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Tell jokes, admit errors: teachers urged to be authentic

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Academics must be prepared to step out of classroom routines to strike a chord with students. But the move will backfire if they fake enthusiasm.

A US study has found that students can spot inauthenticity a mile off.

And they equate it with the worst of teaching sins, with faked interest seen as a hallmark of bloodless ineptitude.

The findings are based on research at two Californian universities, where about 300 students were quizzed on their teachers' communication styles.

"Authentic teachers were seen as approachable, passionate, attentive, capable and knowledgeable," reported the journal *Communication Education*, which published the research last week.

"Inauthentic teachers were viewed as unapproachable, lacking passion, inattentive, incapable and disrespectful." The researchers say academics can achieve a "more authentic style" by using time outside class to relate to their students. They should seize opportunities to share experiences and display their humanity by telling jokes and admitting mistakes.

But they must not overdo it.

"To be truly authentic, teachers should enact such behaviours only so far as their personality and demeanour naturally allow," the journal says.

"Our implication is not that teachers should engage in limitless amounts of self-disclosure," the paper says.

Lead author Zac Johnson, a communication studies specialist with California State University, said students paid attention to the messages academics sent about themselves in the classroom.

"Their perception of those messages seems to play an important role in how they connect to the content of the course," Dr Johnson said.

"Our findings suggest we must attempt to be thoughtful when presenting our true self - not dishonest or antithetical to our real self, but cognisant of how students might perceive our actions." When teachers treat themselves and their students as individuals, it has a "lasting impact", the paper says.

"Teaching authentically need not be more complicated than simple and direct statements regarding the concern and care teachers hold for their students."



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