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Good students make for better teachers

SAN MARCOS – It's long been known that good teachers make students better learners in the classroom, but new studies by researchers at Texas State University-San Marcos suggest that the reverse is true as well: Good students make teachers better educators.

With two papers published in the journals *Communication Quarterly* and *Communication Education*, and a third to be presented at the National Communication Association Conference in Chicago this November, Texas State professors Timothy Mottet, communication studies, Steven Beebe, communication studies, and Paul Raffeld, psychology, along with West Virginia University graduate student Michelle Paulsel are looking to redefine the way traditional teacher-student dynamics are viewed.

“Student nonverbal responses have a profound effect on how teachers respond to students,” explained Beebe. “But we believe that both teachers and students equally influence learning process. There's lots of research on how teachers' behavior influences students, but we're finding out how students' behavior influences teachers.

“Our conclusion is that students have more power in the classroom than they might think,” he said. “They can affect how they're perceived by the teacher. There are things students can do to influence the learning.”

One striking outcome of the research shows that student participation in class improves the job satisfaction and enthusiasm of teachers, and teachers tend to like responsive students more than non-responsive students. Those who respond in class are viewed more positively by teachers overall, who are more likely to evaluate student essays more favorably and give those students more time and attention in class.

“I think the biggest significance is shifting more of the responsibility of the teacher-student dynamic onto the student,” said Mottet. “This allows students to see their ownership and the role they play in the classroom.

“I think a lot of students, when they hear an instructor mention that they are responsible for the dynamics of the classroom--I don't think they take that seriously,” he said. “I think this research shows that students play a larger role than they may have thought.”

In order to get the most out of their teachers, students can show their involvement in a number of ways. Expressing non-verbal interest--including such simple actions as smiling, head nods, eye contact and leaning forward--proved powerful in influencing teachers' perceptions of the student as well as their own teaching satisfaction. Asking and responding to questions during class also had a positive impact on teachers' perceptions.

“We're telling students, if class is boring, don't just blame the teacher. It's a mutual transaction,” Beebe said. “We've found that teachers are more satisfied when students are responsive. They think they're more effective teachers when students are responsive. So when students are responding, they're helping their teachers.”

There is a potential downside to the effects of the positive-feedback cycle, however. Teachers, responding favorably to students who actively participate in class, could be viewed as giving preferential treatment to those students.

“That’s something few teachers talk about. We pride ourselves on being fair and consistent in the classroom, but we don’t engage in discussions recognizing the fact we like some students more than others, and how that influences our teaching behavior,” Mottet said. “When you ask students if they have a favorite teacher, they respond quickly, but if you ask a teacher, they don’t want to answer. They feel it reflects poorly on their professionalism.

“The question is, how can we reinforce good classroom behavior while not letting it sway us?” he said. “Good behavior and interaction in the classroom need to be encouraged and rewarded, but teachers need to be aware and not let it move us in a direction where we’re not being fair and objective in grading students’ work.”