

# ISEP Presentation – CHRIS AQUINO

## Introduction to the “safe environment”

“Self-esteem and emotional wellness are necessary to reach one's potential as a student and as a person in general. It is the teacher who develops a safe, happy classroom environment to nurture those two traits. To cultivate and maintain such an environment is an individual, personal process for each teacher. What works well for one teacher may not work well or feel appropriate for another. But somehow or some way, every teacher needs to establish an emotionally secure classroom setting because brain research tells us that is the best climate for learning.”

The Brain-Compatible Classroom: Using What We Know About Learning to Improve Teaching by Laura Erlauer

## Aquino's path to higher education

After more than 20 years in the corporate world, I decided a change was necessary. What was next was unknown, but I knew I wanted my work to make more of a difference than it had during my time in the corporate world. Teaching had always been a part of my life's plan, but I never “pulled the trigger” because I did not want to do a poor job at something so important.

At a transition point in my career, I had two options. I could relax and recharge for my next role in the corporate world or I could chase down some of my life's unmet passions. The decision was easy. After my first teaching assignment at a community college I was hooked. I realized I probably had been teaching my entire career, but this time it was on a much larger scale. In addition, the “mentees” I had worked with in the corporate world were older and often more motivated than my students. Would the tricks used to motivate my employees (e.g., setting a high bar, working side-by-side with his charges, accountability, and intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, etc.) transfer to the world of higher education? Well, in a sense “yes”...but only for the best of students. Perhaps this should have been expected since I had spent most of my career working with successful companies who only hired the best candidates. So what about the rest of the class? Those who were there because their parents made them go to college or who were taking accounting classes because it was required in their major (e.g., marketing, economics, finance, etc.), or worse yet, those who cruised through high school never being challenged by their teachers. All of this made teaching students much more challenging than mentoring employees.

I quickly realized I knew almost nothing about how to engage and motivate students. The lack of “feedback” received from a good number of the students in my first few classes was good evidence of this fact. So what to do? Well, the great of minds of the academe say when you know nothing about a topic for which you are supposed to be an expert you better get to “researching” it. So that is what I did. First stop was anyone with experience in the classroom, and there certainly were a lot of them who were willing to offer advice. I was told things like “time will make you a better teacher,” “don't teach them how to invest in an accounting class,” and “don't call them clients.” I was also told to “show them respect at all times,” “answer ALL email promptly,” “don't ever show up unprepared for class,” and “always make yourself available to help when they step forward to ask for it.” Some advice was good and some was not so good. The interesting thing was everyone I talked with was being paid well to teach. This scared me. It meant I could do this portion of my new job poorly and still possibly be invited back to the classroom as long as I knew my content “stone cold” and generated good (and or just numerous) research publications. Therefore, the drive to become an effective teacher, one who could reach the best and worst of students, was going to have to come from within. With this understanding, I set out on my quest to change my world and the world of my students. Next stop was the education department!

## **Aquino/Vermette connection**

Paul Vermette teaches education classes for Niagara University. I signed up for his secondary education methods class during my first semester of my teaching at Niagara based upon the recommendation of a friend who worked with Vermette in the Education Department. Research supported constructivist and active learning techniques were emphasized in his class. All good stuff, but it work in a higher education classroom? The only way to know for sure was to try them out on my students.

The process of implementing my newly acquired teaching tools was slow. Generally, my students responded well, but still not all were engaged. I had much to learn. The secondary education class I had taken with Vermette had helped, but my teaching was not improving fast enough. With the busy schedule of a newly hired tenure-track accounting faculty (e.g., teaching, service, and research) there was no time to take more education classes. When discussing the situation with Vermette, he suggested we do research together. We agreed that the primary goal of our work would be to help me become a more effective teacher. In addition, if we came up with anything useful we would tell the academic community about it in the hope others would be motivated to try to replicate our models.

In my first four years at Niagara University, Vermette and I have collaborated on a number of research projects which has resulted in two publications, two submissions awaiting response, and two more papers in the final stage with submissions expected shortly. Our work together has essentially established the research portion of my tenure portfolio which will be presented to the tenure committee in September of 2014. We currently have two other projects in the works that may be completed and submitted for publication before my tenure portfolio is submitted. In summary, there is a possibility of eight publications in a four year period. And best of all...my effectiveness as a teacher has improved significantly over the same time frame. SoTL research makes you a better teacher.

## **Why I try to create a safe environment in my classroom**

Emphasizing a safe environment in my classroom stems from my time in Vermette's secondary education class and our research collaborations since then. In addition, it is very strongly influenced by the following:

1. SoTL and brain research support that students learn better when they feel physically and emotionally safe.
2. My personal moral code dictates that we are all essentially the same and deserve to be treated with respect. In addition, having been "left out" and ostracized at times in my life I have vowed never to exclude or contribute in any way to someone feeling uncomfortable in an environment under my control. I was able to do this in my role as Controller/CFO for more than 20 years in business and I am continuing it today as a higher education faculty.
3. The Vincentian mission of Niagara University. I am very proud to be a part of an organization whose mission it is to help those less fortunate. And as I see it, the best place to start is my own classroom.
4. It makes teaching more fun because students appreciate it and become your friend. I cannot imagine working all of my life with people who do not enjoy my company. Creating and maintaining a safe environment fosters relationship development and makes learning (and teaching) more effective AND more fun for all parties.

## **Things I do to attempt to create a safe environment in my classroom**

Some of the things I do in my classes with the intent of fostering a sense of emotional and physical safety include:

1. Solicitation of feedback at all times and in any form (including cursing and tears in my office).
2. Building a learning community at every chance.
3. Sharing email Q&A including "Thank you" to the student who sent in the question.
4. Anyone asked to do "board work" gets help from the entire class (if they get stuck.)
5. Humor....including "accounting humor" which is often the least effective form. 😊

6. Routine, structure, and organization. The students know where we are going, when we are going, and early on if anything is to be changed. This is hard work for me but goes a long way to reducing stress and tension. Accounting course content alone ensures “heat is on” all semester; a lack of structure would only magnify this pressure.
7. I work hard and early to get to know everyone’s name and something about them (but only if it is offered because some students feel safety only in anonymity).
8. Small group collaboration work as early as possible in the semester so they know some of their neighbors.
9. Slides are used 1) to give structure to my lectures and classroom discussions and 2) as a roadmap for exam coverage. Students often ask, “What is on the exam?” My response is “Check the slides. If we did NOT discuss it in class, it will NOT be on the exam.” This sense of certainty provides safety.
10. Late entrants to class get only a “Hello” or “Welcome” from me. They already feel bad about interrupting and I do not want to embarrass them. Habitual lateness will get an email request to stop by my office for a discussion. It is rarely required.
11. Students are asked to submit resources for the class “Articles and Resources” folder. They do NOT receive extra points for this, but are publically acknowledged when they provide something that gets added to the library. This seems to be enough as I now have a rich “student provided” resource library for most of my classes.
12. Numerous review pre-exam classes and special invitation only “breakfast Club” sessions.

## **Questions/open discussion**

What do you think? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this issue. Let's talk. Thanks for your feedback.