



Strategies for Student Engagement

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Have you ever met a student or professor thrilled about what they do? I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Matthew Sowcik this week, and he happens to be one of the most enthusiastic professors I've ever met. And it made me wonder, where does that kind of enthusiasm come from? Hi there. I'm Alexandra Bitton-Bailey, and this is the Beyond the Podium podcast series at the University of Florida. This series focuses on teaching and learning, and we're here with outstanding faculty who share their best tips, tools, and strategies, always with a little humor.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik is currently serving as an Assistant Professor of Leadership Education and the Coordinator of the campus-wide Leadership minor at the University of Florida. His research interests are in humility and the creation of organizational leadership programs, and aside from his research and administrative duties, Dr. Sowcik also currently serves as a consultant to the New York Times, focusing on the newspaper's educational programming for leadership studies, faculty, and students. Through his story, we find out how he discovered his true passion, developed contagious enthusiasm, and uses that to promote student engagement in his courses.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

When I was starting out, I wasn't a particularly good high school student. I got into a small school, Wilkes University, mostly because my father had worked there, and I think he did the handshake, wink, wink, and got me a first semester try, and that was nice. So I got into Wilkes, and I was really passionate about psychology, and I think, like you hear from most students, that passion really helped me excel in school. That when I was in high school, I didn't care for doing a lot of the things I wasn't interested in and being there from 8:00 to 3:30. But once I got to college, I got to focus in on the things that I really loved. I didn't have to take many classes that I wasn't excited about, and then those classes that I wasn't excited about I really started to embrace, because I was doing well. I was feeling confident.

Alexandra

With this new found confidence, Dr. Sowcik was sure he had found his calling.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

So I came out of Wilkes believing that I was going to go into clinical psychology, and in my junior year, I was so excited I was going to do a clinical rotation at a group home. And I was at the group home for about 15 minutes when one of the clients at the group home threw a fire extinguisher at the back of my head, and I got rushed to the hospital, and I got stitches. And about 20 minutes into that internship, I decided that I was never going to be in clinical psychology, that that wasn't for me. I wasn't interested.

So I had to find a passion in this idea of human behavior and psychology. So it doesn't really require being hit in the head with a fire extinguisher to realize that we really do need a little bit of help sometimes, and that help can come in many forms. And one of the forms it most often comes in, in higher education, is through a great teacher or mentor, and that is exactly what happened for Dr. Sowcik.

My advisor at that point in time steered me toward business, and said, could you use these the same skills, these psychology skills, the things that you're learning and psychology, in the world of business? Instead of taking individuals who needed sometimes severe help to get to normalcy, could you help people who are normal, or people who are just existing in organizations, and make them great? And I liked that idea of taking someone who is just having an average time existing in an organization and building in that engagement and building that community. I think that's where it starts to come from, with the passion I have for teaching, is I really like taking that average student or that average experience and kind of making it great.

Alexandra

So how can we as instructors then help our students discover their passions? Simply by creating any engaged classroom, and that engage classroom happens when we take the time to help our students develop relationships with each other and with the instructors.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

So I think students learn best when emotionally, they're connected to the material. They're connected to class, and they care about the people that are in that class with. A simple, hello, how was your day? I usually say happy Monday as soon as students walk in, and I try, in a 100 person class, to say happy Monday to every single student who walks in.

I think it's those small little things that build up over a semester that students really connect to, they start looking forward to. If every single day for a whole semester I say happy Monday, or how is your day, and then halfway through the semester I stop doing that, students are going to wonder what's wrong. But in most classes, they don't expect that. So I think if you can emotionally get them in a place where they expect you to show up every day, be excited every day, they're going to be excited every day and they're going to want to learn.

Alexandra

Building these kinds of connections, helping students to establish these relationships really begins on the first day of the semester.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

So the first day, for example, of class we usually have that technique of going in and going over the syllabus and jumping right into the material. And it takes away from that opportunity to really build good community, and we get afraid of that. We don't want any icebreakers. Everybody hates icebreakers, but the reason icebreakers are so successful is because they build community.

So you don't have to do the trust fall or the kumbaya. That's not what I'm suggesting. Maybe that's more applicable in certain fields than in others. But you have to do is, on that first day, let students know that this is going to be a special class. It's going to be a class where they can come once, twice, three times a week, feel really comfortable. Feel psychologically safe to take risks, to give answers, to work things out, and that others are going to really support them in that practice at the very minimum. And then on top of that, if they could feel great about coming to class, be excited at 9 o'clock in the morning about waking up and coming to class, all the better.

Alexandra

One of the tactics that Dr. Sowcik uses is really by not only focusing and putting extraordinary effort into building relationships, but also in building a culture of recognition. Because in a culture of recognition, students feel important and valued.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

For example, in the class that I'm teaching this summer, every Friday we do recognition on every Friday's class, and I'll put up recognition. So this week's recognition was from Monday to Wednesday we went up 6 percentage points in attendance. So I let the class know how appreciative I was that attendance was higher on Wednesday than it was on Monday, and we clapped.

There were two students who became note takers. I put them and asked them to stand up, and we clapped. One of the grad assistants answered a question and is going to now hold Tuesday makeup classes for students who want to come. We clapped for them. So I find reasons to

celebrate, recognize. As important as is in organizational cultures or businesses to recognize your employees, it's that important in your classroom to do things like that.

Alexandra

Creating a culture of recognition is not the only tactic that helps students to become really engaged learners.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

Someone told me, a long time ago, if you want to get students to speak up in class, you have to get them first to speak to each other. That's something I always do in class is if I ask a question in class, for example, I was asking them in class yesterday about theory. I'll ask them first to talk to each other and bounce some ideas off. The amount of people who are willing to participate after they've tested it out with one person, then going to the whole class, is significantly higher than if you ask them to speak up, have that critical thought and speak up first, for a couple of reasons.

One, I think they've tested it, and they've gotten reassurance from someone else that it's not a ridiculous idea. Two, I think they usually will speak up, the other person will speak up, and then they'll combine what they heard from someone else and for themselves to use that critical thinking to then speak up to the group. And then the next person will not only use the other person and themselves, they'll use the person who just spoke, or all the people who just spoke. So you start to see this collectiveness in the class in building that critical thinking.

Alexandra

So this highlights the fact that students who speak up in class do so because they feel safe enough, comfortable enough, that they're willing to take risks and engage.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

When I say safe, they're not frightened, but safe to take risks, safe to ask questions, safe to talk to each other about their learning process. At the end of the class, I want them to take the biggest risks, and I want them to knock it out of the park, so to say, using the baseball analogy. My bigger projects are due at the end. So one of the projects I have is they have to interview someone to find out about leadership skills. They have to apply this person, ask them certain questions, use a particular type of interview technique. And then they will write a paper on the theories, the stuff that we talk about in class, how that applies to this leader.

Now, if I don't allow students to take risks, throughout the semester, if I don't build an authentic community where students feel safe to do that, what I find is those papers come back, they've interviewed their parents. They've interviewed their roommates. They've taken no risk to reach out to someone who may really have a tremendous impact, and that's not to say that their parents aren't great leaders. It's just the risk to do that, what happens is they play it safe, they ask those individuals, because they don't want to step out of that boundary or that comfort level.

If I build a community, where they are feeling comfortable to take risks, know that they can screw up, and it's going to be OK, what I find is at the end of the semester they're reaching out. Last semester, I had someone reach out to someone in the governor's office. I had someone reach out to Tony Robbins. Like I had these huge risk taking moments. I had someone reach out to the head of Disney's leadership development training. Not only did they accept, they met with them, and now they're doing an internship down there. So you start to see these amazing risks being taken and it paying off. The question is, how do you get there?

Alexandra

Those are the kind of risks we all hope to see our students take. As a matter of fact, I've had some students that, after a couple of semesters of a foreign language, have gone off on diplomatic missions across the world. Those risks are spectacular growth producing risks, but those students don't magically become great risk takers. It takes guidance in order to nurture a sense of adventure.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

It's a process of facilitating that risk taking, and then you give them a homework or a small homework, like go out and meet with someone. And talk about what you appreciate, or someone you find happy, and let them take a risk there. And then really start to talk about in class those students who took huge risks to go out to someone who was outside of their immediate experience. I had one student go and meet with someone that they actually didn't like at their organization, and it completely changed their perspective of this person. By just doing that interview, they really built a relationship. They understood the commonalities they had. I celebrated that the next class. We clapped. It was great. We talked about it.

I think as students start to see those risk taking behaviors happening throughout the semester-- We have 15 weeks to really shape what happens to that end point. If you think of any great season on TV, or any TV show, they build out over the whole season that final end show. I mean that's kind of what we're doing in teaching is we're introducing the characters. We're introducing or teaching style. We're introducing this community. We're getting people to care about all the people in there, and we're building it to this final place where this greatness can happen at the end. And that's what I love to do, every semester, is try to find ways to do that.

Alexandra

All of the effort put in to creating community and engagement pays off in the end. Because when students are truly engaged, they can and want to dive deeply and think critically through the material presented.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

And I always go back to this, how do you build community? You build community by this thing called psychological safety, making students feel comfortable, thinking deep, not just giving you what you've asked for. If you ask them to just regurgitate, they are gifted at that. They will study every word you said. They will memorize every word you said. They will click off the boxes that you need them to check off, and they will say exactly what you said back to them. I feel like that is hollow in its learning process, because it doesn't do that critical thinking piece. It doesn't connect them to themselves, their experiences, their story, as we had talked about earlier.

Alexandra

It's that critical thinking piece that's so deeply important to Dr. Sowcik, and he works to build community, engagement, and relationships as natural pieces of his courses, because these impact students' ability to think critically.

Dr. Matthew Sowcik

I need to put a lot of energy in up front to allow students to feel safe, to engage, to build community, to emotionally want to get up every morning, at 9:30, to come to my class, to be excited. But if I'm able to establish that in the first couple classes, what you find is that that becomes then reciprocated.

Alexandra

Whether we teach online or face-to-face, whether our classes are large enrollment with hundreds of students or small graduate seminars, the considerable effort we make in planning before the semester begins and in creating relationships and engagement at the start of the semester pays off. In fact, by investing so much in our students, we are guaranteed a significant return on that investment at the tail end of each and every semester.

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