Who Are You?

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ABSTRACT

During the first mid-term examination (which occurred three to four weeks after the start of instruction), students from six lower division undergraduate courses at a major public university were asked if they could recall the name of their instructor. The 95 percent who were able to correctly write the first or last name of their instructor also scored significantly (P = 0.003) better on the examination than those who could not. The most widely reported methods for learning the instructor's name were the first lecture (52 percent), the syllabus (26 percent), and the university catalog (12 percent). Students were also asked if they thought that the professor knew the student's name. Four percent of the respondents reported that they thought the instructor knew their name, 89 percent replied that they did not think so, and six percent were not sure.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our campus will soon have a new performing arts center featuring a main hall capable of seating 1,000 people on the orchestra level, -10 on the first balcony, and 350 on the second balcony. Will this stage and these seats soon show up in the general classroom availability pool? Perceived efficiencies and a superior cost-per-student ratio may seduce some to combine all the sections of, say, general physics or chemistry into one huge lecture offered once per year. It is often assumed that instructors teaching large enrollment courses know the names of only a small fraction of their students. This article looks at the related issue of the students' ability to recall their instructor's name. After all, there may be many students but there is usually only one instructor.

How does the ability to recall the instructor's name relate to exam performance of undergraduate students at a large university? To explore the unaided recall of the instructor's name, a survey was designed that was distributed as the cover page of the first mid-term examination. In the survey, students were asked to write down the name of their instructor (spelling didn't matter). Students were also asked how they learned their instructor's name and whether or not they thought the instructor knew the student's name. Nearly 2000, mostly first and second year, students from six courses (chemistry, biology, engineering, information systems, psychology, and art history) were surveyed. Course enrollments ranged from 60 to over 700 students with an average enrollment of about 300. At the time, the campus had a total enrollment of 19,000 undergraduate and 5,100 graduate students.

Students who were correctly able to recall either the first or last name of their instructor were identified as "knowers" and those who could not were labeled as "non-knowers." When asked to speculate on what percentage of their students would be able to recall the instructor's name, the instructors of the surveyed classes guessed anywhere from 50-80 percent. The data, however, showed that 95 percent of the students were able to recall the name of their instructor by the time of the first examination (the third or fourth week of instruction). Furthermore, no individual course had more than six percent "non-knowers." No meaningful discrepancy was found in the percentage of students from humanities or science courses that were able to recall their instructor's name.

In a previous study, Kirsh' reported that only about seventy out of a hundred students in an undergraduate psychology class could recall their instructor's name when asked to write it down as one of the questions on an examination administered three weeks into the term. A number of factors may have contributed to the higher percentage of "knowers" at the university where the current study took place. For example, the automated course registration system forced students to look up each course before they registered, multiple professors teaching the same course placed students in a position of having to "choose" an instructor, and the use of instructional media (such as computer projected presentations) usually involved displaying the course title and instructor's name at the beginning of each lecture.

An inability to recall the instructor's name may indicate a lower involvement in the course or a more passive attitude towards school in general. A lower involvement in the course may also result in lower examination scores. The data were split into two groups based on whether or not the student was able to recall the instructor's name. Analysis suggested a statistically significant difference in the exam scores of these two groups (P = 0.003). The average score for the "knowers" was 70.8 percent and the average score for the "non-knowers" was 65.1 percent. (Whether or not this translated into an actual grade level difference was not determined.)

When asked, "How did you learn your instructor's name?" the majority of the students reported that they acquired their instructor's name from the first lecture (52 percent), followed by the syllabus (26 percent), and then the university catalog (12 percent). The high number of references to the first-lecture and the syllabus as the methods in which students learned their instructor's name has implications for transmitting other non-subject related information. The data from this study support efforts to make maximum use of the unique combination of heightened anticipation and improved recall associated with the first class event. A portion

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of the initial class meeting could be used to develop the student-teacher relationship by recounting the instructor's own educational journey, verbalizing expectations of students, articulating facets of a personal teaching philosophy, or sharing other items aimed at allowing students to better relate to the instructor.

When asked, "Do you think the instructor knows your name?" four percent of the respondents reported that they thought the instructor knew their name, 89 percent replied that they did not think so, and six percent replied that they did not know if the instructor knew their name. (About one percent declined to answer this question.) The mean exam scores for these three groups of students did not appear to be statistically different. The authors speculate that the students self-categorized large (>60 students) undergraduate courses as "non-interactive" and "impersonal," and knowledge of the student's name by the instructor did not necessarily translate into increased accountability in the student's mind.

A fundamental question, which this study did not address, is whether or not students' ability to recall their instructor's name is of any significant pedagogical consequence. Even though the survey results suggested that "knowers" performed better on the examination, correlation does not imply causation. It would be the egotistical professor indeed who would list "an ability to recall the instructor's name" as a delineated learning objective in the course syllabus.

"Welcome to the main hall of the new performing arts center. The first and second level balconies are also open for seating. Please take your seats. Good morning, my name is..."

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REFERENCE