

When I teach courses, I start with the idea that the classroom is a training ground, not a holding pen or rest stop. Students want to be active. They want to apply. And they want to make meaning for themselves.

High school students attending their first college courses are eager to transcend the tropes of sitting in class for hours and regurgitating answers to multiple choice questions. Veterans, professionals, and returning students have no patience for the three hours of lecture and PowerPoint. So how do you keep students who take a Saturday morning or weeknight class from checking phones, gaming, or spacing out?

Treat them like direct reports, and treat the assignments like work projects.

I hit upon this when reflecting on the similarities and differences between training in a corporate setting and teaching courses at community colleges and tech schools. For my trainees, it's simple: produce results or move on. They will put forth the effort and reap the rewards, or one party will decide it's not working out and take action.

For my students, it's more complicated. They don't know why they should care about writing or understanding theories of motivation. I can convey my excitement and hope it catches fire. But this isn't enough, particularly for instructors like me who teach general education courses. Students want to learn a bit and figure out how it fits into their lives or future careers. They want to see the return on investment, particularly when their time is limited and they are more interested in their other classes.

So I focus on the practical. I show them how I've seen having (or lacking) the knowledge and skills has worked out for me and other people I know. I learned a lot in classes, but I wish I'd learned more about how things apply to the real world, and I made that my mission. And I would've loved to be challenged to think about how my gen ed classes might connect to my prospective career.

So that's what I do. I create a workshop environment where lecture is limited, access to the SME is continual, and feedback, work experience, and big ideas are discussed. Tough questions are asked. Students share their work and life experience. Advice is provided, and so is the rationale for it. Encouragement is freely given, explanations are considered, excuses are not.

And my students respond to it. They want the respect and freedom to use their talents and to grow their budding skills. They appreciate the collaboration and minimal top-down communication. The confidence they bring to the classroom is served well by independent work and thought, and the coaching and personal attention can help bring those along who are transitioning from traditional education structures. The lives and careers they are committing time and financial resources to demand more effort than sitting and listening.