

# Pittsburgh Regional Faculty Symposium Debrief: Keynote Speaker Sarah Rose Cavanagh

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## THE SPARK OF LEARNING



Energizing the College  
Classroom with the Science  
of Emotion

SARAH ROSE  
CAVANAGH

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Cavanagh identifies four categories of teaching practices extrapolated from the research on learning and emotions:

1. Affective Crossover
2. Knowledge Emotions
3. Prolonging Persistence
4. Minimizing Affective Challenges

### Affective Crossover Teaching Practices

Cavanagh uses the term *affective crossover* to describe the phenomenon whereby students are influenced by the projected affect of the instructor. In her words, "...managing your own emotional state in a positive direction may light a fire under your students and lead to a more focused, enthusiastic classroom."

1. Practice good self-care. Get good rest and nutrition, exercise, and schedule regular downtime to decompress.
2. Conduct your classes mindfully by being present and emotionally authentic with your students.
3. Include accessible, relevant humor. A comic or short video clip can be refreshing after covering a complicated topic.
4. Self-disclose (appropriately) and selectively in ways that are relevant to the course material.
5. Be credible, confidant, and competent. Prepare well for classes and stick to the syllabus.

### Knowledge Emotions Teaching Practices

*Knowledge emotions* are affective states involved in the pursuit of knowledge. They include interest, curiosity, flow (absorption, presence, and involvement in a task), and, at times, confusion that leads to new understanding. These are practices that mobilize students' efforts.

1. Include self-relevant activities and assignments.
2. Identify the unexpected discoveries and controversies in your subject that may spark students' curiosity.
3. Structure feedback to enhance competence. Provide positive, encouraging feedback to students about their competence and abilities, especially to those who are struggling.
4. Routinely assess knowledge and skill levels. Use low- or no-stakes assessments frequently to check on students' mastery.

### **Prolonging Persistence Teaching Practices**

Cavanagh uses the term *prolonging persistence* to refer to teaching practices that aim to engender longer-term focus and motivation as well as reduce procrastination. These practices aim to help students become engaged, self-directed learners.

1. Give control and maximize value by building choice into your syllabus.
2. Remind your students of the control they already have and praise effort rather than ability.
3. Employ goal-setting and deadlines.

### **Minimizing Affective Challenges Teaching Practices**

In addition to practices that enhance motivation and promote learning, teaching practices that *minimize affective challenges* attempt to reduce the negative emotions that sometimes stand in the way of learning.

1. Minimize test anxiety by breaking high-stakes exams into smaller, more frequent quizzes and giving students some exposure to your testing style before the day of a big exam.
2. Circumvent social loafing in group work by making clear to students your expectations for appropriate performance. Counsel students about the best process through which to delegate tasks and achieve positive group dynamics.
3. Be empathetic and sensitive to the genuine needs and routines of students' circumstances and lives.