COMMENTARY

Instead of Casting Stones, Develop Empathy for Our Students

Lauren Schlesselman, MA EdPsych, PharmD^{a,b}

^a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut

^b Associate Editor, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, Arlington, Virginia

Submitted July 31, 2018; accepted August 21, 2018; published October 2018.

Keywords: active learning, empathy

Imagine a learning environment. In this learning environment, picture the educator preparing to give an engaging and interactive session aimed at providing a critical active learning experience for the students. Now imagine the students congregating in seats near the back of the room, grumbling about the planned activities, wanting the presenter to simply lecture and provide them with documentation to prove they were in attendance (and supposedly learned). Have you ever experienced this classroom? Maybe you were the instructor in this classroom and maybe you spent countless hours developing active learning experiences aimed at enhancing your students' learning.

While I could have been describing classrooms around the country on any given day, in actuality, the room and experience described is one that I saw played out in numerous sessions at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) in Boston. I was surprised and saddened by the number of faculty members who admitted that they were hiding in the back of the room to "avoid the active learning activities." These same faculty members waited impatiently for the sacred continuing education (CE) codes to appear on the last slide.

First, let us all take a moment to say "thank you" for the time and effort the presenters committed to preparing their presentations and activities. Without their efforts, we would not have an annual meeting. Personally, I took home many amazing ideas for activities and topics to share with the faculty at my own institution. Those active learning experiences not only enhanced my engagement, but provided me with ways to process and reflect on the material and use higher order thinking skills to improve conceptual understanding. This conceptual understanding has made it possible for me to return to work immediately after the Annual Meeting and dive into meetings with faculty who are interested in developing new activities in their own courses.

Corresponding Author: Lauren S. Schlesselman, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, University of Connecticut, 368 Fairfield Way, Unit 4001, Storrs, CT 06269. Tel: 860-486-3402. E-mail: lauren.schlesselman@uconn.edu

Second, beware of throwing rocks when you live in a glass house. For anyone who has ever incorporated active learning in the classroom, the discomfort with active learning is something they have witnessed in their own students. Yet, expecting active learning enthusiasm is only one of the many ways that we set demands on students on a routine basis. As faculty, we often set high demands on our students and get frustrated, roll our eyes, show little compassion, or possibly even claim "it's a generational thing" when they fail to meet our demands. If we honestly reflect on how well we meet these demands ourselves, we might find that we are also missing the mark.

For example: Even before the new Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education standards came, we expected our students to be involved in co-curricular activities. We viewed those students who were involved in co-curricular activities to be well-rounded, stronger, and leaders. But, how many of us make time for co-curricular and extra-curricular activities? Do we attend graduation every year? Do we provide service within our community? It is easy to brush off our own lack of co-curricular and extra-curricular involvement due to how busy our schedules are and say that "students are just students." But, they are not just students. They have families, jobs, and other commitments too.

In our high stress society, we expect students to make time for their own well-being and to seek help when they need it. How many of us are guilty of not making time for exercise? To eat a healthy meal? When was the last time you used all of your vacation days in a given year? How many of us push ourselves to insane levels of stress and anxiety but just accept them as part of the job?

Often, we comment that students do not make time to do the readings for class. Yet, how many of us have a pile of journals on the corner of our desk waiting to be read? How many of us actually read the resources provided for a meeting before attending the meeting?

A favorite faculty complaint is that students do not read the instructions. Having sat through several active learning CE sessions at the AACP Annual Meeting, I can

vouch that I misread, skimmed, or skipped the instructions for the activity. For those who attended the escape room session, the most common struggle was the puzzle with the Boston landmarks because we skipped over the word “Boston” and just assumed we needed to sort all of the landmarks.

Finally, given that we are not perfect and experience many of the same feelings and struggles that our students do, it is time for us to develop more empathy for our students. Empathy requires us to recognize and respond to our students’ emotional plight while illuminating the potential consequences of our actions on their lives.¹ Although empathy does not offer excuses for bad choices because sometimes empathy must still be followed by consequences,² but those consequences can be given with support, not anger or frustration. By showing empathy, we are building a positive classroom culture. We are also recognizing that changes, such as active learning in the classroom, is a culture change and that culture change and growing expectations are difficult for everyone. When looking to innovate in the classroom, we should always ask ourselves “how would I feel as the student in this situation?” Looking at the innovation from the student perspective shifts

our mindset, rather than viewing ourselves as separate from our students.

Remember, beyond the classroom, we expect our students to be empathetic pharmacists after graduation. Empathy is modeled. Students view us as representatives of how they should act. If we are not showing empathy toward our students, they will not view that as a skill they need bother to learn. Yet, the development of the affective domain is critical in health care today. To promote the development of empathy in our students and to reflect on our own empathy.

Let us take time for reflection and reflect on how well we live up to the expectations we set for others. Let us reflect on our own level of empathy for the cultural changes we make in classroom and on how we model empathy for our students.

REFERENCES

1. Hollingsworth LA, Didelot MJ, Smith JO. REACH beyond tolerance: a framework for teaching children empathy and responsibility. *J Humanistic Counseling Educ Dev.* 2003;42(2):139-151.
2. Sornson B. Developing empathy in the classroom. <http://www.isacs.org/uploads/file/Developing%20Empathy%20in%20the%20Classroom.pdf>. Accessed July 30, 2018.