Meeting Student Resistance with Empathic Teaching in the College Classroom

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College teachers experience student resistance in the classroom, such as student inattention and disengagement from learning. While current scholarship has attempted to examine the potential origins of student resistance, such as the mentality of. the Millennial generation, student overuse of social media, and poor academic preparation for college, scholars have not adequately considered strategies for countering resistance to learning in the classroom. Using my own training as a social worker and integrating scholarship associated with immediacy and rapport, I propose that student resistance can be addressed effectively through empathic teaching, which is a method for instruction that notices, connects, and responds to student resistance. By moving toward a method of "empathic teaching", teachers who encounter resistant students can improve their classroom environments.

Keywords: Student engagement, student resistance, immediacy, empathy

Student resistance is not an uncommon occurrence in the college classroom, nor has it been rare in my personal experiences. I have witnessed the 19-year old freshman sitting in the back row with his baseball hat pulled over his eyes. I have seen the student staring at her lap shamelessly texting throughout the class period. I have attempted to respond to the bold student who argues aggressively for me to change an assignment due date in front of the class. These incidents have challenged my patience as a teacher. Yet, it appears I am not alone in facing these experiences. Based on conversations with colleagues and comments overheard prior to faculty meetings, other college teachers experience students who seem to resist or at least disengage from their own learning.

While many college teachers attempt to determine why student resistance occurs in their classroom, the discussion associated with this phenomenon often seems to miss an important question: How do teachers ultimately react to student resistance? In this essay, I argue for greater engagement with student resistance as I share important principles from my training as a social work professional as well as scholarship associated with immediacy and rapport. I argue that

by understanding resistance among students, educators can better respond in a more focused and individualized way when resistance occurs.

Resistance and the College Student

Besides anecdotes about resistant students shared among college teachers, scholarly discussions of student resistance seem to have a similar theme of discovering the origins of student resistance. Offering a psychological explanation for resistance, Williams (2006) argues that resistance derives from a clash between the preservation of students' identities before college and the "growing pains" of their changing identities as learners. While the educator may assume that education will be a transformational or liberating experience, Williams, referring to the common metaphor of education as transformational, states that some students may actually do not enjoy such a transformation. It is often the "simultaneous desire and fear of transformation in the classroom [that] creates a conflict for some students that only increases their anxieties" (p. 151).

Other commentaries have considered advancements in cell phone and computer technology as strong barriers to student learning and preparation. For example, in their study of how college students use their time, Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, and Schlegel (2011), found that students, mostly of the Millennial Generation (born after 1982), spent approximately 12 hours a week studying and over 26 hours texting, talking on the phone, or using social media (e.g. Facebook). Anderson and Konrath (2011) have also voiced concern about the amount of time students of the Millennial Generation spend socializing online and its impact on teacher-student interactions. They speculate that the quantity of online socializing is partially responsible for a deterioration of the necessary social skills associated with empathy. Anderson and Konrath argue that this lack of empathy creates a teacher-student interaction that is more susceptible to conflict.

Moreover, other commentaries have pointed to the educational institutions and faculty as responsible for student resistance in the classroom. For example, Arum and Roksa (2011) suggest that the non-academic aspects of the college experience have eclipsed or at least are eroding the educational aims of higher education institutions. Considering this shift of priorities, originating from both students and activities that colleges offer (e.g., wellness centers, athletics, and extensive clubs and organizations), it is plausible that student resistance occurs in teacher-student relationships because both students and faculty maintain different expectations about student academic preparation and progress. In addition, Arum and Roksa point to a possible shift in faculty priorities. They argue that faculty tolerate more disruptive classroom behaviors, requires less rigorous reading and writing standards for students, and engage in little development of their own teaching skills.

In sum, all of these scholarly explanations seek to understand why some students seem resistant to learning. Yet, current research tends to neglect the questions most relevant to teachers: When I encounter this resistance, how do I address it? Additionally, is there a way of teaching that can prevent resistance and promote greater student engagement? Given this lack of guidance in terms of reacting to resistance, I will review scholarship associated with the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students. This scholarship can provide a helpful guide to finding the most appropriate teaching behaviors to promote learning. Through integrating skills associated with immediacy in the classroom with those learned in the helping professions, I propose *empathic teaching* as a vital interpersonal stance that can promote more active and engaged students.

Resistance in Teaching Encounters

While commentaries and editorials have attempted to understand the origin of resistant behaviors, the specific documentation of resistance in the classroom has received relatively little empirical study regarding its quantity or quality. Alberts, Hazen, and Theobald (2010), in their analysis of 397 early-career geography instructors, have provided some initial estimates as to the degree of resistance experienced by college instructors. Inattentiveness, such as students' failure to respond or looking bored, was the most reported behavior in the large national survey of geography

faculty. Of all instructors, 28% noted that inattentiveness frequently occurred and another 66% of teachers noted that it occasionally occurred. Disrespectful behavior was the next most common behavior, with nearly 15% reporting that it was frequent and 61% reporting it occasionally occurred.

Other authors have attempted to define and classify student resistance in the classroom. Kearney, Plax, and Burroughs (1991) found 19 separate categories of resistant messages among 574 college students who reported to how they resist teachers' attempts to gain compliance in the classroom. In an effort to determine an underlying model of resistance behaviors, the researchers found two general strategies of resistance: "teacher-owned" and "student-owned". In "teacher-owned" resistance, students claimed their lack of compliance was because of the various qualities of teacher. The themes associated with this type of resistance included student perceptions of instructor incompetence, a lack of preparation or enthusiasm by the instructor, or a lack of emotional interest the instructor seemed to show for the students. In other words, in "teacher-owned" resistance, students claimed that they resisted learning because of inadequacies displayed by their instructors.

In "student-owned" resistance, however, students took personal responsibility for their resistance in the classroom. These techniques included using deception (such as feigning attention or preparation), placing a lower priority on a particular class, or even displaying hostility. While this type of resistance may result in comparable learning outcomes to "teacher-owned" resistance, students readily identified their responsibility in using these techniques. This research is an important contribution to our understanding of student-teacher interactions because it suggests that engaging a particular resistant student may differ depending on the type of resistance experienced. For example, with a student using "teacher-owned" resistance, improving the organization of one's lectures may alleviate the resistance, whereas with "student-owned" resistance, a particular student may require supportive gestures that address his or her lack of motivation.

While this empirical documentation of resistance is relatively sparse in scholarship on higher education, issues pertaining to resistance are well-documented in other areas of study, including my own field of social work. A great number of currently utilized textbooks in my discipline have been written specifically to assist in training social workers to help those clients who do not want help, commonly known as involuntary clients (Rooney, 2009; Taylor, 2011; Tripodi, Blythe, & Ivanoff, 1994). The definition of resistance has some clear connections with resistance in teaching. Stean (1979) has succinctly defined resistance as "any action or attitude that impedes the course of therapeutic work" (p. 70). Such examples of resistance in the social work field include a pregnant woman who is abusing alcohol, a psychotic individual who will not take his or her medication, or a parent that uses physical abuse to discipline his or her children. When social workers make attempts to change the behaviors of clients like this, social workers can experience resistance to their efforts.

Fortunately, two skills were particularly useful to me in addressing the resistance experienced by clients: the practice of self-reflection and maintaining a therapeutic relationship with my client. These skills were critical components of my educational training as a social worker. My social work training and internships, which emphasized client supervision, internships, valued the personal reflections I had when I responded to resistant clients. For example, if I had a disapproving attitude or little empathy for an individual with a particular problem, it was important for me to reflect on what was keeping me from connecting with that particular client. Only through a discussion with a colleague or supervisor about my reaction to a client was I able to become more fully aware of these disapproving attitudes. In other words, when I could clarify my own bias against a client, I was better able to empathize with the client' problems rather than being personally defensive or aloof to his or her acts of resistance.

The other skill I developed through training as a helping professional was a basic humanistic understanding that client growth is dependent on the strength of the clinical relationship. My experiences taught me that I can enable client growth to occur naturally by communicating my interest and understanding of their emotions, motivations, and aspirations.. Kahn (1997) argues that this type of clinical orientation, popularized by the humanist Carl Rogers, is akin to the Greek *agape* love: "It demands nothing in return and wants only the growth and fulfillment of the loved one. Agape

is a strengthening love, a love that, by definition, does not burden or obligate the loved one" (p. 39). This type of "love" practiced in the interpersonal relationship consists of genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961). While these humanistic principles may seem unattainable in an absolute sense, striving toward these humanistic ideals was a staple of training in the social work profession.

Defining Empathic Teaching

Empathic teaching is a teaching stance that utilizes these qualities within the interpersonal teaching relationship. It makes a deliberate effort to understand how a particular student resists his or her learning. Empathic teaching attempts to consider a student's unique type of resistance and offer a complementary teaching response that engages the learner. In an effort to better explain the quality of empathic teaching, I offer two overarching principles that are vital to understanding this stance:

Empathic teaching attempts to make an effort to understand and connect with the resistant student.

Empathic teaching selects interpersonal strategies unique to a particular type of resistance.

Just as my clinical missteps as a social work have often been the most instructive to my practice, I think a personal teaching misstep may provide a helpful illustration of when empathy is not utilized in a teaching encounter. The following example is from my first independent teaching experience as a graduate teaching assistant:

Rhonda was a 42-year-old women who declared that she was "in recovery" in her opening introduction to the class. On the first day, she also talked about her wealth of experience working in the addiction field. Over the first few weeks of class, she continuously mentioned her years of experience in the field, with her comments often being tangential to the content of this course. During the third class meeting, she brought her 6-year old grandson to class with her. At the beginning of class, I pulled her in the hallway to ask why her grandson was in class. Although she was extremely embarrassed, I told her I was puzzled as to why she was bringing her grandson to class and noted that her grandson could be a disruption to her classmates.

Why was I so irritated with her? At that moment I could not recognize the cause of my frustration, but as I mulled over the encounter, I realized I was feeling threatened as the "one in charge" of the classroom. When she brought her grandson, I thought she was creating her own rules for my classroom. Additionally, other aspects of her behavior in class annoyed me: announcing her recovery from alcohol and talking endlessly about the decades of experiences she had working in the addition field. Again, these comments challenged my authority as the expert in the room.

Yet, as the semester continued, I began to regret my initial rigid stance. Bringing her grandson to class had little to do with me. She saw bringing her grandson as the only solution to aiding her family and respecting my expectations for student attendance. In fact, on the particular day after I talked with her in the hallway, her grandson was actually a delight to have in class rather than a distraction. In terms of her grandiosity, I developed insights after ongoing classroom interactions that her overconfidence helped her to cope with her academic challenges. When I made an effort to better understand her, I also better understood her need to perceive herself as competent in front of her classmates. These insights encouraged me to react with more empathy to her academic struggles and ultimately aid her in her learning.

Empathy in the Classroom: Immediacy and Rapport

Although the concept of empathy has clear utility in helping professions like social work, little is known about the role of empathy in teacher-student encounters. Despite its more limited discussion in educational literature, there are a number of concepts that are closely aligned with empathy, particularly immediacy and rapport. Immediacy, having a considerable body of work, has been defined as communication behaviors that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another" (Mehrabian, 1969, p. 203). Verbal immediacy includes behaviors such as calling students by

their names, asking students about themselves, and encouraging students' opinions. Nonverbal immediacy behaviors include smiling, making eye contact, moving about the classroom, and using vocal variety. In a large meta-analysis of 81 studies, nonverbal and verbal immediacy were strongly correlated with student interest in the instructor and topic, also known as affective learning. Strong correlations were also found between immediacy and perceived learning. Further, cognitive learning measures were positively impacted, but to a smaller extent (Witt, Wheeless, & Allen, 2004).

Besides the impact that verbal and nonverbal immediacy have on learning, it also appears that immediacy has an impact on the resistance strategies used by students. In a study by Kearny, Plax, and Burroughs (1991), teachers with immediate qualities in the classroom (such as being relaxed, friendly, and vocally expressive) were less likely to experience resistant student behaviors. When students did exhibit resistance behaviors to immediate teaching behaviors, they were more likely to use "student-owned" behaviors in which they held themselves responsible for their lack of learning. In contrast, non-immediate teaching behaviors were associated with greater "teacher-owned" resistance, in which students blamed teachers for their lack of learning or disengagement.

The importance of immediacy is echoed in a study of German college students that sought to understand the satisfactory and unsatisfactory interactions between students and teachers. Through analyzing 429 memorable incidents from 225 students, Voss (2009) found that friendliness and empathy were critical factors in how students rated their interactions with teachers. If a teacher was unable to take the students' perspectives (empathy) or were unwilling to react emotionally positive to students (friendliness), students would often see their encounters with the teacher as negative.

Rapport, or interactions characterized by friendliness and caring, is another concept closely associated with empathy and immediacy (Altman, 1990). While it appears synonymous with immediacy, rapport has been found to independently predict student outcomes after including immediacy in the analysis. Wilson, Ryan, and Pugh (2010) have suggested that rapport measurement may be a more gestalt impression of teachers' qualities than immediacy, which measures the utilization of specific behaviors. In one study of rapport in the classroom, students noted the specific teacher qualities that were associated with rapport, including being encouraging, open-minded, creative, interesting, and accessible. Rapport was positively associated with attendance, paying attention, and enjoying the subject (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005). As Lowman (1995) presents in his two-dimensional model of teaching, interpersonal rapport is necessary requirement for quality teaching beyond intellectual excitement.

Moving Toward Empathic Teaching

Kottler (1992) offers some insights into how to respond to difficult clients. He discusses various typologies for conceptualizing resistance and suggests that empathy can be utilized with resistant clients. In so doing, he notes that different types of resistance are better addressed with different types of responses. It is in this matched response to resistance that I see potential in empathic teaching. In an effort to provide specific situations that could be influenced by empathic teaching, I will provide examples of how these types of resistance could be addressed in the teaching-student relationship.

The first type of resistance centers on a lack of *understanding expectations*. For some students, particularly first generation college students, the higher education classroom can be fraught with confusing new expectations. Unspoken student questions can include, "How is this different from high school? How do I use my new freedom? Can I sleep in? Should I work outside of going to school?" Students are attempting to understand how they interact with their own learning and the teacher-student relationship. In the college classroom, I believe much of the resistance teachers encounter comes from students who are simply trying to understand the specific expectations, whether that be of a particular assignment or how grading is different from their high school experiences. There are many empathic responses for this type of resistance. First, instructors should be more specific. They should clarify their expectations for homework and give their students a roadmap to what they are teaching and how they will deliver the lesson. Further, teachers should explain the specifics of an assignment and tell their students the amount of time they should expect to

spend on a particular project. As Armstrong (2009) comments, "when we name the behaviors we wish to see, students see our classrooms as places where they are safe and teachers see that this makes our classroom communities better and improves student learning" (p. 12).

In a second type of resistance, students lack the *necessary skills or knowledge* to complete a task. It is frustrating when it is obvious that some students lack certain basic skills to be successful in a class. In order to respond to this type of resistance, it is vital for an instructor to discover the skills their students currently possess. This does not necessarily mean teachers should lower their standards, but rather that they should be realistic about their expectations given the existing strengths and abilities of a specific student or group of students. This type of resistance can challenge us to consider how our specific methods of teaching engage the entire classroom, rather than only the students that can easily and successfully engage with our courses. Engagement with these students also means that we need to have the skills to talk openly about their academic challenges and be aware of specific resources that could help support them, such as campus writing centers or tutoring services.

The third type of resistance is *motivational*. This type is marked by general apathy and is often associated with self-defeating belief systems. The song, "Everything Happens to Me" (Adair & Denis, 1958), popularized by numerous singers including jazz singer and trumpeter Chet Baker, sums up these self-defeating attitudes:

> I make a date for golf, and you can bet your life it rains.
> I try to give a party, and the guy upstairs complains.
> I guess I'll go through life, just catching colds and missing trains.
> Everything happens to me.

The student reactions associated with this type of resistance are characterized by pessimism, self-doubt, and embarrassment. The strategy for countering this type of resistance is to instill hope and create positive expectations. Also known as providing ego support, this strategy consists of skills that attempt to help students feel good about themselves. These skills have been found to be positively associated with student learning and motivation (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Though this technique is commonly practiced in helping environments, it may feel awkward in teaching settings. However, there are various ways it may be deployed in teacher-student encounters. An instructor can share with students something he or she noticed in their work that impressed him or her, or comment on a question students raised in class a week earlier. For students uncertain of their abilities, genuine affirmations that instill hope demonstrate to them that they belong on a college campus and that instructors notice them.

The fourth type of resistance is *guilt and anxiety*. Despite the "objective" academic skills of students, some students may always have the notion that they lack any real abilities. Kottler (1992) sees fear as the overriding force behind this kind of resistance: fear of making mistakes, fear of the unknown, or fear of being judged. I have noticed that these fears, common to both students and faculty, are particularly pronounced when students and teachers are under high levels of stress. They frequently ask themselves questions such as, "What will the future hold for me? Is this the right major for me? Am I good at this?" In my role as an academic advisor, I typically try to emphasize the insights that my advisees derive from different classes rather than focusing on the specific letter grade they obtained. Through this approach, I hope to instill in them the general realization that we all have strengths and weakness. I also try to consider ways I can connect a specific student's interests to student groups or community events that link with his or her values and commitments, be it an Amnesty International chapter, a local foreign film series, or even a local mountain biking club. These social and intellectual connections can aid students in becoming less fearful of the emerging person they are becoming in college. Finally, I remind students that the struggle is an important and natural aspect of higher education.

Conclusion

Empathic teaching demands an interest in the types of resistance behaviors used by students as well as a willingness to engage with these students. In this essay, I have provided some examples of both of these requirements. Empathic teaching demands the skills to notice, connect, and respond to students (Miller, 2007). Although there is significant evidence that immediacy, rapport, and empathy are important, teachers in higher education are not typically trained to consider these important interpersonal qualities of the classroom. This is unfortunate because the use of certain behaviors in the classroom, particularly immediacy, have been shown to reduce student resistance (Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988).

In terms of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the emotional domain in the higher education classroom has considerable potential, and we are left with many important questions. Can peer-supports and/or mentors aid teachers in reflecting upon the strategies they use to engage resistant students, just as the helping professions use supervision to improve client care? Can college teachers develop a more empathic teaching style in the classroom? While no known empathy or immediacy training is available, future SoTL projects could explore the degree to which college teachers can develop teaching behaviors characterized as immediate, rapport-building, or empathic. It is my hope that the use of empathic teaching can lead to a more rewarding experience for students and college teachers.

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