

# The Case Study

## Naming Names

### The Greatest Secret in Leading a Discussion is Using Students' Names

Clyde Freeman Herreid

I attended our honors graduation ceremony in early May. Then, as each year before, I was struck by the *tour-de-force* performance of my colleague, Josephine Capuana, Administrative Director of the Honors Program. She read the names of 350 honors students—flawlessly. That may not seem too impressive, but impressive it is.

Our university, like so many public institutions of higher learning, has a spectacularly diverse student body. Dozens of different countries and cultures are represented in each graduating class. To read the names of students from Thailand, India, Poland, Greece, China, Korea, Chile, and a host of other nations flawlessly is no mean feat.

But I know how she does it. First, she calls all of the students whose names are unfamiliar to her and asks them for the correct pronunciation. She writes their names phonetically on cue cards. *Her first secret, then, is to care enough to get the names right.*

*Her second secret is confidence.* She says the students' names with such verve and *joie de vie* that even if she gets it wrong, the parents are convinced that they are hearing their names pro-

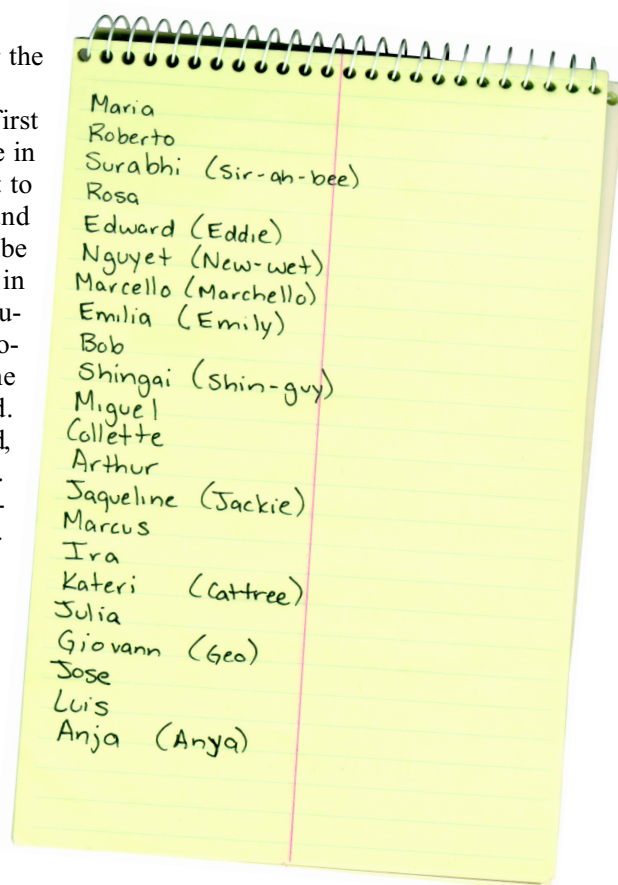
nounced correctly—if only for the first time!

Names are vital. Adam's first task after his naked appearance in the Garden of Eden was to get to work naming the beasts around him. Naming things needs to be done if we are to put our world in order. Names allow us to communicate with other folks. Taxonomists know this. They are the CPAs of the scientific world. They keep our world organized, tidy, categorized—and familiar.

Carolus Linnaeus, a peripatetic Swede from Uppsala University, made the world of plants and animals a safe place to visit when he came up with the Binomial System of Nomenclature to which all students thereafter had to pay homage if they were to pass General Biology. Before his enlightening work, the terminology of Adam's world was a bewildering array of names for God's biological handiwork. Scientists had a devil of a time figuring out whether a potato should be called a "papa" or a "pomme de terre" or a "dirt tuber." Our Swede solved it and said it is *Solanum tuberosum* no matter where you are.

Latin is the thing—no one uses it anymore; it is a stable language; it's not going to change. So use Latin to name the organisms of the planet. And while you are at it, give your tuber two names so that it shows its ancestral connections. Like the names for hu-

man beings. Most of us have at least two names (except for personages of the likes of Cher and Madonna). Names reveal to us family connections. Some of us even have three or more names, like I do. My first name is a given name; my middle name comes from my grandmother's maiden name, and my last name is from my father's side of the family, coming through untold generations of Norwegian farmers. We all can tell similar tales. It isn't surprising that Linnaeus



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felt that the scientific name must do the same thing, and so it is that our potato's species name (*tuberosum*) is equivalent to our given name and the genus name (*Solanum*) is equivalent to our family name.

Names do more than allow us to pigeonhole things and give us relationships. They give us a sense of ownership. Once we put a name to things we get a sense that we understand something about the essence of the thing itself. This may be entirely wrong, but nonetheless we feel secure that our world is more orderly. And we can go on.

There is more to it, argue some philosophers and psychologists. They say that it is difficult to think about things if they do not have names. Indeed, language and nouns set the framework for our analytical processes. Hobbes put it, "We cannot think about things but only about the names of things."

The naming of a child is no trivial matter. We name our kids after saints, heroes, and ancestors in hopes that they will receive some of the virtues or wealth of the individual whose name is used. And using the name can lead to magical and dangerous results. Consider the plight of Rumpelstiltskin, who was doing just fine in the German folklore tale until his captive maiden discovered his name and gained her release.

Name taboos exist in many cultures. The Kiowa Indians say you cannot utter the word "bear" unless you are named for the bear. Otherwise you will be driven mad. One must be especially careful dealing with the names of gods and demons—or before you know it, they may be at your doorstep demanding your soul or more mundane things, like your life. Indeed, using names is no trivial matter.

Dale Carnegie was passionate about names. His famous book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and his training seminars emphasize the importance of learning and using names to become a paragon of success. Perhaps the greatest key to fame and fortune is to remember a person's name. Who doesn't feel flattered when someone recalls their name?

This is especially true if the person who remembers us is someone in authority. "He recognizes me. I must be important," runs our inner dialogue. This recognition reaffirms our existence, our value. Nothing is more personal than our names.

So perhaps we can understand the personal hurt and insult that can occur when someone mispronounces, or worse, misprints our name—there is hardly a greater sin. Harry Houdini, the renowned escape artist of the early 20th century, said he didn't care what the newspapers printed about him—be it good or ill—as long as they spelled his name correctly. That's what mattered.

The point of this essay is simple. *Learn your students' names.* Use them constantly. This will repay you a thousandfold in relationships with students. No longer can students hide in the anonymity of the classroom. They will start to behave more like responsible citizens than the children we are so used to seeing, being irresponsible and whining and behaving—well—like students! A Swedish colleague of mine, Arne Tarnvik, professor at Umea University, has put it well. He said that using students' names is the most cost-effective way of getting a good discussion started and to keep it going. Call on students by name. Use those names whenever possible. No longer will the group be composed of strangers; if not friends, they will become at least colleagues together on a quest.

How many of us have suffered this ignoble fate in our classrooms? We ask a question and get no response? Students avert their eyes and start writing furiously on their papers. We wait in vain for someone to say something intelligent. If not intelligent, at least something. Anything. We give up. And start lecturing again. Surely, not many among us have not sweated through this

scenario. There are several ways to survive this embarrassment, but undoubtedly, the simplest is to use students' names. They can hardly not respond if you call on them by name.

There are many ways to do this. But first you must find out their names. You know the ways. Use assigned seating and seating charts. Use nametags stuck to their bodies or on their desks. Take snapshots in one of the first class periods and learn who's who. Whatever you do, devise some system to get the job done.

This is the way I handle it. If I am in a class or workshop with say 40 people, I have them each write their name down on an index card in bold letters using a felt tip marker. This card is folded lengthwise and placed on their desk with their name facing me. It is useful to have them write their name on the other side as well if there are people seated to their side or behind them. The next step is to use their names constantly. Whenever I ask a question, I direct that question to a person and use their name. "Anna, what do you think about the suggestion that Bill just made?" "Does anyone have a different viewpoint than Jessica's?" "Frank, will you expand on that idea." And so on.

Use names repeatedly, and in the course of a 50-minute class, you can learn 20 to 40 names. Just as importantly, students will begin to use each other's names as well. This sets the stage for a good class discussion.

It won't solve all of your problems in getting students engaged in an intelligent case discussion. But it will go a long way. You will still have to be brilliant yourself. You will still have to give engaging assignments. You will still have students that will not prepare. But there will be fewer of them—they can no longer hide. Because you know their names!

***A name pronounced is the recognition of the individual to whom it belongs. He who can pronounce my name alright, he can call me, and is entitled to my love and service.***

**Henry David Thoreau**