

# Learning Student Names

*Joan Middendorf and Elizabeth Osborn*

In his 1993 book, *What Matters in College*, Alexander Austin reviewed the literature on college teaching, finding two things that made the biggest difference in getting students involved in the under-graduate experience: greater faculty-student interaction and greater student-student interaction. Though learning student names may seem a trivial matter in the entire university enterprise, it is a powerful means to foster both of these interactions.

A professor who does not know his or her students' names may be perceived as remote and unapproachable. "When the professor engages the student in personal conversation, recognizes her by name, and seems to include her in the domain of attention, the subject matter seems more accessible. The nonverbal message goes out that the student is a part of the community of people who can do mathematics, statistics, chemistry, or whatever the subject is" (Willemsen, 1995). In large classes, the task of learning student names can seem daunting, but even if the professor learns the names of only a portion of the class, a caring, inclusive atmosphere will be established.

Student-student interaction is fostered either through exercises in which students directly learn their peers' names, or indirectly when they hear the professor address classmates by name. Classes at IU, especially large ones, are places where students feel "like a number." Knowing one's classmates' names fosters the feeling that there are peers in the class with whom the student can interact. A sense of community among the students begins to grow, fostering learning both inside and outside the classroom.

As teachers, some of us find it easy to learn names, while others have to work at it. Techniques for learning names abound. The following techniques were adapted from responses to Mary Landrum's (Center for Faculty Development, Louisiana State University) Internet request for ideas on learning students' names, from email to us from Ted Panitz and from the FACET guide, "Quick Hits."

## 1. Photos and names

### A. Passport for Class (Connie Batten, Fort Hays State University)

I learned this technique from Liz Miller at Texas A&M and I have used it successfully in large classes. Have the students prepare a "passport" for your class. This is an

exercise in creativity and an opportunity for you to get to know about the student as well as their name. Using an old notecard, have the student make a passport or document that tells about them. They must include a personal picture (a snapshot is okay), some information about their likes and dislikes, and something about where they have been and where they are going. This is especially helpful later, when the student calls and asks for a recommendation...you can use the card to jog your memory.

### **B. Student Pictures (Marty Rosenzweig)**

One of my colleagues brings a Polaroid camera to class and takes each student's picture. He keeps the photos with the students' names attached for reference. Eventually, he learns all of their names.

(Mona Kreaden, EQUAL Commission) At the beginning of the semester, some of our faculty who teach large classes ask their student to choose a permanent seat, and bring in a small passport-size photo of themselves with their name on the back. These photos are attached to a seating chart. One professor also writes comments about the student in a box beside their name, and keeps the charts.

I developed a little mnemonic device (inspired by Francis Yeats' *The Art of Memory*, that has worked wonders. On the first day of class, I bring in a camera and have one of the students take head shots of each student. At the second class, I return with the photos and have the students write something about themselves on the backs of their photos, including information about their ethnic origins and how it's related to their names. I play with my flash cards over the weekend, and by the third day of class, I know every student's name.

I ask the students to transform their names into images -- the more grotesque the better. So, for example, "Mona Kreaden" becomes a picture of "Mona" Lisa's head with the body of a "cretin." "Steve Hutkins" becomes an image of a "steve"-dore standing with his relatives ("kin") next to a little Samoan "hut." "Richard Koppenaar" becomes King "Richard" coping with the whole world ("all") on his head ("kopf"). I play flashcards over the weekend, and by the third day of class, I know every student's name in both my classes -- sixty students.

### **C. The Name of the Rose (Ben Brabson, IU)**

My problem stems from my deeply ingrained bias that teachers teach and students learn. It's only recently that I discovered the other half of that relationship where we teachers are the learners, and our students the teachers. To establish the full two-way collaboration, I find it essential to know each student personally. Of course, I can't, but it's amazing how close I can come. I start with the usual trick of taking a color Polaroid of all my students in groups of five. They immediately put their names on the back for me. That night I arrange the whole class on sheets with names under each person. If I

also meet these students in smaller discussion sections, I arrange the pictures section by section.

For the first few weeks all seems dark and dismal. Even though I study my gallery of pictures before each class, nothing sticks. I hand back graded homework in class wherever possible. As students collaborate in groups I make sure they know each other's names and listen in as they introduce each other. If I don't remember a name, I always ask before every conversation, both in and out of class (it's very embarrassing to have to ask, especially the forty-second time!).

#### **D. Class List (Neil Wylie, Council of Presidents, New England Land-Grant Colleges)**

The technique for learning student names that always seemed to work best for me was to become very familiar with the class list in advance. If I already knew the names, attaching the faces to them was relatively simple.

## **2. Nametags and name tents**

### **A. Name Cards (Rea Freeland, Carnegie Mellon University)**

I also ask students to include on the same card the name they want to be called in class (with pronunciation instructions if they want) and “one sentence to make them memorable.” Students use the one sentence in a variety of ways: to share a favorite quote, to describe a hobby, to tell me where they grew up, or to let me know something about their classroom “style” (sometimes falling asleep because they work late, that they don't especially like to participate in class, etc.).

### **B. Name Tent (Connie Batten, Fort Hays State University)**

To help other students in the class learn each other's names, a name “tent” (a piece of cardboard folded in half that has the student's first name on it) can be placed on the front of their desk or table. This works well in helping identify each other, until they become familiar with one another.

### **C. Name Tags (Linda Nelson, Vanderbilt University)**

I have my students wear name tags (first name only, printed very large) for the first two weeks. It works, and I consider myself “name-learning challenged.” After class, I also review the index cards that I have students fill out with personal information on the first day of class. I look for, hope for, associations.

### **D. A Multi-Pronged Approach (Nancy Diamond, Algonquin College)**

First, read the roster aloud several times before the course begins. Then, before the first day of class, use heavy-weight paper to make name plates for students. Students can pick them up when they enter class and put them at the table or desk. Also, ask questions during class and call on people, using their names. It is important to ask answerable questions and follow up questions (e.g., “John, do you agree?”). Finally, after class,

return to the roster and see if you can remember the faces that go with the names.

### 3. Self-Introductions

#### A. The Name Game (Bonnie Kendall, IU)

Lots of professors play a variant of The Name Game, but my version is based on what I call “the group mind” technique. I tell the students that we have three weeks to learn each other's names and that we are all responsible for insuring that everyone does it. I explain that cultures all over the world have developed strategies for insuring the social distribution of knowledge, such that if one person is lost, the knowledge is retained somewhere else in the group (you can skip this step if you teach, say, engineering and don't want to talk about fuzzy stuff like culture). I encourage them to help each other in the learning process.

Start by having seven to ten students introduce themselves and then ask an individual in the group to name other individuals: “Luke, which one of these people is Rick?” “Rick, point to Susan.” “Susan, what's the name of the person sitting next to Attila?”

If Susan doesn't know the name of the person next to Attila, I'll say “Ask Attila!” or “Ask Luke!” In doing it this way, I can keep everyone on his or her tippytoes, because anyone might be made responsible for an answer at any time -- and everyone knows that someone nearby can be counted on for help. No one is made to feel stupid, because the entire group helps out.

At the beginning (and sometimes at the end) of each class in the designated period, we play the name game: “Susan, is Attila here today?” Bob, what is the name of that woman coming in the door?” “Kathy, point to two people named Mike.”

This is also a nice technique to interject in the middle of a long class, just to shake up people's minds and get their attention revved up.

#### B. Alternative Adjective Name Game (Tim Kennedy, University of Georgia)

The student sitting at one of the corner desks at the front of the room begins by taking the first letter of their name and selecting an adjective that begins with the same letter. Examples include: “Gross Greg” or “Awesome Alicia.” The second person has to repeat the first person's name preceded by its alliterative adjective and then gives their own. The third person repeats from the beginning and adds her own moniker to the game. When all of the students have participated I recount them all back by adding my own name at the end. It may or may not be your cup of tea, but it's an effective device that is always good for a few laughs.

#### C. Unforgettable Neighbor (Ed Nuhfer, University of Colorado at Denver)

Have students turn to their neighbor and introduce themselves. The assignment is for the neighbor to introduce their companion “with a trait that no one can forget.” Obviously the

partners have to be helpful with a trait or mnemonic aid. Pick randomly from around the room for introductions. After a third person is introduced, point at those introduced and the class has to name the individual. Continue with the introductions and cumulative reviews. The repetition in reviews really helps.

#### **D. Student Interviews (Jean Civikly-Powell, University of Mexico)**

I have used a method for learning students' names for the past 20+ years. It can be done for up to sixty names, but fewer names make it easier and faster. I plan on 45 minutes for the activity and do it on the last day of the first week of classes. Students are asked to pair up with someone they do not know in the class and to take three or four minutes each to interview their partner. I put a list of five things on the chalkboard for them to address (name, place where they were raised, area of study, and three questions about the course). After they have interviewed each other, explain the importance of concentrating on the person being introduced, their name, and something unique about the person. Partners introduce each other and after about one-third have done so, everyone can do a quick repeat of names they have just learned. Partners can help the class along by saying their partner's name clear and loud. Finish up by doing a complete run-through of all names. The instructor can play too.

#### **E. Standard Icebreakers (Rudi Aksim, Algonquin College)**

I find that using a class to do two icebreakers helps to learn student names. First, people interview each other, in pairs, for five minutes and then introduce each other to the class. Second, I do an exercise called "Name Calling." I introduce myself and identify the person next to me. For example, "Hi, I'm Rudi and this is Mary." Then Mary says, "Hi, I'm Mary and this is Jerome (person next to her)." These exercises are from Adler and Towne's Looking Out, Looking In.

#### **F. Student Circle (Judy Egelston-Dodd; Martin Tolley, Nene College; Bruce Wagner, Tempe University)**

Have student sit in a circle with you and explain that each person is to give their name and a characteristic of themselves. For example, "My name is Judy and I have a good memory." The second person has to repeat the first person's name and characteristic and then give his own. And so on. Coaching is allowed! There are dangers, notes Martin Tolley: "Only this year we were three-quarters of the way around the first pass when a rather timid-looking student almost burst into tears saying, 'I can't do this; I just can't do it.' We all weighed in with support to which she replied, 'Zoe, my bloody name is Zoe.'"

#### **G. Pointers (Ivan Moore)**

- Ask students to give their names every time they speak to you for the first few times, then ask them to wait while you guess their name.
- Develop a positive attitude about learning names.
- Start small; learn 5-10 names at a time, or one row of students

at a time.

- Ask students to sit in the same seat for the first few sessions.

#### **H. Chaos to Order (Elaine Cohen, Diablo Valley College)**

One that was successful for me was to ask the students to learn each other's names, but not to give them a system. At first there would be chaos, with students moving about asking each other their names, until they got organized, realized they needed a system with repetition, practice, etc. They would then get themselves organized, figure out a way to learn each other's names and practice. We'd have volunteers try to name people and practice a bit at each class. It didn't take too many class periods before they knew each other and I knew all their names too. Then we had a discussion of what worked and what principles of learning took place. The main goal, however, was to have students get to know each other and feel comfortable in the class.

#### **I. Leave them alone (Bill Broderick, Cerritos College)**

Here is another, one that should be conducted on the first day of class, right at the beginning of class. One of the best ways I have found to “energize” your classroom is to leave it! Tell students that you are going to leave the classroom for five minutes, and that when you return, you want each student to be able to introduce five classmates to you on a first-name basis. How are they going to do this? That is up to them. Just do it! Then, leave the class for the allotted time. When you come back, five to ten minutes later, you will find an energy level that is sadly lacking in most of our developmental classrooms. Point this out to your class, then ask a volunteer to introduce five students. You will almost get one, two, or three people to volunteer. If you don't, pick out a student who looks as though s/he won't mind “being volunteered.” As the students are introduced, repeat their names and welcome them into the class. This activity is a terrific way to jump-start your class and let students know that they will be “active” learners, that the normal “passive mind-set” that so many of our students bring to class will not work in your class. With no instruction from you on how the students are to learn the names of five classmates, you have to put them on the spot -- they have to do it, and they have to figure out how to do it. Some will write the names down, others will commit the names to memory, others will not just give the names of five classmates, they will include other information about the people they are introducing. After the introductions, you can then tell students what you are expecting from them for the semester, and, believe me, you will have their attention!

### **4. Association techniques.**

#### **A. Annotations (Ivan Moore)**

Annotate your register. Write down individual features beside [each student's name].

### **B. Office Visits (Beverly Cameron, University of Manitoba)**

A colleague of mine asks students their names when they come in to his office. He puts their name on one part of a piece of paper, and makes a note about their concerns on another portion of the paper. He says that this helps him keep track of and learn students' names as well as their difficulties and concerns.

### **C. Association Techniques (Glenn Allen-Meyer, Cornell University)**

Anyone who has the same name as someone I know is associated and remembered that way. Anyone who has any characteristic that I can distinguish is associated with that. Sometimes, in strange ways, people “look like” their names.

This [anchoring] method help me get several “anchor” people in a group whose names I can now remember. Then I work on “one person to the left of Frank is...” and so on. I also make a diagram of either where people sit or what I can remember about them.

### **D. Names & Faces (Elaine DesRosiers, University of Notre Dame)**

A few years ago I purchased a set of audio tapes and a booklet entitled, How to Remember Names and Faces, by Alan Butkowsky. The concept is remembering a name by associating with some facial feature of a person.

### **E. Collecting Background Information (Rea Freeland, Carnegie Mellon University)**

At the start of the first class, I ask student to give background information about their prior related courses and their reason for taking this particular class.

### **F. Scavenger Hunt (Ed Nuhfer, University of Colorado at Denver)**

Make up a sheet of fairly inane traits with as many traits as you have students in the class. Traits might be something like wearing shoes that require laces or likes spaghetti with clam sauce. Each trait has a space in front of the trait sufficient to write in a name. Everyone in the class gets a sheet, including the professor. The assignment is to find a person with that trait, meet them, and record their name. The rule is that you can use a person only once to complete your sheet. This works wonders with learning names quickly. I've never used it with a class of greater than 40.

### **G. Seating Chart (Ted Panitz)**

I do some work to make sure that people are comfortable with where they are sitting, and then I compile a seating chart.

## **5. Group Techniques**

### **A. Student Teams (Steven Richardson, Iowa State University)**

I have divided my class into teams of eight students each. The teams sit together, do in-class projects together, and act as study teams (as much as possible) outside of class. I also group them together on my grade sheets. I give at least one quiz a week, which

forces me to connect each name regularly to an assignment of progress, and to identify the name with a team of eight. I wander around in my class, and I try to interact with teams. The result of all this is that I have name recognition for every student, and have a pretty good idea how well the student is doing (even without looking at the grade sheet). I can also usually remember which other students are in the same team.

**B. Class Meetings (Marilla Svinicki, University of Texas)**

I teach a class of 72-75 students every spring. Starting with the second week of class, for one week I have small group meetings with seven students at a time. I learn a little about them and they learn one another's names. I take their picture as a group as well.

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