

Work Smarter, Not Harder: High-Impact, Low-Effort Strategies for Student Success

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Resources

The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching (2023)

Isis Artze-Vega, Flower Darby, Bryan Dewsbury, & Mays Imad

Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College (2020)

Peter Felten & Leo M. Lambert

Theoretical Basis

The most crucial factors in determining students' academic success are their relationships with their peers and professors (Felten), and their sense of belonging and equity in the classroom (Artze-Vega, et al.). These impact whether students will finish their degree and go on to successful careers more than anything else, including teaching strategies, hours spent studying, previous test scores, etc.

However, many of the activities that help foster these relationships often require significant effort and investment of time—things we typically have in short supply. The materials presented here are designed to give you actionable strategies for building those productive relationships without significantly adding to your workload—and, in some cases, even reducing it. In addition to contributing to your students' success, this will also increase your own engagement, helping you get more enjoyment out of your class sessions and general teaching. Rather than feeling transactional, it will feel collaborative and cooperative.

A Note on Authenticity

You will notice that many of the recommendations I give contain an element of playfulness. It is a key feature of my personality, and when I am building relationships, humor and playfulness are always central. However, that may not be the case for you, and it is more important that your methods of relationship-building are authentic and genuine. So, if any of the activities or strategies you see here feel way out of your comfort zone, I encourage you to consider how you might modify them to still achieve their central goal while being more authentic to your personality and teaching style.

To do this, examine some of the most valued relationships in your life with friends and family members, and search for the common denominators. Use those as guideposts for how you implement these strategies so that the “real you” is coming through—that is what your students will respond to. Consider what boundaries you want or need to hold as the instructor, but let them see who you are as a human as much as possible.

High-Impact, Low-Effort Strategies

Attendance Questions

[Template for Attendance Question Form](#)

- Go to forms.office.com and use your KSU account to sign in.
- Create a form for each section of your class sections.
 - You can do a different form for each class meeting, or delete response and reuse the same form once you've recorded the data elsewhere.

- For each form, include an icebreaker question that is low-stakes, but will generate fun conversation.
 - I keep a running list to pull from—it’s available in the OneDrive folder linked above.
- As students are coming into class, project the QR code using the “Present” feature on Microsoft Forms. This also allows students to see the responses as they are submitted.
 - Comment on the answers and ask follow-up questions, and share your own answers! Students will get to know each other (and you!) better.
- Student testimonials from Spring 2024:
 - “I enjoyed the way you interacted with each of us, whether it was playing the playlist with all of our favorite songs or asking us about our answers to the discussion questions each morning.”
 - “I love the forms every start of class. It makes me feel connected to everyone.”

Natural Consequences

- Look through your course policies and consider which ones can be amended so that they have built-in, natural consequences.
 - Research tells us these are far more effective for impacting student behavior.
 - The added bonus is that they save you time because they are passive penalties—you don’t have to do any extra work to impose the consequences, they just *are*.
- While these policies are more lenient in some ways, they still hold students accountable for coming to class (and being there on time) and turning in their work in a timely manner. However, they also put the onus on the student to communicate their needs and self-advocate.

Attendance Policy

I track attendance for the sake of “W” grades and general record-keeping, but do not dock points for missing a certain number of classes or for tardiness. We explicitly discuss this policy during the first week of class and I spell out the math for them on the impact it could have on their grade due to missing class work (see late work policy below). I point out that missing a few random days due to illness won’t tank their grade, and they’re better off resting up, but that a pattern of tardiness and absences will negatively affect them.

- Takes the pressure off attendance tracking and removes the workload of counting absences and docking points at the end of the semester.
- Provides natural consequences and natural incentives for attending class—students will miss out on valuable instruction and potential points.
- Puts all the responsibility on the student for their attendance and their grade—you aren’t punishing them for missing class; they are punishing themselves.

Late Work Policy

Minor assignments are not accepted late and cannot be made-up (this includes class work and prep-work). Major assignments have a set due date, but students may email to propose a reasonable deadline extension up until that deadline. During the first week of class, we talk about

See the document “Syllabus Policy Excerpts” in the OneDrive folder for the wording from my syllabus on attendance and late work.

Multi-Purpose Assignments

Craft low-stakes assignments that address course content and/or college skills, but that also help you get to know students. The most effective versions of these are:

- Reflective in nature (asks students to think about their own opinions or thought processes)
- Clearly tied to course content and/or college readiness
- Short and do not require extensive grading or feedback—just a check to make sure it’s done.
 - If any glaring issues pop up, you can always make a note or reach out to that student, but largely you’re just scanning through answers for anything out of the ordinary.

Email Etiquette Assignment

This assignment goes hand-in-hand with our review of the syllabus as we talk about professional communication. The key is to have a frank discussion with students about *why* these are the expectations/requirements for professional communication so that they understand it isn’t an arbitrary power trip.

- Create an assignment on D2L and set it up as a file submission.
- Write out your instructions and requirements.
 - I have my students read the “Communication” section of my syllabus for an explanation of my requirements, as well as the article “[How to Email Your Professor \(Without Being Annoying AF\)](#),” to give them more than just my own perspective.
- Attach the [Email Etiquette Template document \(found in the OneDrive folder linked above\)](#) and instruct students to download the file, insert the correct information wherever there are brackets, and then upload the file for submission.
- As you grade these, write a quick “response” to each student in your feedback in the same style you would use to reply to an email.
 - Use the annotation feature in D2L to correct or address any issues in the “email” they submitted.
- *This activity is the most time-consuming, but the practical application for students and the relationship-building early in the semester pays dividends in the long run.*

Other Strategies & Activities

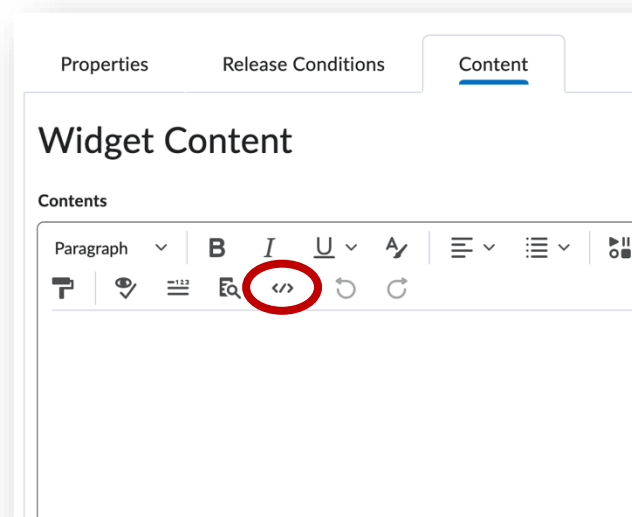
Recommendations with an asterisk * are also feasible for large class sections.

Create a Class Playlist*

- In smaller classes, I have students submit three songs each (see prompt below), but in larger classes you could ask for just one song.
 - Compile all of these in a playlist (I use Spotify) and embed or link to it on your class's D2L page.
 - Put the playlist on shuffle and use it as background music during class work—students love it when they hear one of the songs they submitted get played!
 - **Prompt for three songs:**
 1. If you were a baseball player, what would your walk-up song be? (If you're unfamiliar, this is the song a batter chooses to have playing as they walk up to the plate. It's usually a song that pumps them up or makes them feel powerful/confident).
 2. What song do you most relate to, or you feel like it describes you in some way? This could be literal, or more figurative, like a song that captures an emotion you relate to.
 3. What song always makes you dance-- or at least want to dance?

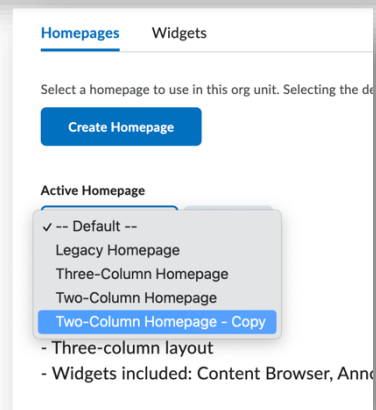
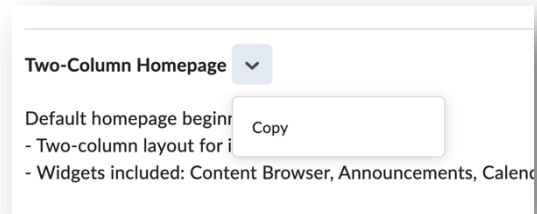
How to Embed a Spotify Playlist on D2L

- After you have created the playlist on Spotify, click the “Share” button and choose “Embed playlist,” then copy the embed code.
- On D2L, go to “Course Admin” → “Widgets” → “Create Widget”
- Name the Widget “Class Playlist” (or something similar).
- Click over to the “Content” part of the widget and click the “</>” button.
- Paste the embed code right where the cursor automatically generates in the window that opens.
- Click “Save and close.”
- Now you can add this widget to your course homepage (you will need to have a copy of your course homepage so you can edit it).



How to Edit Your Course Homepage

- Go to Course Admin → Homepages
- The Two-Column Homepage should be the default one that is currently active.
- Click the drop-down arrow next to the title and click “Copy.”
- You will now see a new homepage titled “Two-Column Homepage – Copy” that is a clickable blue link.
- At the top of the page, click the drop-down menu for Active Homepage, and choose that new “Copy” homepage, then click “Apply.”
- Now you can scroll down and click on the copied homepage (with the blue clickable link) and you are able to add, remove, and rearrange widgets on your course homepage.



Solicit Informal Feedback Throughout the Semester*

Use Microsoft Forms or just have a conversation with students about what is working and not working, and encourage them to provide recommendations. You can use a “Start/ Stop/ Continue” setup, or ask questions about specific activities or assignments. **It is important to preface this with a conversation about *constructive* feedback and the value of explaining their answers.**

Let Class Vote on Modality/Content Where Appropriate*

When it doesn't significantly impact your coverage of the content or your time commitment, let students choose between options for how to complete and/or submit certain activities. For example, I have let my students vote on whether they would like to choose their small groups for the final exam or be randomly assigned. Neither method created more work for me, and both options are pedagogically sound. I have also let students choose whether they want to submit assignments as one running document or as separate ones when it didn't make a significant difference for me in terms of the ease of grading.

Hold Mandatory One-on-One Conferences

At least once during the semester (I recommend right before or after the first major assignment), cancel class for a day or two in order to hold individual conferences with students. Set aside 15-30 minute windows for each student, but keep the meetings themselves to about 10 minutes.

In addition to checking in with students on a **specific aspect** of the course content (i.e., going over their grade from the major assignment or checking in on their progress on it), take the opportunity to just chat with students. Mention something from their class introduction or their email assignment and ask a follow-up question. At the very least, ask how their semester is going, how many classes they're taking, which classes, etc.

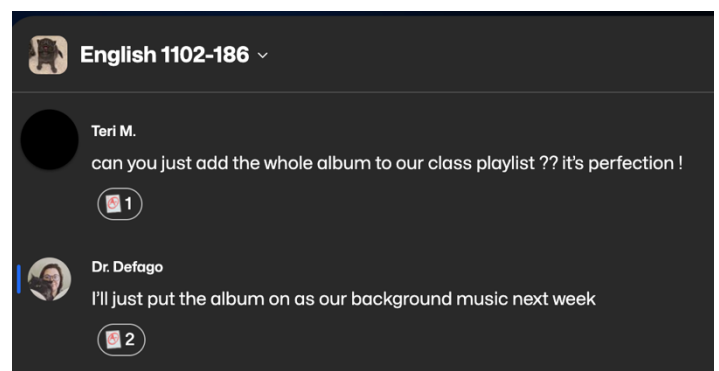
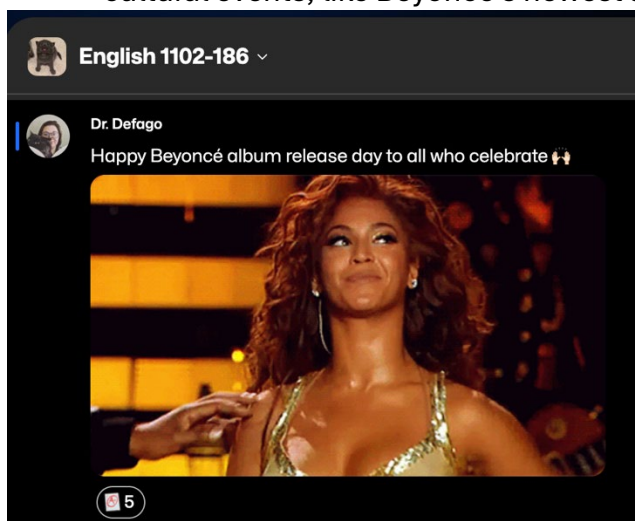
Note: This is my one recommendation that won't actually save you any time. In some ways it is more work, or at least makes for longer days. *However*, I find these conferences to be so overwhelmingly valuable for both students' academic progress and relationship-building that I *always* do them, even when I know it will be time-consuming. Students leave these conferences feeling seen as an individual, feeling less combative with you, having a better understanding of course content, feeling more comfortable coming to you with questions, knowing where your office is, and learning that it's not actually that scary to go talk to their professors. I cannot overstate the value of these meetings.

Create a GroupMe For the Class*

This doesn't have to be your main method of communication, but it's a nice backup for when students have a quick question that might also benefit the rest of the class. If you do this, have a frank conversation with them about when using GroupMe is appropriate vs. when an email would be better.

Uses:

- Reinforce D2L announcements or remind them to check their KSU email (they're more likely to see these phone notifications)
- Share memes or jokes related to course content as a way of reinforcing it and making deeper connections
 - I also let students submit and vote on options for the chat photo
- Humanize yourself! Once I learned that the majority of my students play the New York Times Wordle and Connections games daily, I started posting my results when it was a particularly hard one. I also used the GroupMe to acknowledge important cultural events, like Beyoncé's newest album:



Have Students Introduce Themselves on D2L or FlipGrid*

Even if you're teaching a face-to-face class, have students post a slightly more extensive introduction on D2L or FlipGrid. Not only does this reinforce their introduction from the first day (when everyone's getting information overload anyway), but it also helps if someone adds to the class late. It gives them an opportunity to "catch up" with the other students, and to introduce themselves since they didn't get a chance on the first day. Encourage students to include a phonetic pronunciation of their name, a photo of themselves, and some fun information like current movies/music/books they're loving.

Respond to as many of these as you can, even if it's just to acknowledge and thank them. If you can also comment on some of the information they provided, that's even better! And if you ask them to post an introduction, you should post one yourself.

Boring Fact Icebreaker*

- On the first day of class, my go-to icebreaker is to have students introduce themselves, say where their hometown is (whatever they consider their hometown to be), and to share **one very boring fact**. It is important that it's a boring fact, not an interesting one, because boring facts are more relatable.
 - As students introduce themselves, take a short note next to their name on your roster with that boring fact or thing you remember.
For example, "JJ—likes to work on his car"
 - Keep this list! If you want to add to it as you learn more about students, feel free to do that.
 - When students email you or set up a meeting, go back to this list for a refresher. It will help you put a face with a name, and it will help them feel that you see them as an individual.
- **If you are teaching a large class section in which this isn't feasible, incorporate this into a FlipGrid or D2L post (separate from their official introduction post).** Have them post a brief video with their name, hometown, and their boring fact, just to get the ball rolling.

Split the Workload*

- If you have a teaching assistant (or more than one, you lucky dog!), divide and conquer. Divide the class by however many instructors/TAs you have and assign each one to a certain group of students. They are responsible for learning those students' names, checking in with them, etc. You may want to set up a shared document or folder where they can post information about the students (like the list from the previous recommendation).
 - As the lead instructor, you should be able to access this, but this helps divide up the workload, while also giving students a designated point person they can go to and build more of a rapport with.