4-2023

Does Being Known Matter? Analyzing the Effects of Name Recognition by Instructor and Student

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Abstract

Trying to learn the names of students is a challenging semester ritual for many professors and graduate students. In support of this endeavor, research suggests that learning students' names promotes greater student participation and engagement (Auster and MacRone 1994; Pearson and Lucas 2011). However, both research and practical pedagogical advice has typically focused only on the importance of students believing that *instructors* know their names. Consequently, we know little about students feeling recognized by name by other students. To further explore this issue, this study analyzes both the predictors and outcomes of student name recognition. The results of the study underscore the value of instructors learning names, showing that the belief that an instructor knows one's name is linked with a lower likelihood of feeling nervous while speaking in class. Classroom characteristics were also linked with student experiences, with finding the class interesting and the more lecture-oriented class both being associated with students perceiving greater classroom community.

Keywords: Classroom climate; learning names; speaking anxiety; talking in class

Published in *College Teaching* 2023
doi:10.1080/87567555.2023.2203893

Published 26 April 2023.

Introduction

Many instructors attempt to learn the names of their students, despite the difficulty. Over 80% of instructors report that they try to learn the names of their students (Smith and Malec 1995). Learning student names—particularly in large lecture classes—can be a challenging task that requires dedicated effort. For example, Cooper et al. (2017) note that even with the use of name tents throughout the semester, the two co-teaching instructors recognized roughly 50% of their 174 students by name. The difficulty of learning names is highlighted by the number of techniques some instructors will employ, including relying on student photos, coming to class early, talking with students during group work, using information cards, practicing names while returning assignments, and focusing on learning at least three new names a day (Smith and Malec 1995).

There are several reasons for instructors to invest the cognitive and temporal resources necessary to recognize their students by name. First, learning names may help teachers better connect with their students. Second, names are "emotionally loaded" (Chamblis 2014) and can have important cultural, familial, and racial/ethnic meanings to an individual (Kohli and Solórzano 2012). Third, failure to call students by the correct name can leave students feeling humiliated and undervalued (Cooper et al. 2017). Finally, our brains respond uniquely to the sound of our own names compared to hearing the names of others, which can be seen with functional magnetic resonance imaging (Carmody and Lewis 2006).

Students also think that name recognition matters. Cooper et al. (2017) conducted a survey of students in a lecture class of 185 students, finding that 85% of students believe that it is important for faculty to know their names. When asked what "made them feel that a professor was invested in them and their academic success," students' top answer was having an instructor know their name (Holstead 2019). Similarly, Johnson and LaBelle (2017) survey of roughly 200 students from across a university finds that students believe an instructor is more attentive when the instructor knows their name.

Knowing student names can also enable an instructor to create an environment that is more likely to increase student engagement. Hess (2002, 88) argues "perhaps the single most important thing a

teacher can do to create a positive climate in the classroom is to learn students' names," linking the use of names as a sign of respect to students. Glenz (2014, 21) argues that "Calling students by name communicates respect, helps them feel recognized as individuals, and helps to draw out and include shy students in class discussions." Indeed, the faculty behavior most associated with greater student participation is calling on students by name (Auster and MacRone 1994). Similarly, Pearson and Lucas (2011, 671) find through a qualitative analysis that *recognition* (which was grounded in the instructor knowing a student) promoted engagement. Discussion in class can sometimes be dominated by a small group of students (Jones 2008; Lee and McCabe 2021). However, when an instructor knows students' names, it could be easier to include more reticent students into the discussion, as it allows an instructor to invite students by name into the conversation. Kollat (2018) reports in her own classes that cold calling students increases attendance, participation, and exam scores.

Of course, instructors are only part of the learning environment. Teachers are usually vastly outnumbered by students in the classroom. While being recognized by an instructor seems to be important, it may be also important for students to recognize each other. The use of "icebreakers" or other ways of getting students to become acquainted with each other is meant to improve class engagement and discussion (e.g. Goodbar 2019, 26; Welz 1990). Meyers (2003, 95) shares one instructor's personal opinion that students are more likely to speak when they know each other, as "this sense of community encourages them to take risks and practice speaking although they may be uncertain of their abilities." Empirically, research finds that positive relationships between students in the classroom are linked with more participation (Fassinger 1996; Frisby and Martin 2010; Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield 2010) and learning (Frisby and Martin 2010; Johnson 2009; Prissbell et al. 2009).

Scholars have tried to formally operationalize relationships between students in class. Fassinger (1996) measured the "emotional climate" of the classroom through a scale that asked students about the perceived supportiveness, cooperativeness, and friendships of students in the classroom. Although using a more expanded scale, Dwyer et al. (2004) measured the perceived "connected classroom climate" by having similar items on how cooperative, supportive, and respectful

students are, how comfortable students feel with each other, and having a strong bond with students in the class, among other items. While perhaps knowing student names might be implicit in some of these measures, they do not have an explicit question on students knowing the names of each other. This absence in scholarship perhaps reflects an assumption by college instructors that learning student names are primarily the job of teachers, not students. It might further underscore a general assumption that students are meant to learn from the instructor, rather than from each other. Consequently, it is unclear how important name recognition is for student outcomes.

Taken together, research suggests that name recognition can be an important factor in the classroom. Given the value of instructors knowing the names of students as well as the importance of student relationships, there is reason to believe that students might also benefit from believing that other students know their name. Based on the literature review, I make the following hypotheses:

H1: Nervousness about speaking in class will be negatively associated with believing the instructor knows one's name.
H2: Nervousness about speaking in class will be negatively associated with the number of students a person thinks knows their name.
H3: The number of students one believes knows their name will be positively associated with perceived positive classroom climate.

Methods

To address these issues, IRB approval was obtained to administer surveys to students in two different classes in Spring 2022 at a large, R1, public university in the Midwest. Students were given the survey during the 10th week of the semester., which allowed enough time in class to facilitate getting to know students but occurred before the creation of groups for a final team-based project. The survey was administered within the first few minutes of that particular class session, with the instructor refraining from calling any students by name or circulating an attendance sheet until later during the session after the survey had been completed. This was avoided in order

to have students rely more on their long-term memory of student names. The instructor left the classroom and waited outside in the hallway while a department staff member obtained informed consent, distributed the surveys, and collected them (this process took roughly 20 min). Students that were present on that day received extra credit points on their last participation grade (all students received a participation grade for each day of class for both of the courses). Extra credit was provided to each student that was present in class as acknowledgement of their potentially engaging with a class activity (in this case, reflecting on their attitudes and behaviors in class, as well as trying to recall the names of their classmates). Students were notified on the first day of class about the possibility of receiving extra credit for being present on the day of the study, regardless of their participation. Students that were not present that day did not take the survey. Students in both classes received the survey in the same week with several weeks remaining in the semester. Both classes were taught by the same instructor.

Each class was relatively small. One class was almost entirely discussion-based, had 33 students, and met twice a week for 75 min each time, 11:00–12:15 (26 students filled out the survey from this class). The general topic of this class was on contemporary issues in Political Science. The other class was lecture-driven with 34 students but still incorporated discussion, and met three times a week for 50 min each session, 11:30–12:20 (27 students filled out the survey from this class). The general topic of this class was focused on a sociological analysis of media. The room for each class was very similar, with a capacity of roughly 40 students and having movable desk chairs (although the desk-chairs were kept in rows), which were four rows deep. These classes were selected because they maintained the same general instruction style by the instructor, had the same graded participation rubric, had a similar number of students, were both in the College of Liberal Arts, and was not a required class for the department's major. Fifty-three students ultimately took the survey across both classes, with no student taking both classes. In terms of the composition of the classes, the overall class standing year was 3.02 (SD = .87). In terms of breakdown, 43% percent of the sample were Juniors and 32% were Seniors; only 5.7% of the sample were First-Year students. The class standing between the courses was 2.81 (SD = .98) for

the more discussion-based class and 3.22 (*SD* = .70) for the more lecture-oriented class. A two-sided independent t-test found that the difference in class standing was not statistically significant $t(51) = -1.78$, $p = .081$. Fifty-three students ultimately took the survey across both classes. Listwise deletion was used when a respondent did not answer all questions in the statistical models; the lowest number of cases in any of the statistical models was 51.

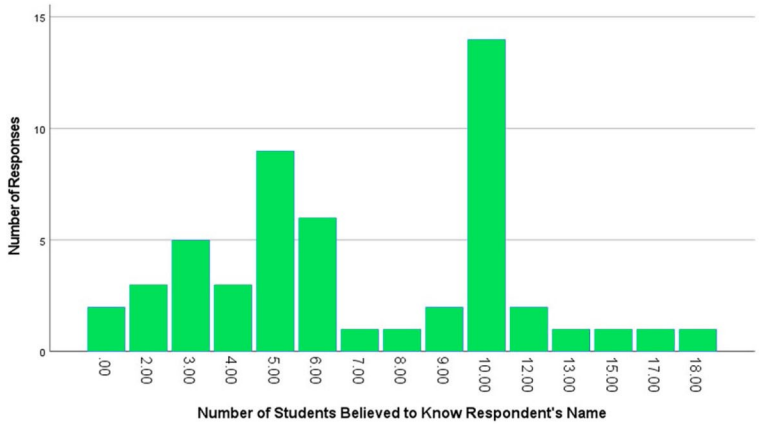
Given the relatively small size of the classes, there were concerns about student anonymity and how this might affect their responses since the survey was taken during the semester. Consequently, the decision was made to keep the survey anonymous and refrain from asking any questions about demographics except for the class year of the student.

Key independent variables

Two items focused on student name recognition. The open-ended item *Students Know Me* asked students "How many students from this class (including those absent today) do you think could correctly guess your first name without being told? Please provide a single, specific number of your educated guess" (*M* = 7.19, *SD* = 4.02). The vast majority of students believed other students knew them by name, with only 2 respondents (3.8%) listing no students knew them. Half of the sample listed between 2 and 6 students knowing their name, and the most common listed number was 10 (26.9% of the sample). Roughly 12% of the sample listed between 12 and 18 (the latter being highest number listed) students knowing them by name. This variable was also used as a dependent variable for the first model to see what predicts a student thinking more students know them by name. Please see **Graph 1** for a visual display of these responses.

The second name-related item independent variable was *Instructor Knows My Name*. The 4-point response options of "Yes, Probably, Probably Not, No" were converted to a binary variable where Yes =1 and other response options were coded "0" (*M* = .53, *SD* = .50).

There were also two control variables included beyond name recognition. Students' level of *Interest* in the class was controlled for with the 5-point Likert statement "I found the topics in this class interesting" (*M* = 4.19, *SD* = .96). *Class Type* controls for which class



Graph 1. Number of Students Respondent Thinks Knows Them By Name.

the student was enrolled in, with the more discussion-based class being coded 0 and the lecture-oriented class being coded 1 (M = .51), SD = .50).

Dependent variables

This study has three dependent variables. With the exception of the ratio variable *Students Know My Name*, all of the variables used Likert scales and thus were ordinal in nature. Given the small sample, each proportional logistic regression was found to have too few cases in each cell. As a result, these ordinal variables were subsequently transformed into binary variables, always aiming to divide the response distribution in half as closely as possible.

The second dependent variable was *Nervous Speaking in Class* (M = 2.89, SD = 1.48), which had a 5-point Likert scale and asked students how much they agree with the statement "I feel nervous speaking in this class." This variable was converted into a binary variable, with response options 1 through 3 coded as 0 and response options 4 through 5 coded as 1 (M = .45, SD = .50).

The third dependent variable includes measures for *Classroom Community*. These items were based on items that overlapped with the operationalization of Dwyer et al. (2004) and Fassinger (1996). The *Classroom Community* scale (M = 3.30, SD = .78) was converted into a dichotomous variable with response options (1.50 through 3.25

coded as 0 and response options 3.50 through 4.75 coded a 1 (M = .55, SD = .50). This scale contained four five-point Likert scale items that asked students how much they agreed with the statements "I feel a strong bond with my classmates" (M = 2.08, SD = 1.00), "The students in my class share stories and experiences with one another" (M = 3.38, SD = 1.13), "The students in my class laugh with one another (M = 3.43, SD = 1.10) and "The students in my class are friendly with one another" (M = 4.30, SD = .72). Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .79.

Results

This study uses regression to be able to control for other factors that might also be associated with name recognition. The first analysis uses OLS regression to analyze what predicts a student believing more classmates know their name since the model has a ratio dependent variable. Unexpectedly, believing the instructor knows the student by name did not predict that believing that more of the class knew the student's name (B = .56, SE = 1.09, p = .61). The only statistically significant variable was finding the class interesting, which was positively associated with thinking students know one's name (B = 1.40, SE = .57, p = .018). Please see Table 1 for these results.

The next model uses binary logistic regression to analyze what factors are linked with feeling nervous speaking in class, since the model has a dichotomous dependent variable. Believing the instructor knows your name is negatively linked with feeling nervous speaking in class (B = −1.75, SE = .65, p = .007), supporting H1. However, H2 was not supported, as the number of students a student thought knew their name did not predict nervousness about speaking in class (B = −0.05, SE = .08, p = .576). Finding the class interesting (B = .01, SE = .34, p =.98) and class type (B = −0.01, SE = .01, p = .20) were also not statistically significant. None of the other variables in the model were statistically significant. Please see Table 2 for these results.

The third model uses binary logistic regression to analyze perceived classroom community, since the model has a dichotomous dependent variable. Believing that more students knew one's name did not predict perceived classroom community (B = .10, SE = .10, p = .310). Consequently, H3 is not supported. Similarly, believing that the instructor

Table 1. OLS Regression on Number of Students that a Student Believes Knows Their Name.

	B	SE	*p*
Instructor knows my name	.56	1.09	.610
Find class interesting	1.40*	.57	.018
Class type	−0.00	.01	.914
N	51		

****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05

Table 2. Logistic Regression on Nervousness about Speaking in Class.

	B	SE	*p*
Instructor knows my name	−1.75**	.65	.007
Students know my name	−0.05	.08	.576
Find class interesting	.01	.34	.98
Class type	−0.01	.01	.20
N	53		

****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05

Table 3. Logistic Regression on Perceived Classroom Connection.

	B	SE	*p*
Instructor knows my name	−0.74	.71	.298
Students know my name	.10	.10	.310
Find class interesting	1.16**	.45	.010
Class type	.02**	.01	.004
N	53		

****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05

knows one's name was not statistically significant ($B = -0.74$, $SE = .71$, $p = .298$).

Finding class interesting did increase the likelihood of seeing the class having higher classroom community ($B = 1.16$, $SE = .45$, $p = .010$). Surprisingly, being in the more lecture-heavy class also increased the likelihood of believing there was greater classroom community ($B = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .004$). Please see Table 3 for these results.

On a final note, it is worth discussing some alternative variables were also included in models not mentioned in this paper. Statistical models not reported in this paper accounted for self-reported

attendance in the semester, self-reported contributions to classroom discussion, and the number of students that the respondent could list by name, but none of these variables were statistically significant. This deserves mention because it means that interest in the class or class-type are not proxies for how often students attended class, how much they spoke, or how many students they knew. Importantly, this also means that the negative association between believing an instructor knows one's name and nervousness about speaking is not simply the result of a student's greater attendance and discussion in class. It also means that knowing the names of other students (as opposed to feeling like one is known by name to other students) did not matter to the findings.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of feeling known by the instructor as well other students. There are a few key takeaways. First, this study provides some support for instructors' work on learning student names, as feeling known by the instructor was linked to reduced nervousness while speaking in class. This suggests that working on learning names is especially worthwhile given concerns about helping quite or shy students to speak in class (e.g. Medaille and Usinger 2019). Surprisingly, feeling one was known by the instructor did not predict thinking other students knew one's name, even though being called by name in class would seemingly be an important mechanism for name recognition.

This study also helped shed some light on students feeling known by other students. In this sample, students on average thought 10 other students knew them by name. It is unclear how much this amount (either as an absolute number or as a percentage of class enrollment) was influenced by factors like class size and how long students had been in college. Contrary to expectations, believing more students knew their name was not linked with lower nervousness speaking in class or greater perceived classroom community. This is not to say that feeling known by other classmates (or knowing classmates) is necessarily non-beneficial to students. For example, feeling known could help facilitate students asking their classmates for help

on an assignment, sharing notes, or helping with networking in other classes or beyond the classroom altogether.

Another notable finding was that larger external factors also played a role in some of the models. First, when students found the class interesting, they reported feeling known by more students and were more likely to report perceiving greater classroom community. Additionally, the lecture class predicted greater classroom connection. These relationships raise questions about mechanisms. One possibility here is that the lecture class focused on mass media, which often involved students sharing their favorite programs in class and with other students. Sharing and hearing this personal information (and perhaps bonding over favorite shows) may help explain why students in the more lecture-oriented class reported higher classroom community with students.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the majority of the semester was taught with masks being required in class. Masks were required for roughly the first 9 weeks of the semester in the classroom. Masks were optional for roughly 4 weeks prior to the survey being administered. The number of students still wearing masks continued to decrease after the mask requirement was lifted, although perhaps 10–20% still continued to do so (the instructor wore a mask each day for both classes throughout the semester). Perceptions about the instructor and other students knowing names would arguably be higher if masks had never been worn. A second limitation it that due to concerns about filling out a survey during class, responses were kept anonymous and without demographic information, which limits our knowledge about how race, gender, or even seating arrangements might have affected feeling known or being known. A third notable limitation is that the sample was drawn from two classes and was small in number. As noted earlier, this smaller sample lead to the use of later recoding the ordinal Likert scales into binary variables. While a larger sample is preferable, a sample of ten cases per independent variable (or less) is not necessarily cause for concern in logistic regression (Vittinghoff and McCulloch 2007). Each model had over 50 cases, and none of the models exceeded four independent variables. Finally, due to concerns about anonymity, this study is not able to speak to how the gender and race/ethnicity of students relate to name recognition and its possible effects.

Future research can follow-up this study in a few important ways. First, more light can be shed on how students come to be known by other students, as well as how students learn about other students. Follow-up research could look into the possible roles of seating arrangements, chatting before class, group work, or previous or concurrent classes with other students. A second area that can be further explored is the possible importance of having a close relationship with 1–2 students as opposed to having relatively thin relationships with many students, as well as the importance to the classroom experience of knowing students knowing classmates *prior* to class. It is also possible that name-knowing is less critical to students' experiences than simply sensing that they are recognized and welcomed by students (e.g. "Hey, how was your weekend?"). Extended activities involving some shared fate like group work or peer review might also strengthen bonds and sense of feeling known more than basic name recognition. Future research could build off this work in having a larger sample, having courses that are more similar but taught by different instructors, looking at courses and universities that are more racially diverse, and evaluating if the importance of name recognition changes between younger and older students.

Names are an important part of an individual's identity, and students believe it is important for instructors to know their names. However, for reasons unknown, feeling known by name by other students did not appear important to facilitating speaking in class or increasing perceived classroom community. Although having students know each other could be beneficial, for now it seems that instructors should continue to work hard on being the one to learn names.

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Appendix

Thank you for filling out this survey. Please do not write your name on the survey.

There are 23 items. You may leave any item blank.

1. What year are you in school?
   - First Year
   - Sophomore
   - Junior
   - Senior

Please select how well the following personality traits apply to you.

2. I see myself as extroverted, enthusiastic.
   - Disagree strongly
   - Disagree moderately
   - Disagree a little
   - Neither agree nor disagree
   - Agree a little
   - Agree moderately
   - Agree strongly

3. I see myself as anxious, easily upset.
   - Disagree strongly
   - Disagree moderately
   - Disagree a little
   - Neither agree nor disagree
   - Agree a little
   - Agree moderately
   - Agree strongly

4. I see myself as reserved, quiet.
   - Disagree strongly
   - Disagree moderately
   - Disagree a little
   - Neither agree nor disagree
   - Agree a little
   - Agree moderately
   - Agree strongly

5. I see myself as calm, emotionally stable.
   - Disagree strongly
   - Disagree moderately
   - Disagree a little
   - Neither agree nor disagree
   - Agree a little
   - Agree moderately
   - Agree strongly

The next set of survey items are on your experiences and perceptions with this class.

6. Overall, how much do you like or dislike this class?
   Strongly Dislike
   Somewhat Dislike
   Neither Like Nor Dislike
   Somewhat Like
   Strongly Like

Please select how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on this class.

7. I come to class prepared to discuss the readings.
   Strongly Disagree
   Somewhat Disagree
   Neither Agree Nor Disagree
   Somewhat Agree
   Strongly Agree

8. I have regularly contributed to discussion in this class throughout the semester.
   Strongly Disagree
   Somewhat Disagree
   Neither Agree Nor Disagree
   Somewhat Agree
   Strongly Agree

9. I have attended all or nearly all of the classes for this course.
   Strongly Disagree
   Somewhat Disagree
   Neither Agree Nor Disagree
   Somewhat Agree
   Strongly Agree

10. I was already knowledgeable about many of the topics in this class before the semester started.
   Strongly Disagree
   Somewhat Disagree
   Neither Agree Nor Disagree
   Somewhat Agree
   Strongly Agree

11. I found the topics in this class interesting.
   Strongly Disagree
   Somewhat Disagree
   Neither Agree Nor Disagree
   Somewhat Agree
   Strongly Agree

12. Students listen to me when I speak in this class.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

13. I feel nervous about speaking in this class.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

14. I feel a strong bond with my classmates.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

15. The students in my class share stories and experiences with one another.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

16. The students in my class laugh with one another.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

17. The students in my class are friendly with one another.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

18. I think that the instructor genuinely wants to hear me speak and share my thoughts during class about course material.
    Strongly Disagree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Neither Agree Nor Disagree
    Somewhat Agree
    Strongly Agree

The last set of questions regard name recognition. Please slowly scan the room and think about students that are absent today for the next 3 questions.

19. How many students from this class (including those absent today) do you think could correctly guess your first name without being told? Please provide a single, specific number of your educated guess.

_____

20. Please scan the room slowly and see how many students that *you can identify by their first name*. Also include in your total the students that you know might be absent from this class today. Reflecting on this, *please provide the first name of each student that you believe that you can correctly identify in our class*. By this, I don't mean that you know *that* there is an "Alexander" in the class, but that you could identify *which* student is "Alexander."

You do not need to list the names in any alphabetical, seating, or familiarity order. Do not worry about perfect spelling—just do your best. Please list each first name next to a number (e.g., if you can list 5 names, slots 1-5 should have a first name next to it). Since this survey is being distributed to other classes, there might be more slots available than there are students actually enrolled in your particular class.

If you cannot identify any of your classmates by name, please circle "0" below.

0.			
1.	11.	21.	31.
2.	12.	22.	32.
3.	13.	23.	33.
4.	14.	24.	34.
5.	15.	25.	35.
6.	16.	26.	
7.	17.	27.	
8.	18.	28.	
9.	19.	29.	
10.	20.	30.	

21. How many students in this class (including those absent today) did you know by their first name *prior to our first day of class*? Please provide a single, specific number.

_____

22. Overall, do you think that the instructor of this class knows your first name without being told?

Yes
Probably
Probably Not
No

23. Overall, how well do you think the instructor in this class knows your first name without being told?

Extremely Well
Very Well
Somewhat Well
Slightly Well
Not Well At All