We all have had these special moments of insight that make us view our lives in a new way.

For example, I have been chairman of the Department of Science Teaching at Syracuse University for more than a dozen years. For years, I complained about the difficulties and frustrations of being a chairman. One day, my son said, “Dad, you probably don’t want to hear this from me, but your job as chairman is to make the department better.” His singular remark made me think about the job in a new way, and since then I have been trying to make the department better.

Another example is when my daughter was studying for a college exam on the kidney. She asked me a question, and I answered it. Then I asked my daughter if she knew about the countercurrent multiplier system in the kidney. Her response was, “I don’t have to know that. It’s not on the exam.” I pointed out that when she becomes a dietician, she will be dealing with patients who have kidney diseases. She won’t only have to know what’s on the exam, she’ll have to know everything about the kidney. “Oh,” she responded, “I never thought about it that way before.” From then on, my daughter has always consciously asked questions and pursued more information when we have discussions. The secret to meaningful, lifelong learning effects is to provide experiences for students that make them say, “I never thought about it that way before.”

Instructors should try to design lessons that are likely to provide these special insights. In every class period, I try to emphasize at least one idea that students “never thought about that way before.” If successful, this approach can have a lifelong effect on students. This may not work for every class, but this approach is worth trying. If a student is absent, these insights may never come.

When I explained these thoughts to my class, one clever student remarked, “But, if I’m experiencing your class, then I’m missing another experience.” My reply was, “Yes, but if the other experience is doing the laundry, that can wait.” Students do have to make choices and set priorities.

Experiences in and out of class provide the enrichment that is so essential to meaningful, lifelong learning and provide a motivational learning environment (Druger, 1998; Druger, 2000/2001). If an instructor is working hard to provide such enrichment opportunities, I believe it is the student’s responsibility to participate in these experiences. I believe so strongly in this philosophy that there is a “no tolerance” policy about attendance in my introductory biology course. The written policy in the course syllabus states, “Students who do not participate in lecture, lab, and recitation will not receive a pass-
ing grade in the course, even if they do well on major exams and earn a passing percentage of total points through major exams.”

This means that a student can pass all the exams but, without regular attendance, the student will fail the course. Why? Because students are not in college just for information, they are there for the experiences. If they did not experience the various aspects of the course, they essentially did not pass it.

If this strict attendance policy is adopted, it is important that students be told about the policy and about the rationale. My students know about these expectations, and I regularly get emails from concerned students who have to miss a class for a good reason. Obviously, there needs to be some flexibility to allow for legitimate absences, but students know that we keep track of their attendance in lecture, lab, recitation, and special optional events.

Providing many enrichment opportunities is important, but how can we convince students to attend and participate? Variation in maturity is perhaps the most significant variable among college freshmen. Some students are eager to learn as much as they can, and they get as much learning as possible from their college experience. Other students are not yet mature enough to recognize the value of learning opportunities.

One effective way to motivate students is coercion—they must attend, or face the consequences. I use a more benign approach involving “benefit-of-the-doubt credit.” Tickets are made available for all special events. Students write their name on the ticket and drop it into the “bio box,” outside the lecture hall. We maintain a computerized record of attendance at these events. If the student’s grade is borderline at the end of the semester, we check the attendance records. If the student has attended classes regularly and has attended a reasonable number of special events, we boost the grade. If the student has not attended the special events, we don’t lower the grade, but we don’t boost it. Such students may have legitimate conflicts in the evening and, thus, can’t attend extra sessions. Students are eager to earn benefit-of-the-doubt credit, and we have high attendance at these sessions.

But why “force” a student to attend? What if they attend only to get credit? My response to this objection is that students who are “forced” to attend, or who attend only for credit, often emerge from the session having learned a lot. It is not uncommon for students to say, “I just went for the credit, but that was interesting. When’s the next one?”

The philosophy expressed here is founded on more than 47 years of college teaching experience. If students don’t participate, they will miss the experiences, and nobody can ever adequately explain to them what they missed. If we truly want to make a long-term difference in the lives of students, we have to try our best to incorporate a wealth of experiences into our courses. Every course should be an adventure in life with many opportunities for students to get involved with the subject matter, interact with others, learn more about their strengths and weaknesses, and grow in maturity. Memories of content fade, but memories of experiences linger and have long-lasting effects. What this tells me is that “being there” is the essence of learning and maturing, and this is something that we need to reinforce in our teaching.

References
