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Strategy 1: Track Attempted MGCs

A moment of genuine connection (MGC) is any situation where you briefly interact with a student and you attempt to communicate, earnestly and simply, that you value, know, or respect that student. Because feelings of being valued, known, and respected are subjective, a teacher can't expect to control whether a student feels these ways after a brief interaction. Hence, to enact this strategy we don't seek to *guarantee* an MGC but instead to guarantee that we are regularly *attempting* MGCs with each student we teach.

What to Do

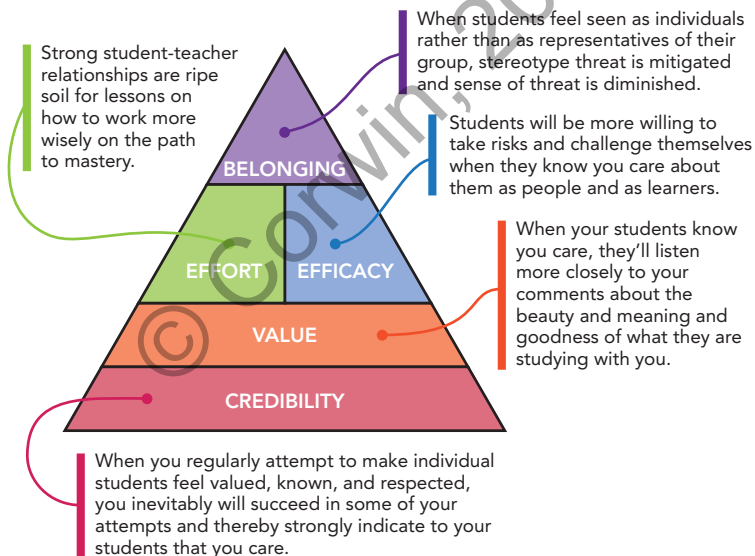
- Before class, during an independent work portion of class, or after class, pull aside students and attempt to make them feel valued, known, and respected (examples below).
- As you do this, keep track of who you've done it with (example tracking systems below).
- Don't repeat an MGC attempt with a student until you've attempted an MGC with every student on your roster; this discipline is important for establishing an equitable, "student-by-student ground game" that signals care to every individual.
- When you sense in your heart that there's a student you're coming to not value or respect (this happens to most of us, myself included), work to again value and respect that student; this is the *genuine* part of MGC. MGCs don't work when they're faked.

Key Pointer

- In order for your MGC attempts to contribute to your teacher credibility, it's important to balance your attempts between academic and personal connections. For example, personal attempts might include the following:
 - Adam, I remember that you like the Michigan Wolverines. Did you watch the game this past Saturday? Yikes—that was a tough loss for us.

- Bianca, how did your dance recital go this past weekend? I saw that you wrote about it in your warm-up last week. I'm impressed that you balance both school and such a rigorous extracurricular activity!
- And academic attempts might look something like these:
 - Charlie, how has your at-home instrument practice been going? Where are you having a hard time or getting stuck? I'm glad you're in my music class, and I want to do whatever I can to help you in your efforts to improve.
 - Danielle, what goals do you have for yourself in school during this new semester? How can I be a support as you pursue these?

How Strategy 1 Influences the Five Key Beliefs



WHY THIS STRATEGY

I've got about a million reasons why tracking MGC attempts is worth your time. I mean, that's what this book is all about: the teaching techniques that are most worth your time. Each of our ten focus

strategies, if you practice toward expertise in them, will make your classroom richer with the Five Key Beliefs in uniquely powerful ways. But to keep the book streamlined, I'll limit my remarks right now to just the top five reasons why I think you've got to go big on tracking attempted MGCs.

This Strategy Helps You to See Your Students as the Once-in-a-Universe Souls That They Are.

Like so much of teaching, the person who gains the most out of Strategy 1 is the teacher. That's because as I practice the discipline of communicating that I value, know, and respect all of my students as individuals, my heart and mind become trained *away* from abstracting them into generic numbers on my roster and *toward* marvelling at their stupendous originality.

This Strategy Helps You Remember Why You're a Teacher to Begin With.

There's this line in the old Hebrew poem, "Psalm 139," where the writer proclaims, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." I've always loved that language, "fearfully and wonderfully made." It speaks to universal human dignity. The word *fearful* can be confusing though; it's not an anxious fear, but instead the kind of thing you feel standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon or listening to the roar of Niagara Falls.

I only bring this up because this strategy helps us grow in our tendency to see students as fearfully and wonderfully wrought. In turn, we'll find it easier to remember that what we're doing matters and is worth the difficulty that often attends it. Is the system broken? Often so. Are the conditions rough? They certainly can be. Can our students challenge us? You bet. But gosh—the work is good.

This Strategy Draws the Ellies out of the Alienation Whirlpool.

Years ago, I taught a student whom I'll call Ellie. I wish you could have seen Ellie's standard facial expressions in my classroom the first six months I taught her. She exuded an aura that said to me, "This teacher is a joke. I can't stand this guy. He's out of touch. He's old.

He's lame." Each time I pulled Ellie aside for an MGC attempt, she just didn't seem to want to talk to me.

There was one day in particular when I asked Ellie to step into the hallway during an independent-work portion of class.¹⁰ In this case, my MGC plan was to talk to her about her grades.

"Hey Ellie, how are you today?"

"Fine."

"Good! Ellie, I'm just checking in with students this week on how school is going in general. How are your grades in all your classes?"

"Fine."

"What kinds of letters did you see in PowerSchool the last time you checked?"

"Cs and Ds. One E."

"Oh—how do you feel about that?"

"Fine."

"Well, listen, I'm going to be honest with you Ellie, because I think that's important. Those grades don't sound to me like they line up with who you are and where I sense that you're going. I'm not a 'grades are all that matters' type, not at all. But you and I both know you're capable of more than that. Right?"

"I guess."

"Well listen, if you ever want to have a quiet place to work on things for any of your classes, you just let me know, all right? My room is quiet during lunches and after school most days; I'd happily open the

¹⁰This pulling a student out into the hallway is a positive norm in my classroom. By the end of the first month of school, all students have been pulled out at least once for a brief conversation, and most of these conversations are intentionally aimed at being encouraging.

door for you and any other classmates that you think may want to come and get work done. Square deal?”

“Okay.”

Ellie went back inside. I marked on my clipboard an A next to Ellie's name, meaning I had attempted an academic MGC with her. And the day moved on.

Later that afternoon, I got a call from my principal.

“Mr. Stuart, Ellie was in a fight this afternoon, and your name came up just now when I was talking with her. Ellie shared with me a lot of things that have been going on with her outside of school, and it was a lot of really hard stuff. And I asked her, ‘Hey, is there anyone at school that you can talk to when this stuff becomes too overwhelming?’ And she replied, ‘Yes. I can talk to Mr. Stuart.’”

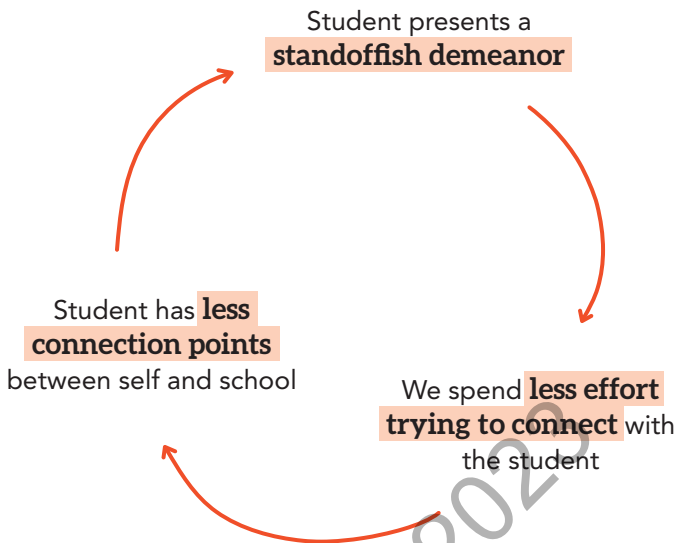
Wait, I thought. Me? The guy she can't seem to stand?

My reason for sharing this story isn't that I think I'm some kind of special teacher. I'm sharing it for these reasons:

- If I hadn't been tracking MGC attempts, the awkwardness of my attempts with Ellie would have undoubtedly led me to seek fewer connections with her than I should have. She would have been one of those students that is in the classroom, is not causing major problems, and is left to herself.
- Because I had been tracking MGC attempts, by this point in the school year Ellie had experienced ten or so brief moments with me in which I just tried to communicate to her heart: “Ellie, I see you, I value you, I know you, I respect you. I'm glad you're in my class.” And while many of those attempts likely failed, at least a couple apparently did not.

That is how tracked MGC attempts work. That is how, over time, they lead to noticeable gains in Credibility because the Ellies of your school aren't being missed. This gives you a reputation for caring in a special way for all of your students, and you become well-loved in all student subgroups.

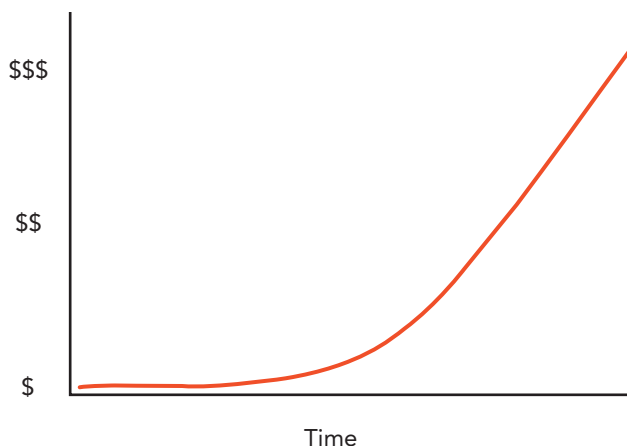
The Alienation Whirlpool



When we don't track MGC attempts for our full rosters, we can end up approaching students who appear standoffish or annoyed less than we should—kind of like the story I shared about Ellie above.

This Strategy Is the Most Efficient Method Ever for Building Strong Working Relationships With All of Your Students.

I remember when I was in my twenties meeting with a financial advisor in the cafeteria of my first school placement. It was one of those “free pizza lunch as long as you listen to the personal finance guy’s spiel” things. Obviously having been hooked by free pizza, I was there when the advisor shared a compound interest graph we’ve all seen before.



“The best way to unlock this power,” said the finance guy, “is to invest without even thinking about it—that is, to have money automatically withdrawn from all of your paychecks and placed into your investment account. If you start this young, it’ll seem like nothing at first, but eventually . . . I mean, just look at the chart.”

In my experience, this is a lot like how Strategy 1 works. You make tiny and regular investments in your relationships with each of your students—one thirty-to-sixty-second attempted MGC at a time—and within a few months you realize, *Wow, I’ve got functioning teacher-student relationships with all of my students, and I’ve not spent that much time creating them.* MGCs, it turns out, are the basic building block of a relationships-rich classroom environment.

In the first three years of my career, I believed that in order to have strong working relationships with my students I needed to have my classroom door open all of the time. So before school, during lunch, and after school for hours there would be at least a handful of students in my classroom. When I look back and do the math, it’s safe to say that I spent fifteen to twenty hours per week building relationships with students.

And, truly—we had great relationships!

The trouble was, of course, that those fifteen to twenty hours didn’t come from nowhere. They were hours in which I wasn’t analyzing student work, wasn’t providing feedback, wasn’t planning lessons, wasn’t doing research into the craft, and wasn’t collaborating with my colleagues on how to improve toward competence. Because of this,

there was never an evening when I didn't bring work home with me, never a weekend untouched by the labors of the classroom.

Eventually, I had all the marks of classic burnout: I felt overstretched, incompetent, and ineffective. So I quit teaching. While my wife was finishing her undergraduate degree in New York City, I worked odd jobs that had nothing to do with school. I bussed tables, barista'ed coffee drinks, answered phones, and sold comedy club tickets. It was exhausting and unfulfilling, and by the end of that year, I sensed that I was meant for a classroom. However, I also realized that, should I return to teaching, I was going to need to find a way to do it sustainably. I was going to need to be able to both be a good teacher *and* have a full life in the evenings and on the weekends.

Tracking MGC attempts was one of the key initial building blocks of this new approach to teaching. What used to take me fifteen to twenty hours per week now took me fifteen to thirty seconds (per student) every two weeks.

I haven't turned back since. And, strangely, I would describe my relationships with students *now* as immensely more productive than my relationships with students back when I was the open-door guy. When my door is closed and I'm working on my craft or my lessons or feedback on student work, I'm becoming really good at my job. And when students are with me during their class periods, I'm strategically building meaningful and strong working relationships one brief MGC attempt at a time.

This Strategy Is So Obvious That 95 Percent of Us Overlook It.

Now, before we move into practicalities, let's address something you may be sensing: MGC attempts are an obvious strategy. So obvious, in fact, that some may find it insulting. As in, "Did I seriously take the time to pick up a book that is going to tell me I need to attempt to make students feel valued, known, and respected? That's Teaching 101, man!"

And herein we have one of my greatest communicative challenges so far in this book: I'm explaining to you something that you already know how to do and already know is important, but at the same time it's a strategy that is grossly underutilized by the average classroom teacher.

Some muscular-albeit-anecdotal evidence: In 2021–2022, I asked every teacher audience I spoke to, "Would you mind raising your

hand if you've kept track of the students with whom you've attempted an MGC in the past month of your practice?" Less than 1 percent of respondents said they had, out of a total audience pool of several thousand colleagues.

Here's the key leverage point of the strategy: All of us know we're supposed to try making students feel valued, known, and respected. But about 99 percent of us have no way of knowing whether we've *actually done this* for the students on our roster in a given year.

In an elementary classroom, it may make sense not to keep track of attempted MGCs. Such teachers may have redundant mechanisms—meaning mechanism upon mechanism, so that no odd event can preclude their proper functioning. I don't know as I've never taught elementary students in a public school classroom setting.

But, in a secondary teacher's student load, where there are one to two hundred students on a total day's roster? It's *insanity* to not have a tracking mechanism for this critical Credibility signal. According to American-Canadian psychologist Levitin (2015), "Writing things down conserves the mental energy expended in worrying that you might forget something and in trying not to forget it" (p. 67).

Tracking MGCs, then, is a no-brainer; after all, who among us needs to waste a single ounce of mental energy?

HOW TO GAIN PROFICIENCY WITH STRATEGY 1

As with all of the ten strategies in this book, tracking MGC attempts isn't like pushing a button on a machine. It's a learnable, improvable, refinable *skill*. Our first goal is for you to become so proficient at it that it becomes like driving a car or tying your shoes. Automaticity in this, like in all things, will be the fruit of practice.

Step One: Print the Doggone Paper.

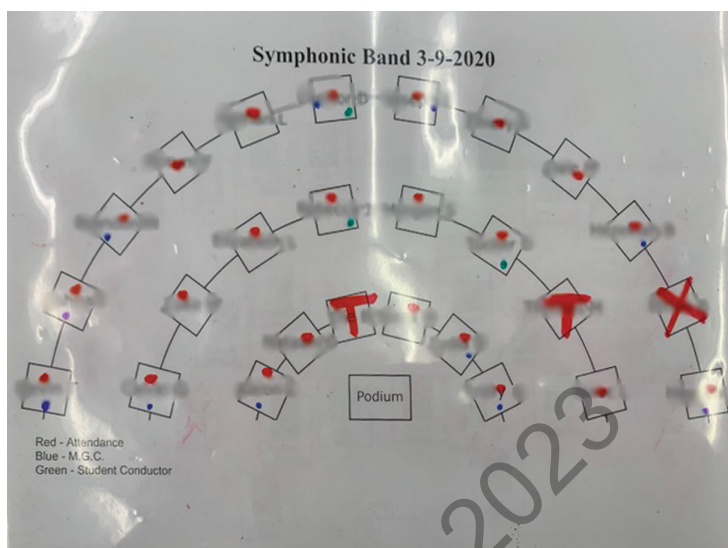
I like to keep track of my MGC attempts using a simple, single-sheet roster. I copy and paste student names from PowerSchool into this Google Sheet (see next page) and then print ten or so copies. In my Google Drive, I label this sheet, creatively, Clipboard Sheet. As my roster changes during the year—as students join or leave the school—I update this single document and print out fresh copies.



Scan the QR code to view/download the Google Sheet that I use as a Clipboard Sheet

	HOOR 1			HOOR 2			HOOR 3		
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Others like to keep track on a seating chart. For example, here's Clint Roberts's MGC tracker from his practice as a band instructor at Oak Canyon Junior High School in Linden, Utah.



Here's how Clint describes it:

I wanted to run with your concept of “Moments of Genuine Connection” tracking sheet but in context for band. At the beginning of the year I was cutting out student photos and scanning them to create a seating chart. It took forever but was worth it to put students' faces and names together. Now that I have those names and faces, I use <https://bgreco.net/band> to generate my band seating charts.

After printing the chart, I put it into a clear sheet in my attendance binder that stays on my conductor's music stand. I take roll with a red dry erase marker and erase it each day when it goes in the computer. I'll be using Blue and Green to mark which students have had certain opportunities in class. Blue dots will be students with whom I've had an MGC. Green dots will be students who have had an opportunity to conduct the band either in warm-ups or a song (my class's version of public speaking).

Some folks do this digitally, too—for example, here's a spreadsheet Dr. Charles Youngs, an English department chair in Pennsylvania, developed during the early pandemic.



Scan the QR code to get a copy of Dr. Youngs's MGC Checkboxes spreadsheet.

Step Two: Set a Tempo.

You want to make sure that you attempt MGCs regularly, and to help with that you need to set a tempo. As a practical example, for secondary teachers with five to six class periods per day and thirty to forty students per class period, I recommend aiming for three MGC attempts per class period per day. In my practice, this often looks like this:

- one attempt while students are filtering into class,
- one during an independent work portion of the class (often the written lesson warm-up for me), and
- one as students are filtering out of class.¹¹

If you do this on a daily basis, you'll have an MGC attempt with thirty students per two-week period for each of the classes you teach. This means that, in a given school year of forty weeks, you'll

¹¹Keep in mind that in each of these interactions I'm pulling the target student aside or out into the hallway. I want these to be as private as they can be.

end up attempting an MGC with every one of your students fifteen to twenty times, depending on how big your classes are. That is a *lot* of attempts! Inevitably, a few of them are going to land square in the hearts of your target students. Credibility, here we come!

Step Three: Track Every MGC Attempt.

After I attempt an MGC with a student, I make a simple notation on my clipboard sheet. If I attempted to make the student feel valued, known, or respected academically, I mark an *A*; otherwise, I mark a *P* for personal. This is something I spend zero seconds overthinking; I just mark it down and move on.

Over time, the *As* and *Ps* give me a sense of how well I'm balancing my attempts between personal and academic. This is important, as too many *personal* attempts will make you a nice person in the eyes of the student but not necessarily a good teacher. If you're trying to improve student motivation, you need to be perceived of as someone *more* than nice or caring; you need to be perceived of as a *good teacher*. And so you must balance the *As* and the *Ps*.

A Few More Pointers for Gaining Proficiency With Strategy 1

Practice in the mirror. I often hear from folks about how their MGCs can be awkward (see the common teacher hang-ups on page 61), and while bit of that is inevitable, some of it does have to do with our own skill and confidence. The quickest way to fix this, apart from just getting your reps in with the students in your class, is to practice five or so MGCs per day in the mirror as you're getting ready for work. It may feel silly, but just imagine that you're an athlete or performer preparing for something important and hard.

Rehearsal is key!

Incorporate MGC attempts into your teacher evaluation goals. If there's any way for you to work MGC attempts into your teacher evaluations, you should. This lets you turn what is often a hoop jump—being evaluated on an overly complex teaching rubric on whether or not you're a proficient teacher—into something that aligns with actual competency development.

When you find that you don't like a student, work on that. I often mention on my blog and in my workshops that I don't naturally like all of my students. For some of them, it takes *work*. I don't think this is because I am a jerk; I think it is because I am a human being and so are my students.

What I try to do to remedy this is, first, be mindful of small twinges in my heart as I'm looking at my roster. Is there a student whose name provokes a twinge of anger? Annoyance? Embarrassment? Frustration? Hurt? I make note of that—usually on a blank index card, stacks of which I keep all over my room—and then, later on, I sit down or take a walk to process where that feeling is coming from. Usually I find there's some memory associated with this student that I've been holding on to. These can be as extreme as a student cussing me out—yes, it still does happen to me, even halfway into my career—or as minor as a student laughing at a comment that I made in seriousness.

Once in awhile, try connecting with every student in a day. When I sense a lull in my soul about the work of teaching, sometimes I rearrange my lesson plans so that I can attempt an MGC with every student that I teach in a single class period. Since my classes have thirty to forty students in them every hour, this of course takes some finagling.

Typically it means I'll need to use an extended independent work block in the lesson. In order for this to be an effective use of learning time for all students, the work at hand needs to be something that my students can navigate on their own. In my world history classes, this may be an extended set of primary source documents with accompanying analysis scaffolding questions (the DBQ Project publishes fine examples of these). In my ELA classes, this may be an extended segment of independent reading or writing.

As students are doing this, I ask one of them at a time to step into the hallway for a thirty-to-sixty-second chat. This gives me lots of MGC attempt reps in a short amount of time, which is great for my skill-building in this area. It also gives me a motivation boost as I'm reminded of just how special my students are.

Our colleague Linda Bisarek, an instructional coach in Hillsboro, Wisconsin, honors teacher requests to cover their classrooms while the teacher pulls students for this kind of periodic everyone-in-a-period MGC spree. If you've got an instructional coach or support personnel at your school that can monitor independent work in your

room while you do this, it's a pretty fine opportunity for the coach to have an impact on your practice and your students to gain something special from a day of class.¹²

COMMON TEACHER HANG-UPS

My MGCs Are Awkward!

I've had colleagues write in to the blog before saying, "Dave, I'm a bit embarrassed to admit this, but sometimes it feels like my MGCs are . . . awkward, like pulling teeth. How do you mitigate this in your classroom?"

I find a few things help here:

- **First, take heart in knowing that every secondary educator on the planet has awkward encounters with their students.** Adolescents, in their infinite diversity, are a gloriously awkward people group—and I say that with the love and admiration only possible from someone who is himself sometimes more than a bit awkward. While I'm not one to say that we ought to *try making* these encounters awkward—far be that from us—I am certainly of the belief that some of them just will be.
- **Second, it is helpful at first to practice MGC attempts in the mirror at home.** I know I mentioned this a few sections prior, but it bears repeating. In my conversations with teachers near and far, I find verbal, out-loud practice to be a critically underutilized form of teacher expertise development. If you want to get smoother at delivering these brief thirty-to-sixty-second "I see you" moments to your students, practice them at home in front of a mirror before you head to work.
- **And finally, keep at it.** The more MGC attempts you check off of your list and the more lists you fill completely, the more adept you'll become at navigating the waters of awkwardness.

(Continued)

¹²For a strategy that's sort of like Strategy 1 but focused specifically on students you're most concerned about reaching, see "Common Teacher Hang-Ups: I Have a Student Who Seems Completely Uninterested in Succeeding. What Should I Do?" on page 200.

(Continued)

I Did an MGC With a Student, but It Didn't Work!

Too often, books and trainings for teachers treat our job as if we're technicians: "Use X strategy and you'll get Y result, every time—results guaranteed!" Given the complexity of a student's soul, this is at best a silly notion and at worst deeply demoralizing. Yet silver-bullet promises persist nonetheless.

There are a few things that help us think better about MGC attempts that seem to fail.

- First, like every worthwhile teaching strategy, MGC attempts are a practicable, improvable skill. There are weak MGC attempts and strong MGC attempts. There are ways, absolutely, to do them wrong, such as making them public instead of private. I'm talking about *practice*. Keep at it.
- More importantly, you have to view tracking attempted MGCs as a strategy akin to long-term investing. With each series you complete, the likelihood of a student receiving the valued/respected/known signal into their heart increases.
- Finally, you may need to seek to repair damage done. More on that in the next hang-up.

In short, it's critical to see Strategy 1 not as a one-and-done intervention but instead as a comprehensive, context-shaping approach to teacher-student relationship development.

I've Got a Really Bad Relationship With a Student, and a One-on-One MGC Seems Really Unsafe.

First of all, let me be clear that I don't know your unique situation. Any time that you feel unsafe in your practice, I implore you to reach out to proper supports and protect yourself from danger.

With that said, sometimes I find that MGCs are threatening to me when I know that my relationship with a given student is quite sour. In situations like this, the surest source of relief is an attempted repair of the relationship.

Let's take an example from my practice; we'll call this student Nysha. I noticed one day in class that Nysha's affect toward me was markedly colder than I had noticed before. Not wanting to make assumptions, I noted the difference and resolved to attempt a repair-focused MGC with Nysha at my earliest convenience.

When the chance arrived for me to ask Nysha for a brief conversation in the hallway, I said something like, "Nysha, I've noticed a change in your demeanor toward me lately. I have to ask, have I offended or hurt you in some way? If I have, I'd like to apologize and make it right. My goal is never to offend or humiliate a student, but I'm not silly enough to think that I don't accidentally do just that. Please know that what you share with me, I'll not hold against you, Nysha. I just want you to be comfortable to learn and grow in my classroom."

In this particular case, Nysha did not share anything with me during this attempted MGC, but I found out a day later that she had gone to the school counselor shortly prior and said she did not feel comfortable in my classroom. The reason, it turned out, was that I had asked her a question about her recent gaps in attendance, and from her perspective the way that I asked it was audible to nearby peers and therefore humiliating.¹³

I told the counselor that I was grateful to learn this, and at my earliest opportunity I asked Nysha into the hallway to tell her what the counselor had shared and how sorry I was for making her feel ashamed or embarrassed. Nysha told me that she appreciated my apology and my sensitivity to pull her out the previous day.

I almost always find in situations like this that simply making the moves to reach out and be curious are the majority of what it takes to repair rifts in a relationship.

Given that secondary teachers have upwards of a hundred students that we interact with in a given day, I find it inevitable that we'll offend or embarrass someone at some point in the year. While we shouldn't be complacent and should always seek to improve our sensitivity in this area, we also must remember that part of the job is being mindful of situations where repair is needed.

¹³Humiliating students is one of the Tacky Ten we looked at on page 39.