syllabi, teachers should specifically outline their approach to fostering professional social skills.

They can include their reasoning for emphasizing social skills, how social skills will be emphasized, and how students will get feedback on their progress. For example: "Part of this course will emphasize professional social skills. The ability to function professionally and to communicate in an appropriate manner is critical to success in any career field. Throughout the semester, students will be given examples of professional social skills, opportunities to practice professional skills, and feedback on their performance."

Teachers also can include specific statements regarding social expectations in the classroom. For example:

- Please be on time, as a display of professional courtesy and respect.
- Demonstrate sensitivity and respect towards other classmates, particularly when personal experiences or differing opinions are being shared.
- Class participation is essential for a complete educational experience. Oral defense of ideas is as important as written presentation of ideas.

Similarly, you can indicate how you prefer to be addressed and the rationale behind your request. When we spoke to non-academic professionals, they expressed concern over the trend for incoming college-educated employees to use an informal interactive style, which can be misinterpreted as disrespect. Thus, we encourage students to assume formality unless instructed otherwise. We prefer to be addressed by our title, because of the benefit it offers to students, not for any benefit to ourselves.

Facilitation of Student Interaction

Many articles have discussed the value of student interaction in the classroom (Fassinger, 2000), one benefit of which is improving social skills. When the entire class is interacting, teachers should simultaneously model and facilitate. Using names helps students learn to address each other directly and models networking skills. For example, a teacher might say, "Tommy, it sounds like you agree with the position Susan just expressed." Teachers also need to be quick to use disagreement as a chance to practice social skills. For example, a teacher might rephrase a comment so that it focuses on the issue rather than the people involved.

Teachers also can create smaller groups in which students interact. Because the teacher is not always present during group work, providing feedback about social skills requires additional effort. One way is to solicit feedback from all members of the group about the participation of its members. Doing so anonymously usually provides the most accurate information. If consistent themes emerge, either positive or negative, the teacher has the option of addressing those issues with an individual student, privately, of course.

Using Psychology to Teach Social Skills

Psychologists study behavior, and most behavior occurs in social settings so class material can be tied to social interaction and social skills. The following topics, in addition to many others, might provide a launching pad for discussions related to personal development.

- Impression management

- Social reinforcement
- Fundamental attribution error
- Social development in young and middle adulthood
- Decision-making heuristics
- Body language
- Persuasion

In addition to using class topics to facilitate social skill development, entire courses sometimes have social skills as their primary focus. Many departments offer courses that teach counseling skills or focus on the development of "helping skills" (Korn, 1980). Developing rapport, listening carefully, and clarifying communication parallel some of the social skills that employers want to see. Teachers of these courses might want to emphasize the broad applicability of these skills beyond counseling settings.

Developing Social Skills Through Guided Activities

In addition to using typical classroom activities, teachers and departments can create specific activities that target skill improvement.

Formal Student Presentations

Student presentations are often used because they offer practice at oral communication. A second benefit is the opportunity to develop professional demeanor. Teachers may choose to require appropriate professional dress and technical language, and a presentation that reflects an awareness of the status, experience, and education of the audience. Students also may be asked to invite questions from the audience, a situation that will help them practice calm and thoughtful responsiveness. If handled with care, teachers can allow classmates to provide feedback not only about the presentation's content, but the presenter's style as well. We recommend having students submit their feedback to the teacher who can then screen any unhelpful comments and type the remaining comments to ensure anonymity.

Community Speakers

Another way to develop students' professional social skills is through recruitment of a guest speaker for the classroom. We divide students into groups of two to seven, depending on the overall size of the class. Each group recruits a professional from the community to speak on a course-related topic, creating an excellent opportunity for polishing their social skills inside and outside of the academic arena. Each group is required to identify a course-relevant community organization or business; discuss its choice with the instructor; solicit a speaker from that organization; prepare the speaker for the presentation; introduce the speaker to the class; send a note of thanks; and gather feedback from the class.

Regardless of who invites the speaker, teachers can use the presenter as a launching pad for a discussion of professional behavior (Mullins, 2001). Before the presentation, students can be encouraged to show interest and ask thoughtful questions. If the speaker is controversial, the class may want to discuss appropriate ways to behave and respond. Afterwards, the class can discuss what impression the speaker made. Was he/she professional, prepared, appropriate and what impact did that have on the message of the presentation? Did the way the speaker presented him/herself add to or take away from the content? Did they exhibit any behaviors worth adopting for the students' personal use? As students become more

aware of how they form impressions of others, they will gain greater ability into how to monitor the impressions they convey themselves.

Facilitated Expressions of Thanks

Students often fail to express appreciation, which is unfortunate, because offering thanks helps the recipient feel valued and appreciated. Typically, we are willing to work harder for a student when our efforts are appreciated, a social reciprocity that is often mirrored in the workplace. We can encourage this social kindness by facilitating formal expressions of thanks. One simple way is to listen for students to compliment other students or teachers. When this happens, help the student consider ways to pass that compliment directly to the recipient. Another idea is to have a day devoted to expressing thanks. For example, Psi Chi might sponsor a faculty and staff appreciation day. Departments can make a point of inviting students to events where members of the campus community are honored, to involve students in the formal recognition of performance.

Career Building Workshops

Students may view social skills as more valuable when they are linked directly to future outcomes, such as job hunting and career building. Teachers or organizations, such as Psi Chi can organize workshops that address professional behavior. Speakers can include representatives from the job placement office on campus, community leaders, and alumni. Faculty may also be invited to share their perspective on the student behaviors that impress or frustrate them. In our experience, students respond well to this information when it is provided as an adult-to-adult conversation, rather than in a didactic manner.

One simple workshop activity is to distribute sample graduate school or job application forms to undergraduates. Most of these forms ask faculty to rate students on factors such as oral communication skills, ability to work in groups, willingness to learn, motivation, and professional demeanor. In addition, recommendation forms typically ask for a letter that comments on the applicants' strengths and weaknesses. Students are often surprised to learn that they are evaluated on personal behavior as well as academic accomplishments.

Similarly, students can be asked to imagine themselves as a supervisor who has just given feedback to an employee. Ask students to comment on their impressions of an employee who responds by asking for ways to improve his performance versus one who argues over the evaluation. This situation offers a nice analogy to a classroom setting where a student can look over a test with the goal of improving performance, or to argue a point here and a point there. At times, we have directly addressed this issue, assuring students that exhibiting maturity, assuming responsibility, and communicating carefully are far more valuable skills than is a point on any one exam.

Last but certainly not least; examples of professional social behavior can be distributed in handouts. For example, we offer students a guide for how to ask for letters of recommendation, including the following items:

- Ask teachers, "Would you feel comfortable writing a letter of recommendation for me?" This question provides an option for faculty who cannot write a strong letter to decline the invitation.
- Communicate with the recommender in person, rather than by e-mail or phone.

- Provide at least a month for the letter to be written.
- Organize all materials, remembering to complete the student's portion of the recommendation.
- Provide stamped envelopes.

Similar guides could be created for other social situations, such as approaching a faculty member in her office. Suggestions could include:

- Ask the faculty member if he or she is currently available. Do not make assumptions based on your cursory observation. Do not interrupt if a faculty member is talking with someone else.
- Introduce yourself and remind the faculty of your relationship to him or her.
- State the reason for being at the office.
- Be prepared and direct about the nature of the issue. If a problem is being addressed, be ready to offer solutions.
- Listen carefully. Maintain eye contact. Think before speaking.

Professional Community Interaction

While the classroom offers one perspective of the field of psychology, students also can benefit from involvement in the professional community outside of the classroom. Teachers should encourage students to gain such experience through community service or internships, making sure to advertise opportunities, working with students on funding sources to help students become involved, and providing opportunities for students to present their own work.

Similarly, teachers should be aware of special events for students at professional conferences. Many conferences offer awards and sessions that are geared directly toward undergraduate students. Following the conference, help students learn by reflecting on their experiences. Ask questions such as, "From whom did you learn the most, and why?" or, "Was there anything you would do differently the next time?" Posting conference presentations in the department may also be an avenue for continued interaction between students and between students and faculty.

Creating Professional Experiences

For many reasons, it may be difficult to get the majority of psychology students to attend professional conferences or to write grants, so these experiences should be created in the local environment when possible. Departments or institutions can hold mini-conferences to showcase student work. To make the event successful, teachers need to support it and be willing to draw students into discussions about their process and product. Teachers can offer both compliments and suggestions. Perhaps even more helpful is to challenge students to target strengths and weaknesses of their own work, and to practice communicating that information in a comfortable manner.

Developing Social Skills Through Personal Example

Modeling is a powerful teaching tool. Teachers should be aware of every opportunity to show the behavior they wish to see from students by being on time, respectful, and courteous. Similarly, listening carefully when students speak or handling disagreement calmly provides excellent role modeling of frequently needed skills.

Be on time for office hours and respectful towards students, even when they are not being respectful in return. The goal is not to make office hours a formal, uncomfortable event. In fact, we know that accessibility is important for student success in the classroom (Anaya, 2001). We believe that teachers can be highly accessible while still expecting and modeling respect and appropriateness.

Another way to model a professional skill is to refer to colleagues as you expect students to address them. For example, we do not recommend "Bob's class" to a student, but instead "Dr. Smith's class." Remembering to consider the student's perspective is easier in some settings that others, and teachers might want to consider how to handle addressing one another when students are present.

Besides referring to colleagues in an appropriate manner in front of students, it is important to avoid disrespectful actions or attitudes when interacting with colleagues. The debate of ideas should be handled with a focus on the issues rather than the persons, and teachers should avoid sharing opinions of colleagues with students. Students learn what it means to be a professional by watching the professionals around them.

Providing Feedback

Providing reinforcement for positive behavior and constructive feedback for negative behavior is easily neglected but may be vitally important. The latter can be uncomfortable, but may have a huge impact on a student's future success. A teacher who can provide unpleasant feedback in a gentle, calm, and kind manner is modeling professional behavior in a challenging situation.

Teachers should focus on the issue and not the student. Teachers also should describe the behavior and its consequences. For example, it is appropriate to say, "I feel frustrated by your tardiness, because I will not have enough time to help you now." Or, "It seems as though you are more concerned with your grade than what you have learned. Is this an accurate perception?"

Emphasize that your feedback is designed to help the student succeed, rather than criticism without a clear purpose. For example, "I'm giving you this feedback, because this is a safe environment in which to receive it. The consequence for making mistakes is relatively minimal in comparison to the workplace where mistakes can cost you your job. Here, mistakes are an opportunity to learn and improve." To be appropriate, teachers need to examine their own motives. If strong emotions are expressed during the feedback, teachers are not only ineffective, they are modeling what they do not want to see.

Often, students are adept at working through solutions to problems when scaffolding is provided. When students are part of a problem, allowing them to be part of the solution can be a valuable learning experience. For example, we might say, "You chose not to take the third exam. I cannot allow you to take a make-up, without being unfair to your classmates. What do you think we should do about this situation? What would be fair to you, me, and your classmates?" This scenario allows students to view situations from others' perspectives and to practice their problem-solving skills in a social setting.

Conclusion

Helping students understand the value of professional social skills will benefit both your students and department. Both undergraduate and graduate students are representatives of our schools, and their

success in the job market is often reflected in enrollment figures and alumni contributions, and in further job opportunities for future graduates. The facts that we teach may be soon forgotten, but developed social skills benefit students long beyond their academic tenure.

At a more global level, one of the goals of an undergraduate liberal arts education is to prepare students for active and effective participation in society (Barker, 2000). Being a useful and well-rounded citizen requires both technical expertise in a chosen career and also the professional skills necessary to function within that realm. Students master the technical knowledge, skills, and abilities through traditional classroom activities such as reading, writing papers, and taking exams. However, given the unprecedented pace of change within disciplines, specialized techniques and training (i.e., technical skills) quickly become outmoded (Barker, 2000). The ability to cope with this change, the capacity for critical thought, and a professional demeanor may have far more lasting value. In fact, professional social skills transfer across, and are valuable in, all domains and settings.