Helping Failing Students: Part 1

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Chris Keller is a hard working student. She never misses class, sits in the front row, and takes copious notes. She reads her text faithfully each week, completing her reading assignments well ahead of time. She makes flash cards to help her learn key terms and concepts and takes all the practice quizzes in her online study guide for the course. She often takes advantage of her professor's office hours to ask questions about lectures, class discussion, and past quizzes and tests. Unfortunately, despite her "A effort," Chris is failing her psychology course. Disappointed that her hard work is not paying off, Chris is becoming discouraged, and feels like she is wasting her time investing even more effort in the course.

Trey Anderson is also failing the same psychology course, but for a very different reason. He rarely attends class, showing up for only quizzes and tests. He puts in equally little time preparing for his tests and other assignments. He has never spoken to his professor nor e-mailed him. He knows he is failing, but doesn't show any outward signs of being discouraged or upset at his performance. In fact, he gives the appearance that he couldn't care less about the course and how well he understands the material.

Failure seems an inevitable part of the college classroom — to be sure, over the span of almost any given semester, we encounter students who struggle with our courses and who perform at substandard levels. Students fail courses for many reasons, although as our descriptions of Chris and Trey suggest, we may categorize failing students into two broad, non-overlapping categories: Those students who actively participate in class, but still perform poorly, and those students who perform poorly because they seldom, if ever, attend class or complete their assignments.

For *actively failing students*, poor performance may be isolated to a particular graded assignment (e.g., failing a specific exam) or may occur repeatedly across course assignments and course content (e.g., failing consecutive exams). Actively failing students are often the type of struggling student we are most likely to encounter through e-mail contact or office hours because they sometimes, although not always, seek help or express concern over their performance.

Passively failing students represent an altogether different kind of student. Whereas actively failing students are at least moderately engaged in the learning process (e.g., attend class, take notes), passively failing students show little or no such engagement. The names of these students appear on our class rolls, but the students themselves seldom appear in our classes. Helping this kind of student to improve their class performance is a much more difficult task because they are not likely to seek, or perhaps even desire, help.

The good news is that all teachers who have actively or passively failing students in their classes can adopt particular strategies and tactics of teaching that may prove beneficial in helping failing (and other poorly performing) students improve their course performance. The remainder of this essay outlines strategies and tactics for helping actively failing students improve their class performance. Next month's *Teaching Tips* column will focus on helping passively failing students.

Helping Actively Failing Students

Helping failing students is a two-step process. First, we must identify these students, and second, we must figure out what we can do to help them in their particular situation.

Identify Struggling or Failing Students Early in the Semester

Gross Davis (1993) suggested an initial exam during the first three to four weeks of a course provides a good opportunity to assess students' level of understanding of course materials and possibly identify at-risk students. Actually, an initial exam or other graded assignment may serve a two-fold purpose to (a) identify the skills and deficiencies of students early on, and (b) convey instructors' academic expectations to students.

Once we have identified potentially at-risk students, we can contact them individually, setting up a time to meet. This meeting provides the opportunity to discuss the course, offer suggestions for study strategies, and just as importantly, get to know the student a bit. Establishing a positive professional contact with students may lead to developing rapport with them, which may benefit them by enhancing their motivation to attend class, study the material, and revisit us on their own initiative during office hours or via e-mail (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005).

Attempt to Identify and Remediate the Source of the Problem

During an individual meeting, teachers might ask students for their thoughts and reflections over their performance. In doing so, teachers should try to assess whether the failure is (a) specific to the course or occurs across other courses and (b) an isolated incident or a potentially recurring issue within the course. Undoubtedly, some course material will be more difficult for students to comprehend than other material. Some types of graded assignments will tap into skills or abilities that a student may lack (e.g., critical thinking), and personal situations outside of the classroom may affect students' performance (Rossi, 2006).

If the failing performance is not isolated to the course or a single incident, and if pressing personal issues appear to be in play, then students may be in need of special assistance to remedy the peculiarities of their situation. Oftentimes, students may not be aware that special campus resources exist to help them address these issues. If so, we should refer students to offices such as a student success center, student counseling center, or the disability program (Foushee & Sleith, 2004).

If students seem to be struggling with understanding particular course content, then the obvious action plan is for the teacher to invite students to meet on a regular basis to prepare for future assessments. These meetings may be one-on-one or in small groups or some combination of them. Both types of meetings have their advantages. For example, individual meetings provide the opportunity for students to ask questions that they may be hesitant asking in front of their peers (in the desire not to look "stupid" before others). Group meetings have the advantage of being demonstrably more social, setting the occasions for these students to meet with one another outside of office hours in study sessions for the course.

Of course, both tactics have their limitations as well. Meeting individually with students could tax your

office hours and discretionary time, especially if you have many struggling students. Holding group meetings with struggling students necessarily means that most, if not all, of these students become publically identified as poor-performing students, which may be embarrassing for some of them, thus decreasing their motivation to attend future meetings! However, casting the meetings as "general study sessions" open to all students may effectively sidestep this sort of stigma.

Provide Specific Study Strategies

Once we have identified failing or struggling students, invited those students into the office, and perhaps pinpointed some of the problems they are having with their performance in the course, it's time to offer specific strategies for improving their performance. These suggestions should be tailored specifically to the nature of the particular student's problem and not focused on building the student's self-esteem — research has shown that the latter strategy is largely ineffective (Forsyth, Lawrence, Burnette, & Baumeister, 2007). In general, we have discovered in talking with struggling students that these problems take one of three forms: not spending enough time studying, poor concentration while studying, or poor reading comprehension.

Time on task. One of the first questions to ask actively struggling students is how much time they spend reading and studying for the course beyond attending class. If they reply that they are studying far less than 6 hours a week, we may have isolated one key variable underlying their poor performance. Using the general rule that students should study 2 hours outside of class for each credit unit, we feel that students should spend roughly 9 hours on task over the span of a week for a 3-credit hour course. In fact, we offer this advice during the first day of the semester and when we identify struggling or failing students, we remind them of it. We also add two caveats. First, we tell these students that those outside-of-class study hours should be distributed evenly over the week and not "crammed" into the 1 or 2 days just prior to an exam or a quiz. Second, we emphasize that outside-of-class study should involve an initial reading of the material to glean its gist, but further study should involve considerably more *active* engagement of the material.

We also ask our students how they have scheduled their semester and how that translates into organizing their weekly study routines. If they do not have a "master plan" for the semester, we advise them to develop a general overall schedule for the semester that includes, among other things, their class times; work responsibilities, if any; trips or special events such as visiting family, weddings, etc. We advise them that it is a good idea to evaluate and, if necessary, modify their schedule on a weekly basis — unpredictable events, such as illness or a change in work schedule, often require students to adjust their study plans accordingly.

Concentration while studying. When we ask our struggling students "how they study," seldom do they respond by saying "I find a really nice, quiet, and comfortable study area where I first outline my study objectives and then set about accomplishing them." Instead, their responses are more like "I study in my dorm room" or "I study at work." This sort of student response always prompts us to offer students the following advice:

Find a quiet, distraction-free study area that is both convenient to your schedule and comfortable (good lighting, comfortable chair, table or desk).

Avoid unnecessary distractions, such as idle cell phone conversations, listening to an iPod or other electronic medium, or spending time exploring Facebook while you are studying. Make sure you have your necessary books, computer, paper, pencils, pens, etc.

To minimize boredom and tiredness, study no longer than 20-30 min at time before taking a 2-3 minute rest break to clear your mind and to stretch or walk around a bit.

This simple procedure will not guarantee that students will become more focused, but it will tip the balance in that direction. At the very least, it will minimize the sorts of distractions that all too often disrupt an otherwise productive study session.

Reading comprehension. When we feel that students are having difficulty gleaning the appropriate information from their reading, we suggest to them the time-tested Survey-Question-Read-Recite-Review Method, or as it is better known, the SQ3R method (Robinson, 1946), although in recent years some teachers and researchers have added a fourth "R" (relate or reflect; see e.g., http://www.wvup.edu/academics/learning_center/sq4r_reading_method.htm). Martin (1985) showed the SQ3R method to be an effective learning tool, and more recently, McDaniel, Howard, and Einstein (in press) showed that a briefer version of the method focusing only in the "3Rs" (read, recite, review) also benefits student learning.

In its basic form, this method requires that students take the following steps:

Survey the chapter or material to be read before they actually read it. This process involves reading all headings and subheadings as well as bulleted or bold-faced points, figure and table captions, summaries, and any built-in pedagogy such as review questions or study tips.

Convert key points, headings, and bulleted or bold-faced items into questions before moving on to the next section of the reading. It is a good idea to suggest to students that they put these questions in writing so that they don't forget to answer these questions as they read the chapter.

Read the chapter and attempt to answer these questions. In addition, break the reading into short segments and take small rest breaks in between. Suggest to students that they slow down the reading pace of the sections of the material that they are having difficulty understanding.

Summarize the major points and key ideas of the material they are reading in their own words and preferably in writing. They should rehearse these points and ideas before moving on to the next section of reading and write out answers to the questions that they originally posed about the reading when they first skimmed through it.

Review the chapter again as well as any notes that they've taken. Students also should test themselves on what they've learned by continuing to question themselves over the major points and key concepts that they've learned.

Other ideas. We also advise our students to adopt three other tactics to improve their performance in the course: (a) form a study partnership or group to discuss the materials, (b) take the practice quizzes and tests in the study guide (online or paper) that accompanies the text, and (c) study old quizzes and tests to

identify reasons why they may have missed particular questions and why they got other questions correct (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). It can also be helpful to provide all students, and not just those who might be struggling, with examples of "good" and "poor" work to help them understand the criteria for acceptable performance (see Foushee & Sleith, 2004).

Set Realistic and Attainable Goals for Improvement

After identifying failing students and providing advice for improvement, teachers should consider setting performance goals that encourage their students to improve their scores on subsequent assignments (Pastorino, 1999). These goals should promote gradual, not drastic, improvement over the course of the semester — after all, it is unreasonable for teachers to expect huge boosts in performance over a small interval for struggling students (e.g., from the first to the second exam). Thus, rather than setting up false hope for failing students to earn an A on the next exam, encouraging these students to "shoot for" a C might be the wiser strategy (although, of course, it is possible that failing students could earn an A on a subsequent exam). However, once students have proven themselves capable of passing quizzes and exams, teachers should then encourage their students to do still better. This process is not unlike the method of shaping by successive approximations used by behavior analysts in generating desired behaviors in their clients or research participants.

Throughout the remediation process, and regardless of the approach that teachers adopt in working with actively failing students, they should closely monitor and stay in contact with their students. By staying on top of the situation, teachers can meet with these students and continue to provide positive encouragement to them in ways that reinforce both effort and achievement.

Imagine the downside for our students if we fail to stay involved in helping them with working toward doing better in our classes: Neglecting these students after first giving them the impression that we care about them will surely have a negative impact on their desire to do well in the course. It might also diminish their impression of our discipline and us as ambassadors of that discipline (Buskist & Saville, 2002). As Lowman (1995) pointed out, the classroom is not a neutral emotional space. Indeed, for students it is just the opposite — they are quite concerned what others (including teachers) think of them and focus to no small extent on the social relationships present in the classroom (Schaeffer, Epting, Zinn, & Buskist, 2003).

Final Thoughts

In a perfect classroom, all of our students would earn As. Unfortunately, our classrooms are seldom, if ever, perfect. Despite our most concerted pedagogical efforts, students vary in how well they perform in our courses. Some students work very hard and get good grades, whereas others work just as hard and get failing grades. And, of course, there are those students who do little, if any, work and also fail our courses. In the perfect classroom, failing students would approach us about how to become better students. However, we all know that many students shy away from approaching us about their shortcomings in the course, leaving it to us to bear the responsibility for taking that first, and sometimes, second and third steps.

Taking that first step signifies at least two things about us as teachers. First, it says that we are actively involved in helping all students in our courses, not just the "smart ones." Second, and perhaps more

importantly, it says that we care about our students' academic welfare. Demonstrably caring for students, though, will not always yield the results we might hope for — some failing students will remain uninspired to participate in their education. Nonetheless, consider the opposite side of the coin: demonstrably showing that we do not care for our students' academic success. That strategy surely would seem to guarantee that *all* failing students will remain uninspired, and perhaps this effect may generalize to students who are passing, indirectly causing them to become disinterested in our subject matter or to underperform in the classroom.

The relatively little effort required on teachers' part to monitor their students' classroom progress and extend failing students an invitation to visit them during office hours would seem to be justified by what is at stake for the student, for the class, and perhaps the entire educational system. We believe that Charles Brewer (2005, p. 507) was correct when he said that "the real reason for teaching is to make a difference. . ." Taking the time to reach out to failing students and working with them to pass our classes is surely one way of making the sort of difference Brewer had in mind. **?**