THE Teaching PROFESSOR

Volume 31, Number 4 April 2017

# Principles that Help Make Online Courses Successful

Beverley McGuire has taught online courses for 10 years, and she's been a student in them for five. From those experiences, she's learned a few things about making online courses effective. She's also conversant with current research and collaborates with colleagues. From that knowledge and those experiences, she identifies five key design and delivery principles for online courses. She teaches religious study courses, but her principles are broadly applicable.

## Humanizing the course website

It's a simple but powerful principle. When students first open the course website, they are meeting the course and its instructor. What's their first impression if the website is not easy to navigate? How much text confronts them during this first encounter? "By humanizing their course website, instructors enable student to get a sense of their passion, personality, or persona, which can create a sense of teaching presence" (p. 31). McGuire continues, "Although I initially gave little thought to the appearance of my course website, viewing it as a repository for syllabi, lectures, and assignments, I now approach it as a kind of virtual persona" (p. 32).

## Chunk the course content

McGuire's advice is about getting the course content into what looks like manageable units to students. Online course designers recommend units that correspond to four or five weeks of instruction; modules, which are subdivisions of units and about a week in length; and topics, which can be a lesson, an assignment, or a learning experience. McGuire recommends carefully attending to what may seem like trivial details. Each of her modules has a table of contents with an overview of the module, its objectives, a to-do list, and instructions for each assignment.

## Structure and monitor online discussions

"The key to effective online discussions is to set clear parameters and expectations for discussion, ensure that discussion prompts align with learning outcomes, and monitor discussions to prevent any violations" (p. 36). Students are not born knowing how to discuss online. Participation rubrics and examples of good online posts and discussions help them develop those skills. In McGuire's content areas (as well as some other academic areas), there's a need to underscore the difference between what's being studied and students' personal beliefs about the subject. McGuire's advice is to monitor but not interject comments all that often. Her goal is to encourage students to be responsible for their own learning.

## Prioritize giving feedback

"One cannot overemphasize the importance of instructor feedback in online learning environments" (p. 37). And the feedback should be prompt. McGuire writes about the frustration she has felt in online courses when the feedback was minimal. Providing lots of feedback is time-consuming, but there are shortcuts which can be used when students take similar positions or make the same kinds of errors.

## Make the course relevant

Relevance is a powerful driver of motivation, and one of the challenges for online learners is that self-direction is required. If the relevance of the content is understood, that makes it easier to persevere. The relevance needs to be more than asserted; it needs to be demonstrated with examples of its application now and in the future.

The popularity of online courses continues to grow, as does our experience in delivering them. There are lessons to be shared from our experiences, and this article provides a good example of that wisdom.

**Reference:** McGuire, B. (2017). Principles for effective asynchronous online instruction in religious studies. *Teaching Theology & Religion, 20*(1), 28–45.

## In This Issue

Hard Courses . . . . . 2
Assignments They Don't Like. . . . . 3
Group Work: Stay Together or Form New Groups?. . . . . 4
Holding Students Responsible for What Happens in Groups. . . . . 5
Using Student Evaluations to Improve Teaching . . . . . 6
Recording Lecture Material: Worth the Time and Effort?. . . . . 7
Entitled: Is That How Your Students Feel? 8

THE Teaching PROFESSOR

Editor-at-Large
Maryellen Weimer, PhD
grg@psu.edu

Managing Editor
Katie Carney
katie.carney@magnapubs.com

President
William Haight
whaight@magnapubs.com

Publisher
David Burns
dburns@magnapubs.com

For subscription information, contact:
Customer Service: 800-433-0499
support@magnapubs.com
www.magnapubs.com

Submissions to *The Teaching Professor* are welcome. When submitting, please keep these guidelines in mind:

- We are interested in a wide range of teaching-learning topics.
- We are interested in innovative strategies, techniques, and approaches that facilitate learning and in reflective analyses of educational issues of concern.
- Write with the understanding that your audience includes faculty in a wide variety of disciplines and in a number of different institutional settings; i.e., what you describe must be relevant to a significant proportion of our audience.
- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

***The Teaching Professor*** (ISSN 0892-2209) is published 10 times per year by Magna Publications Inc., 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Phone 800-433-0499; Fax: 608-246-3597. Email: support@magnapubs.com. Website: www.magnapubs.com. One-year subscription: $119 (Multiple print subscriptions and Group Online Subscriptions are available, call Customer Service at 800-433-0499 for information.) Photocopying or other reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *The Teaching Professor*, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. 

*Editor's Note: This article launches* Insights, *a new column. I'm picking pesky issues without easy answers and inviting individuals to share their thoughts. Lolita Paff launches the series with thoughts about how teachers and students define hard courses. -MEW*

# Hard Courses

*Lolita Paff*
*Penn State Berks*
*Lap21@psu.edu*

If you asked students to tell you what makes a course hard, what would they say? Would their answers be the same as yours? Would it be a problem if they weren't?

## What makes a course hard?

Draeger, del Prado Hill, and Mahler (2015) conducted campus-wide surveys and interviews to ascertain students' definition of academic rigor. Students explain hard courses in terms of workload, grading standards, level of interest, and perceived relevance. These results contrast with faculty definitions which focused on active learning, meaningful content, higher-order thinking, and appropriate expectations. These findings confirm my experience: Teachers and students are not on the same page when it comes to what makes a course hard.

## Does it matter?

This mismatch has significant implications for learning. Let me explain with an analogy.

Monique wants to lose weight. She hires Carmen, a personal trainer, to help her with a cardio program. Like many people, Monique believes less food and more cardio are all she needs. The session starts with ten minutes of cardio, but then to Monique's surprise, Carmen takes her over to the weight machines. Monique protests—she wants to burn fat. Carmen persists and Monique begrudgingly complies, but with disappointment and less enthusiasm. She finishes the session without understanding why weight training is a necessary part of successful weight loss programs.

I have a lot of students like Monique. They've paid good money and they're willing to work. But like Monique, their expectations and understanding of what's required are incomplete. Monique and Carmen aren't on the same page and neither are my students and I.

Carmen's the expert and assumes Monique understands that and will accept the plan. Carmen doesn't explain why weight training is necessary or develop the weight loss plan with Monique. Carmen—and many teachers—think like experts, forgetting that novices see and approach learning very differently. If teachers and students understand "hard" courses differently, that bodes poorly for the relationship between them.

## What can teachers do?

Martin et al. (2008) investigated students' perceptions of hard and easy courses across engineering programs. Two of their strategies have broad application.

- Consider student characteristics such as semester standing, in-major versus general education courses, and majors. "The key is determining what an appropriate challenge is for a course and for a particular group of students. The more an instructor interacts with students, the more likely the instructor is to notice the overwhelmed or bored students" (p. 112).
- Emphasize content connections. "Real" and "relevant" are the levers that push students to work harder and longer. Content needs to matter to students.

There is value in initiating conversations with students about

*PAGE 3* ☛

# Assignments They Don't Like

Students aren't all that excited about most of their assignments. Given the chance not to write papers, not to take exams, or not to complete group projects, most students would happily take advantage of the opportunity. But those are all assignments they're used to, ones about which they feel a certain degree of comfort. How about an assignment you know they're going to dislike—such as having them memorize and recite a poem?

Nichole DeWall readily admits that memorizing poetry is no longer the rite of passage it used to be in education. She quotes others who uses the terms "antiquated" and "outdated" to describe memorizing poetry. She's aware that anyone with a smartphone has a digital storehouse of poetry at their fingertips, but still she insists on the assignment. "I believe it is the surest way for students to build lifelong relationships with literary works" (p. 78). DeWall continues, "Reading a poem from a smartphone screen is a categorically different experience than having a poem surface from memory" (p. 78).

She adds other arguments based on the learning propensities of the millennial students she teaches. "Memorizing poetry asks millennial students to practice a deeper, more sustained kind of attention than is required of them online; it won't tolerate the 'continuous partial attention' that millennials define as multitasking" (p. 81). The assignment also requires "students [to] practice the covert skills of persistence, patience, and delayed gratification as they pursue learning their passages by heart" (p. 83). As the assignment unfolds, students both monitor and discuss their learning—identifying which strategies do and don't work when memorizing poetry.

*DeWall sees value in assignments that cause students some discomfort.*

But the most interesting argument DeWall constructs is the one that makes this relevant to every teacher, most of whom are not going have students memorizing poetry: the extent to which we use assignments that take students out of their comfort zones. Summoning others, she writes about the tension between "meeting students where they are" by accommodating their "preferences" and "tendencies" versus demanding (at least some of the time) that they meet us where we are. And DeWall is no Luddite when it comes to recognizing the role of technology in learning and life. She uses Blackboard's Discussion Board feature and Facebook to communicate with students and organize events. She has students track Twitter hashtags to analyze their rhetorical contexts. Even so, DeWall sees value in assignments that cause students some discomfort. "It is neither necessary nor desirable for the classroom to feel like a seamless extension of our millennial students' native worlds" (p. 80). Transformative learning experiences take students to places they've never been, and there's always a bit of unease associated with unfamiliar destinations.

While DeWall doesn't discuss this in the article, one concern to those considering assignments that take students outside their comfort zones is the degree of discomfort students, be they beginners or majors, can constructively handle. In DeWall's case this is a small assignment; the rationale behind it—the value of memorization, the learning skills it develops, the understandings that will result—is discussed in detail, and all of this is shared with students up front. Is that enough to make students fall in love with the assignment? No, but that isn't the goal. She's after a learning experience that puts students and literature in a different relationship.

She concludes, "As college instructors, we should make many efforts to meet our students where they are, to accommodate and celebrate their particular ways of learning. But we should also, at times, challenge our student in new ways, and give ourselves permission to be unfashionable" (p. 88).

**Reference:** DeWall, N. (2016). Millennials by heart: Memorization as an active learning strategy for the *SparkNotes* generation. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 27*(4), 77–91.

## Hard Courses

*FROM PAGE 2*

learning and how that relates to definitions of "hard" courses. We can't dispel misperceptions if we're unaware. The goal of the conversations isn't to negotiate watering down the course or lowering expectations. It's to give students a voice so that what makes a course hard is understood by everyone and the definitions move closer to being mutually acceptable.

**References:** Draeger, J., P., del Prado Hill, & Mahler, R. (2015). Developing a student concept of academic rigor. *Innovation in Higher Education, 40*, 215–228.

Martin, J. H., Hands, K. B., Lancaster, S. M., Trytten, D. A., & Murphy, T. J. (2008). Hard but not too hard: Challenging courses and engineering students. *College Teaching, 56*(2), 107–113.

# Group Work: Stay Together or Form New Groups?

For faculty members requring group work, one of the key logistical questions involves how long group membership should stay the same. Membership can shift after every meeting, or groups can be stable, with the same members meeting together multiple times across a content unit, grading period, or for an entire course.

There are arguments on both sides. When group membership shifts, students have the opportunity to meet and become acquainted with more classmates. The more classmates they get to know, the more likely the class will gel as a community, with students experiencing a sense of belonging and cohesion. If a particular group of students is not able to work well together, they are in a different group when group membership shifts. On the other side, stable groups allow for the development of deeper relationships, where students really get to know each other. If there are difficulties in the group, there's time to work around and through them. Norms and roles develop, thereby showing students why group members working collaboratively can accomplish more than persons working individually. When group members know each other well, they tend to feel more comfortable, and that allows them to engage in more challenging conversations.

The question of interest to this research team was whether shifting or stable membership had any effect on academic performance, as in exam scores. The context was two sections of a large introductory sociology course, where students attended two lectures per week and one recitation section with 30 classmates. The recitation sections, facilitated by graduate students, used, in addition to quizzes and film clips, cooperative learning groups to develop critical-thinking, problem-solving, and consensus-building skills. In the groups, students tackled complex scenarios for which they had to develop an action plan using course content. One section of graduate teaching assistants used shifting group membership while the second relied on stable group membership.

"Using two semesters of data, the analysis demonstrated that the stable-membership approach did result in higher test scores compared to the use of more traditional ad hoc student groups. This finding came with an important caveat: the stable membership approach only resulted in higher test scores in one of the two semesters" (p. 14). However, there was an important difference between the two semesters, and that was the amount of time students spent in groups. Film clips were used for considerably less time during the second semester, which meant that students were spending significantly more time working in groups. In that case, stable group members scored nearly half a letter grade higher than those in the groups with shifting membership.

*Large-course instructors typically rely on lectures, and so students in those courses often do not experience what it means to be members of a learning community.*

In large, introductory, required courses, it is a challenge to get students connected with each other. They come from different majors and are routinely beginning students, new to college and new to each other. Large-course instructors typically rely on lectures, and so students in those courses often do not experience what it means to be members of a learning community. Group work, like that used in these recitation sections, gives them the opportunity to connect with other students, directly engage in activities where they must apply what they are learning, and explore how to work with others in groups. These findings are especially impressive in that this was not graded group work. Students came to these recitation sessions because each opened with a graded quiz, but the group work used the cooperative learning model—although the graduate assistants monitored the group discussions, they were not graded.

This research team does not hypothesize as to why the stable group membership made a difference. Research on small group dynamics would predict that as the members became more comfortable with each other, they were more willing to engage in vigorous discussion and that, as they debate, argue, and try out explanations and ideas on each other, their understanding of the content grows.

Both shifting and stable group membership are viable options. However, if the goal of the group work is to improve performance in the course, this research favors keeping the membership stable.

**Reference:** Walker, A., Bush, A., Sanchagrin, K., & Holland, J. (2017). "We've got to keep meeting like this": A pilot study comparing academic performance in shifting-membership cooperative groups versus stable-membership cooperative groups in an introductory lab. *College Teaching, 65*(1), 9–16.

# Holding Students Responsible for What Happens in Groups

Many teachers avoid using group work because they fear what happens when students work together—some group members don't contribute, others contribute too much, there's no in-depth exploration of issues, some members don't deliver, others don't show up, group meetings are more social events than work sessions, disagreements get personal, and so goes the list. When problems like these emerge, the students who care register complaints with the teacher. The question then is, who's responsible for fixing what's going wrong in the group?

Yes, the teacher can intervene, and if the problems are serious or students are very inexperienced group members, that may be the best option. But in most other cases, it's not the best approach. Students, many of them soon to be professionals, ought to be developing skills that can be used address group process issues. How would most bosses handle an employee who comes complaining about a group member who's always late to meetings?

Initially, students (especially beginning ones and those who are not yet mature adults) are reluctant to accept responsibility for the behavior of others in their groups, even though they may have had a hand in creating the problems. They need teachers to empower them to tackle behaviors that compromise the group's effectiveness. Students are often surprised that what they can do isn't all that confrontational or disagreeable. If the group's been trying to decide what they should do and Antonio hasn't said anything, somebody in the group needs to ask Antonio what he thinks. In other cases, it's how the group shouldn't respond. A member arrives late, apologizes, and then runs through a litany of reasons why she didn't arrive on time. What that member shouldn't be hearing from the group is, "Oh, Katy, it's okay. It's not a problem, no worries. Sit down and catch your breath." It is a problem. She wasn't there when the group was working, and while no one may want to say that, they certainly shouldn't be saying the opposite. It would be better for someone in the group to respond with, "Okay, now that you're here, we've made these decisions, and we're dividing up the work this way."

Students need to understand that the norms governing how people function in groups get established early on. If most members arrive to meetings on time, if the group has an agenda, and if members are coming prepared, that puts pressure on everyone else to follow suit. Couple the presence of norms with a bit of peer pressure, and the group has a powerful motivating force.

*Effective group functioning is also the result of how well individual and group goals are integrated.*

Effective group functioning is also the result of how well individual and group goals are integrated. Leadership illustrates how this feature of group dynamics works. If the group has no designated leader, that means one has to emerge. Members indicate their interest in being leaders through their leadership behavior: "Well, maybe we could start by introducing ourselves." "Does anybody have any ideas about how we should start?" "I'm wondering if we should start with a to-do list." If the group does what the member proposes, that response suggests this potential leader has followers. The problem emerges when multiple individuals in the group have leadership goals. If they are all suggesting what the group should do and their suggestions differ, that group has a leadership issue. What helps the group is for potential leaders to recognize that the group needs followers more than leaders, and then sacrifice the need to lead for the good of others in the group.

Being able to sacrifice individual goals requires students to understand what roles help groups function effectively and to be willing to put the group's success ahead of individual goals. Students new to group work often don't have these insights, but they can be cultivated by encouraging student reflection about what's happening in the group, what individual goals others have, and what their goals in the group might be. Sometimes the best analysis is forward-looking: "If you were in a group like this in the future, what would you do to make the group successful?"

Group members should be encouraged to have discussions about how they are working together. If all is going well, these are easy conversations that can focus on fine-tuning processes. If they aren't going all that well, the first attempts at discussion typically sugarcoat the problems, making them seem minor and unimportant. If teachers facilitate these more difficult discussions, they can help the group explore more in depth those areas that need more work.

When called upon to intervene in group problems, teachers are at a disadvantage. They haven't been part of the group's interactions. They must act on the reports of individuals in the group. If the reports of what's happened are different, who's telling the truth? Groups may be in a better position to respond to problems, especially if the teacher is there to offer guidance and support.

Too often teachers underestimate the importance of group dynamics issues, even though how well students learn the content is frequently determined by how the group functions. It behooves both teachers and students to recognize that the responsibility for what happens in the group ultimately resides within the group.

# Using Student Evaluations to Improve Teaching

Student evaluations can be used to improve teaching, and here's an excellent resource to inform those efforts. Author Guy Boysen writes, "The purpose of this teacher-ready review is to provide a comprehensive, empirically-based guide for the use of student evaluations to improve teaching" (p. 273). His premise is that if teachers are going to base improvement decisions on evaluation data, then they need to be using "scientifically justifiable practices" (p. 27). Specifically, they need to a) use reliable and valid forms, b) have an adequate sample of students, c) analyze the responses systematically, and d) make the results part of an ongoing professional development effort.

There's a vast collection of studies on student ratings, covering virtually every aspect of instructional evaluation. As has been observed more than once, if you want to believe something in particular about ratings, chances are good you can find a study to support that view. "In order to avoid the potential bias of selecting single studies to fit a predetermined conclusion, this review emphasizes trends identified through meta-analysis" (p. 274). The focus is mainly on summative, end-of-course ratings. However, Boysen is not writing about how these are or should be used by administrators for promotion, tenure, and merit. He's writing to teachers, offering advice on using rating data for improvement purposes.

## Use valid and reliable instruments

If you don't use valid and reliable instruments, you're making decisions about instructional changes based on data that may be bogus. Boysen points out that "Many colleges . . . create their own student evaluation measures by haphazardly selecting survey questions with face validity" (p. 275). This matters because research shows that when teachers make improvements based on valid and reliable data, subsequent evaluations show larger gains than those of teachers who aren't using valid and reliable instruments.

Boysen also tackles the continuing belief by some that student evaluations are not a valid measure of teaching effectiveness. He cites seven meta-analyses that support the validity of student ratings. That ends up being a lot of data to argue against. He also addresses the more current belief that ratings have been rendered irrelevant by students' senses of entitlement and the consumerism of higher education. Are students now evaluating the quality of the instruction, or are they punishing teachers for failing to satisfy their demands as consumers? He calls this belief interesting but points out that so far it hasn't been empirically validated. In fact, there is evidence that challenges the belief. It's provided by a huge study involving over 750,000 classes at nearly 350 different colleges and universities; this study documents that ratings in the 2002–2011 decade were "consistently" higher than they were between 1998 and 2001 (p. 275).

## Have an adequate sample size

The big worry here is the low response rates being generated by online data collection and the prevailing view in some quarters that disgruntled students who give low ratings and write negative comments are overrepresented in online data. Response rates for online course evaluations are lower. There's no arguing that point. Boysen writes that it's "safe to assume that at least 20 percent fewer students will complete an online versus a face-to-face student evaluation survey" (p. 276). However, Boysen references five studies documenting that online and face-to-face evaluations produce "results of similar magnitude and correlational structure . . ." (p. 276). Furthermore, as far as who completes the online evaluations, research suggests it's the students with higher GPAs (Boysen references five studies here as well). "Online evaluations do not appear to be dominated by students who earn low grades and who, on average, tend to give lower evaluations of their teachers" (p. 276). Finally, analyses of online and face-to-face comments do not show any differences in the number of students who make comments or in the number of negative or positive comments they provide. In fact, several studies (five citations) show that students are actually writing more—by some estimates, 150 percent more—when they complete online evaluations.

What's the response rate that teachers should be looking for? It depends on class size and what's determined to be acceptable as a margin of error. For example, with a stringent 3 percent margin of error and a class size of 20, you'd need a 97 percent response rate. If there were 50 students in the course, you'd need a 93 percent response rate, and for 100 students, an 83 percent response rate. If a 10 percent margin of error is acceptable, then the response for these class sizes would be 58 percent, 35 percent, and 21 percent, respectively. There is no consensus as to what the acceptable margin of error for student ratings might be.

## Analyze the results

"Student evaluation results represent scientific data, but research suggests that faculty readily interpret that data without reference to established statistical principles" (p. 278). As an example, Boysen points to the small variations in average scores that lead faculty to conclude they've improved or they need to. Error is inherent in any psychological measurement, including these less-than-precise measures of teaching effectiveness. Teachers need to look at the results across multiple semesters before making big changes.

Then there's the matter of student comments, which are usually received

*PAGE 7* ☛

# Recording Lecture Material: Worth the Time and Effort?

Technology makes preserving and accessing lecture material an easy option these days, and many faculty are now recording the course content they present. The value of doing so is determined by how students make use of these recorded resources.

In response to surveys, students favor having recorded lecture content. And what can be done with recorded materials also makes a persuasive case for making them available. With recordings accessible all the time, students can use the material at their convenience. The recordings can accommodate a variety of different study habits. Students can listen to parts they found confusing in class. They can add content to the notes taken in class. Listening also offers an opportunity to review the material. On surveys, students indicate that they believe having recorded lecture material improves their grades, and they report it doesn't negatively affect their attendance in class.

However, it's that attendance issue that's of most concern to faculty. Will students stop coming to lectures if they can access the same material on their own? The data are mixed, with some studies showing no effect on attendance and other indicating negative effects. And although students believe that the availability of the recordings improves their grades, most of the studies (six are cited in this research) report little or no change in grades. These researchers conclude that the "results do not substantiate the reports of students' beliefs that access to recorded lectures helps them learn" (Simcock, Chua, Hekman, Levin, & Brown, 2017, p. 69).

The most salient issue is how students actually use the recorded material. In the studies that have tracked usage, most students are only watching a fraction of the material that's available.

The students in an Essentials of Mammalian Biology course surveyed in this study confirmed a number of the findings reported elsewhere in the research. Most of these students (87 percent) reported that they attended the lectures in person. Of those responding to the survey, 52 percent claimed they had used the lecture recordings; 55 percent said they only watched one-third or less of the 36 recorded lectures, while 24 percent reported they watched more than two-thirds of them. The log use data confirm this relatively low usage. The course enrolled 267 students and on average only 24 views occurred per day, with the most occurring just before the final exam.

The most common reported use of the recorded lectures was to cover for days students missed class. Most did not watch the recorded version of lectures they had attended in person. In other words, these students were not using the recordings to review course content.

As reported elsewhere, these students thought that the recorded lectures were a useful resource that improved their grades, but that was not the case in this study. In fact, lower grades in this study were associated with lower reported attendance of the live lectures. This research team worries that having recorded lectures may lull some students into a false sense of security.

Sixty-three percent of these students did not indicate a preference for live lectures or recorded ones, 29 percent did prefer getting the material live, and 8 percent preferred recorded lectures. Interestingly, students reported the live lectures helped them understand the course material and keep up with the content.

As for an overall conclusion, the researchers offer this. "Although students did utilize recorded lectures, they did not engage with the recordings extensively and valued live lectures more" (p.75).

In this study the live lectures were simply recorded. With the currently popular flipped models, recorded content is often not being presented in class, and that changes the role of recordings in the learning process. Does it change the decisions students make about listening to the recordings? Issues such as these should prompt those using recorded course materials to anonymously survey students so that how the recordings are being used can be considered in light of their intended role in the course.

**Reference:** Simcock, D. C., Chua, W. H., Hekman, M., Levin, M. T., & Brown, S. (2017). A survey of first-year biology study opinion regarding live lectures and recorded lectures as learning tools. *Advances in Physiology Education. 41*(1), 69–76.

## Student Evaluations

*FROM PAGE 6*

as an unorganized collection that encourages teachers to look at and respond to individual comments, often over-reacting to negative ones. The advice is to sort through comments systematically, disregarding those with no specific advice ("great teacher, you rock") and those with negative assessments only offered by one or two students.

"Student evaluations can improve teaching when they are used as part of a process of professional consultation and goal setting" (p. 279). In other words, the research suggests that results should be discussed with a peer or instructional expert. Based on that conversation, faculty should set goals and proceed to implement changes.

**Reference:** Boysen, G. A. (2016). Using student evaluations to improve teaching: Evidence-based recommendations. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 2*(4), 273–284.

# Entitled: Is That How Your Students Feel?

"Prevalent among university faculty is the perception that a large number of today's students possess an outsized sense of entitlement" (Luckett, Trocchia, Noel, & Marlin, 2017, p. 96). But what exactly does entitlement mean in the academic realm? High grades without much in the way of effort? A demanding attitude toward teachers? Views of education as a commodity, something they've paid for and believe they should have their way?

In this study, researchers started with a measure of academic entitlement developed in 2008 that a student focus group helped them update. Here's a sample of the questions used in the survey: 1) A professor shouldn't be annoyed with me if I carry on text message conversations in class; 2) I would think poorly of a professor who didn't respond the same day to an email I sent; and 3) If I have completed most of the reading for a class, I deserve at least a B in that course.

Those three questions are representative of the three dimensions of academic entitlement explored in this study. The first represents behavioral entitlement; it involves issues of classroom conduct, specifically the use of electronic devices during class, attendance, and arriving late or leaving early. The second question, which researchers labeled "service entitlement," concerns expectations about instructor responsiveness—how quickly e-mails and phone messages should be returned and how students feel if the professor cancels an appointment with them. The third question represents behavioral entitlement and students' expectations that attending class, doing the reading, and trying hard all merit receiving a B.

Using this measure of academic entitlement, researchers surveyed 293 undergraduate marketing students and found they belonged to one of four different clusters.

## Cluster 1: The model student

This group scored lowest on all three of the entitlement dimensions just described. They are students who abide by the rules. They believe that grades should be earned. They are mindful of rude behaviors that make it difficult for others in the class to learn, and they are more forgiving of their professors. The good news is that this was the largest cluster of the four, comprising 41.3 percent of the overall sample. The group had more women (almost 60 percent) and reported the highest GPA (3.20).

*However, as the researchers note, "while representing only 23.2 percent of our sample, entitled students can consume a disproportionate amount of time and resources and negatively influence learning outcomes for all students."*

## Cluster 2: Under the radar

"Under-the-radar students were unique in terms of their relative lack of outstanding characteristics relative to the other clusters" (p. 99). They are not demanding or disruptive, but they are still less deferential than the model students. They score a bit higher on the third dimension than model students, but lower than Cluster 3 and 4 students. This group also believes that grades should be earned and that certain behaviors are unacceptable in the classroom. This group was evenly split between males and females and constituted 35.5 percent of the sample.

## Cluster 3: Instructor as servant

These students "were arguably the most entitled students" (p. 99), with the highest scores on both the grade entitlement and service questions. They feel their grades should be more reflective of effort than performance, with B being the default grade. They expect prompt responses to voice and e-mail messages and are likely to take offense if the professor cancels a scheduled appointment with them. This cluster was almost 70 percent male, and it contained the youngest students. Seventeen percent of the students fell into this cluster.

## Cluster 4: The privileged

In this cluster (again predominantly male), students care little for rules and manners in the classroom. They feel texting and internet use are appropriate in class. They also want grades for effort and expect professors to respond quickly to their demands. The group was also younger than the first two clusters and had the lowest GPAs (2.94). They constituted just a bit more than 6 percent of this student cohort.

Some comfort can be taken from the respective size of each of these cohorts. However, as the researchers note, "while representing only 23.2 percent of our sample, entitled students can consume a disproportionate amount of time and resources and negatively influence learning outcomes for all students" (p. 101).

This is useful work that clarifies how academic entitlement manifests itself. The sample survey questions contained in the article would garner useful information from students in any class. However, these results do not indicate widespread academic entitlement, as the research was done at one institution with a student cohort from one academic discipline.

**Reference:** Luckett, M., Trocchia, P. J., Noel, M. N., & Marlin, D. (2017). A typology of students based on academic entitlement. *Journal of Education for Business, 92*(2), 96–102.