Book Review

A Teacher's Guide to Learning Student Names: Why You Should, Why It's Hard, How You Can. BY MICHELLE D. MILLER. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. 2024. Pp. 113 (Paperback). $14.95. ISBN: 978-0-8061-9466-0.

During my nearly forty years of full-time college teaching, I often felt like my effort to learn and remember the names of my students was much like throwing darts at a dart board. Occasionally I would hit the bullseye, matching the correct name to the student standing in front of me. Sometimes I would hit the target but not the bullseye, recalling a student's first name but not her last. Most often I missed the target completely, recalling neither the student's first nor last name.

Michelle D. Miller begins her short but information-packed book by making a significant claim: research data shows that students are more engaged in their learning process if their teacher knows their names. And, when they are more engaged, their learning outcomes tend to improve. By making student name-learning a key part of one's teaching practice, the quality of that practice likely will improve. In addition, "learning names– and saying them correctly!–is a major aspect of inclusive, equity-oriented teaching, one that supports success for more diverse learners" (5–6).

In order to improve her readers' proficiency in the practice of learning their students' names, Miller embarks on a journey to deepen our understanding of how name-learning works within our brain. As our guide on this journey, Miller employs her professional expertise in psycholinguistics, which concentrates on "the intersection between memory and language processing" (3).

In the first of the book's four chapters, Miller forthrightly admits that learning proper names is more difficult than learning (and remembering) most other types of information. She documents why it is so hard to remember proper names. Names are isolated bits of information with little to no connectivity to other related facts. Lacking associations, "names hang out in isolation" (15). When we hear a person's name enunciated, our brain inputs its auditory characteristics. However, without adequate associations to the name, we often face the

difficulty of recalling this person's name at a later date. This difficulty is known to all of us as having a person's name "on the tip of our tongue" but being unable to retrieve it from our memory bank.

Our memory, according to Miller, involves three distinct processes: encoding, storage, and retrieval (20–21). Learning a new name is first encoded in our memory and then stored. The retrieval process is facilitated by cues and connections. The more cues and connections that are associated with the name, the easier it is to recall it. While the retrieval process is often seen as the moment of success or failure—you either recall the person's name or you don't—it is the encoding process that sets the stage for successful retrieval. Within the encoding process, Miller highlights the phonological working memory as the aspect of our brain that enables us to hold onto short, specific pieces of information such as a computer security code (24). The secret to remembering the code resides in the attentive effort to engage our short-term memory power. Once a name is encoded and stored, the process of retrieval is facilitated by repeated usage of that name. In practice, Miller suggests repeating the person's name you first heard in the initial introduction. You might end your encounter by saying something like: "I've enjoyed meeting you, (name)" (22). This repetition enhances the strength of the encoding process.

Miller's second chapter offers the reader four key techniques for facilitating one's efforts in name-learning: Attend, Say, Associate, Retrieve (ASAR). Our attention to the first hearing of a person's name is supported "by using the new name at least twice right away" (34). Miller encourages personal creativity in searching for links associating the new name with other areas of our knowledge base. For example, the name *Sally* may link with "salad". This association can help in the retrieval of her name. In Miller's view, "actively retrieving a memory is the best way to strengthen it" (37).

It is in the service of expanding our retrieval practice that Miller offers her best practice for strategically learning and remembering student names. She refers to this practice as "The First-Day 'Introduce Each Other' Icebreaker" (39). This activity incorporates each of the ASAR techniques and not only facilitates the teacher's ability to learn and remember student names but also engages students in learning one another's names in the process. Miller also suggests using student photos (in schools where this is permitted) to practice associating the students' faces with their respective names. In addition, table tents and name tags are helpful ways for both teacher and students to learn one another's names. These efforts at name-learning have been shown to increase the levels of collegiality as well as inclusivity within the classroom. These are significant benefits that attach themselves to our concerted efforts to learn our students' names.

Having mapped the normal processes for learning proper names, Miller acknowledges that things are not always normal in real life. Her third chapter is entitled "Complications, Challenges, and Special Circumstances". Several complications can be attributed to the individual differences that exist among us. Some individuals have a relatively limited phonological working memory (PWM), which makes it more difficult to retain a name when we initially hear it spoken to us. We can learn about our personal PWM by performing a self-test. How many numbers of a digital code can you recall immediately after seeing the code? Miller informs us that a span between five and nine numbers is the range typical for most people. A number lower than five may indicate a person with a relatively limited PWM and may help explain why that person faces increased challenges in learning proper names (59–60).

An additional challenge in name-learning centers on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The initial attention deficit means that the memory will also be affected. Without the required attention in the encoding process, storage and retrieval will be negatively impacted. The diminished capability of the encoding process is also found in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A particular aspect associated with ASD is the difficulty in "recognizing and distinguishing among faces" (66). Face blindness can be a condition with which one is born, or it may be the result of a brain injury. In either case, the affected person will struggle with the association of names and faces.

Learning and retrieving student names will also be affected by advancing age. As Miller points out, "names, specifically, become harder to remember with age" (69). Studies indicate that one remedy for this is to embrace the reality that it takes more time to learn names at an older age. She suggests that our "best bet at compensating for aging is to simply add more time into the equation" (71). An important caveat that Miller stresses here is that her comments apply only "to the typical progression of normal aging, not to the changes wrought by age-related diseases such as Alzheimer's dementia" (71).

One final challenge that many teachers of all ages are encountering today is the increasing number of students of foreign origin. Many of these students have names that teachers have never encountered. Learning these very unfamiliar names will require more effort than normal. Inviting the assistance of each student of foreign origin to pronounce her name will be vital to a teacher's ability to correctly remember and enunciate that name moving forward (72–74).

In her book's concluding chapter, Miller cautions us that unless we practice learning names regularly, our abilities will atrophy. The age-old adage "use it or lose it" finds an apt application here. To assist her readers in their efforts in name-learning, Miller gathers online resources that function much like tools in a toolbox. She provides the web address for each resource in the endnotes (104). One group assists us with pronunciation aids.

In this group we find "My Name Is", Namecoach, Pronounce-Names, and NameDrop (79–82). A second group of resources provides memorization aids. In this group we find the online sites Name Shark and Nameorize (82). Having reached the end of her journey, Miller concludes her text with an echo of her initial statement of the value of learning student names "as a key strategy for inclusive, student-focused teaching" (89).

Miller certainly hits the bullseye of her target—that is, she offers a theoretically sound and practically accessible text with the goal of assisting college professors in the important task of learning their students' names. As I read the text, I often found myself personally internalizing the various points of Miller's unfolding presentation. I learned much from my reading. At the same time, I also found myself thinking that the information she presents would have helpful applications in other areas of higher education. Coaches of athletic teams could benefit from learning the names of their players. Deans could benefit through learning the names of the members of the various departments that they oversee. Yes, teachers will benefit greatly from reading Miller's book, but so will college coaches and administrators. And, as students feel more highly valued when their teachers and coaches know them by name, it is also likely that students will value one another more highly as they learn the names of their fellow students both inside and outside the classroom.

George S. Matejka
Ursuline College, Cleveland, USA