



Hearing Students Voices With the 'Class Communicator'

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For the most part, communication between professors and students is limited and therefore less than ideal. To begin with, it's generally one-way since the professor speaks and students listen. Although students are encouraged to ask questions and make comments during class or office hours, most do not. Furthermore, I wonder how representative of the larger class the individual questions and comments made by the few students who do participate in class are. Ideally a professor should hear from all her students, not just a few. After giving it some thought, it occurred to me that I could acquire that kind feedback by asking students to complete a form that I've now named the "Class Communicator."

The Class Communicator is a single page divided into four sections. The first section asks students for basic information: their name, e-mail address, and the date. There is also space for a photo, which I find invaluable in connecting names and faces.

Section two focuses on the weekly readings. Students list the readings and then reflect on them. These two sections are completed before students come to class.

Section three pertains to the class meeting. It contains four questions, and students are asked to answer one of them: 1) What new information did you gain from today's class, and how did it help you? 2) What did you find particularly interesting? 3) Did you "test out" any of the methods, techniques, or approaches learned in this class on your own students? (I teach teachers in a MA in Education

program) 4) What did the instructor do particularly well in class today? And finally there is an "Other" section, which students are encouraged to use to ask questions or make comments.

And here's how I use this Class Communicator form. I attach a blank copy to the syllabus and have students use it as a "master" from which they make one copy for each of our class sessions. They attach their photo before Xeroxing the form. I also share copies of well-written Class Communicator forms so that students can see the level of detail they should provide. Students use the last five minutes of class to complete the bottom two sections of the form. I use the completed forms for attendance purposes as well and so late ones are not accepted.

I find it works best for me if I read the Communicators right after class while what happened is still very fresh in my mind. They don't take long to read, and I find that they almost always answer questions I've had during the class about who's understanding, what questions they aren't asking, what's connecting with their interests, and how well my various approaches are working. I put all the Communicators with questions in one pile, and I start the next class by responding to those questions. If an individual student raises a question the rest of the class does not need answered, I speak with the student individually or jot them a quick e-mail.

I feel the Class Communicator has benefited my teaching in a number of different ways. It has helped me feel better connected with all my students, not just a select few. Having my finger on the pulse of the class lets me know sooner rather than later if there's a problem. I can address it while there is still time to remedy the situation. Feedback on topics stu-

dents find beneficial helps me continue to retain the most meaningful content in subsequent courses. These forms help me teach more effectively because I get feedback on my strategies but also because they keep students up with the readings and that always makes for richer exchanges during class.

And feedback from my students confirms that the Class Communicator benefits them as well. The benefits they report fall into four categories: the Communicator helps them keep up with the assigned readings; it forces them to regularly reflect on course content; it encourages them to ask questions; and it helps them remain focused and organized throughout the course.

Communication between professors and students will never be perfect but using the Class Communicator has significantly improved communication in my class. It's a strategy I heartily recommend and no longer teach without.

Ed.'s nte: If you'd like a copy of the Class Communicator form professor Medina has developed, you may request one from her electronically. ♥

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- 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.

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Technology as a Tool, Not a Teacher Replacement

By Elizabeth J. Wark,
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I am writing in response to two articles in the June/July issue of *The Teaching Professor*: “12 Commandments for PowerPoint” and “Presentation Software: Does the Course Make a Difference?” Many cogent points raised in the articles caution instructors that much of the technology available today supports instruction but it does not take the place of fundamental teaching tasks.

Having rushed to jump on the technology “bandwagon” in the late 1990s, I now find myself using a mixture of traditional teaching methods along with presentation and application software programs. I am lucky to teach my business statistics and quantitative methods courses in one of my college’s computer labs. This means that all the students have their own PCs loaded with virtually the same software as my teaching station. They can download my slides and follow them at their own pace, while also working with the statistical packages I use in real-time. I went from low-tech to high-tech over the course of one semester and felt sure that my students were getting the best instruction possible. I almost forgot that I was the teacher! When I backed off a bit, and more judiciously used the technology to help clarify points and present material (following rules very similar to the 12 Commandments), the technology helped to enhance my presentations and not overpower the concepts I wanted to discuss during class time.

I edit and refine any slides or instructional materials provided with my texts, plus develop my own class assignments. I also develop individual assignments for students as needed. This does take a bit more time, but ultimately, I have materials more specifically tailored to the needs of my students. I always have a variety of class materials ready to use (after all, low-

tech options must be developed since projectors and PCs fail when least convenient). In preparing both low- and high-tech options for class use, I am able to switch back and forth as needed during any section to emphasize specific concepts and material, and in response to the variety of backgrounds and learning needs of my students.

I still use both PowerPoint and statistical software to go over the material, techniques and tools that my students are learning, but I do so with more of a keen eye on their individual learning. As I get to know the students in each class, I find that some groups need more (or less) individual attention and/or technology use. As I’ve tried to achieve a more balanced approach, not only are diverse learning styles addressed more thoroughly, but my students are also less likely to have that “glazed over” look that emerges after having seen way too many slides. I go over homework with the aid of statistical software where appropriate but also use the board for examples. I use a few PowerPoint slides to introduce new concepts and techniques and then have students work together to practice the techniques on their own PCs or by hand. The PowerPoint slides have moved from the center of the lecture to become an organizational tool that I use to introduce new material and then make available to students for future reference.

The core of my class time is now devoted to students working on mastering statistical concepts, either in groups or with my assistance. I am able to quickly introduce material, but always try to give myself time in class to “wander about” as students work on problems or projects. Technology gives a “power assist” to my classes now, so that I can still do what I enjoy the most, teaching and working with students. 🍀

Finding the ‘Deliberate Negatives’ in Our Student Evaluations

By Rob Dornsife, Creighton University, NE
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Despite all the questions end-of-course student evaluations raise, reading our own evaluations constructively is a crucial part of our job as teachers. What I'd like to do here is offer some advice that might be helpful in sorting out and through evaluative student feedback.

Arguably more than anything else, we need to pay attention to recurring themes in the feedback — what more than one student says in more than one way. That's where the most valuable truths might be found. I suggest first that getting at these truths can only be achieved if the evaluations are read as “wholes.” In other words, the good teacher will read the “parts” of her evaluations largely through their relation to other parts. Let me explain why and how that works through my concept of “deliberate negatives.”

The deliberate negative

Have you ever received feedback like this: Under course weaknesses a student writes, “The professor would not answer my questions about how to do what she wanted us to do.” And then under course strengths, the same student notes, “The professor allowed me to think for myself for the first time in my life.” These examples illustrate a dynamic that the student evaluator is not often aware of — the supposed “negatives” were actually responsible for the positives. These are what I call “deliberative negatives,” seemingly negative comments without which the positives of the course would not have happened. To fix these “negatives” may be to sabotage what made the course successful. The pedagogically deliberate teacher eventually realizes that to try to wholly avoid such negatives may amount to avoiding success, or side stepping student learning.

A first key, then, toward an authentic reading of the negatives is to ask if there is a corresponding, resulting, positive. We should read the negatives “through” and in

the pedagogical context of the positives. As further examples, are there negatives about the amount of reading required by the course? If so, are there positives about how much was learned in the course? Are there negatives about the too-demanding “level” of the expectations and positives about the course eliciting the student's best work or of the student's resulting pride? Are there negatives about a lack of clarity and positives about the student's independence?

Even when there is a corresponding positive, as may very well be the case in these examples, there still may be some ways in which the negative can be reduced or eliminated and the positive preserved — we are always obliged to push on this possibility as hard as we can. But in the case where there is no corresponding positive, then the chance that the negatives are anything other than negative is reduced. In that situation we do well to first consider how the reported strengths may be strengthened or how new strengths may emerge as a result of addressing the negatives as valid criticism. Of special concern here is our tendency to rationalize negative assessments. For example, that “students these days just don't know what is best for them” is an invalid response when faced with criticisms that do not appear to be part of a larger positive picture. In my experience, most attempts to go “outside” of what the evaluations reveal in an attempt to explain away negatives is misguided. Unfortunately, the teacher who uses rationalizations to deal with negative feedback has no trouble finding other teachers who are willing to support these rationalized assessments of negative comments. But the good teacher will seek no such solace. Instead, that teacher will work to revise those aspects of instruction or the course that are routinely criticized and for which there appear to be no corresponding benefits.

The praise

Positive feedback is at least as difficult

to negotiate as criticism. Sometimes, the positives appear to be “unearned,” and often with good reason. In some ways, I do think it is harder to actually deserve the positives that students bestow upon us, since positives result from the student's own initiative, and not from anything we have done — or possibly could have done — per se. Students with such initiative are often quick to share the credit for their successes where such credit, in the terms that the students bestow, is not due. For example, when the student reports that the teacher “made me care about my writing,” the student is in good spirit offering credit for something that can not possibly be done. No teacher can “make” a student care about anything.

So the teacher may want to read such positives not with an eye toward taking undue credit but committed to understanding those conditions that allowed the student to achieve the success. Understanding this enables us to fine-tune and repeat whatever “set up” we provided so that other students may benefit from it. Again, while such a “setting up” may not be exactly what the student praise pinpoints, it may very well be “underneath” the student's generously misdirected praise. We are well counseled to read “behind” any such positives just as we do with the negatives.

In conclusion, reading evaluations of ourselves is as difficult as it is necessary. In general, the negatives and positives must be read not as unrelated observations about different parts of any given course but as describing what amounts to the same thing — the experience that was the whole of the course. Each comment must be read in relation to the others; each numerical rating must be read with those around it, and always in a forward-looking way. Doing so should allow our evaluations, over time, to reflect our positive growth as teachers. 🍎

Tom Cruise Saves a Failing Student

by Kathleen Hagen, Nova Southeastern University, FL
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I've always considered myself the prototypical professional student. Dean's list, honor roll, graduating cum laude. I'm never happier than when sitting in a classroom, learning some unusual concept. Through countless hours of college credit, I've explored a diverse curriculum: history, English, French, Spanish, Latin, writing, psychology, music, speech, physics, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, chemistry, biology, anatomy, physiology, and accounting. No matter the course, I've always enjoyed learning the material and never had a problem adjusting my mindset to that of the field I was studying. Never, that is, until this past month when I found myself in a coin grading class.

My husband is an avid coin collector. Lately it dawned on us that I should have some knowledge of his collection should I someday have to make a solo visit to our safety deposit box at the bank to dispose of it.

The American Numismatic Association holds annual summer conferences and included in this year's schedule was a one-week course in grading U.S. coins. Perfect! We arranged to take the class together. However, there was one small, black cloud at the edge of my mental horizon. I have no interest in coins. I calmed my fears by reflecting that the magic of the classroom had never failed me. I mustered all my enthusiasm for learning.

The class, taught by qualified instructors, was formatted into nine, three-hour sessions over four-and-a-half days. I knew I was in trouble by the end of the first session. The classroom magic wasn't kicking in. I couldn't arouse any interest in the topic. In fact, I was hostile toward it. I resented my husband for getting me into this; I resented his collection (thinking of it as an albatross around my neck); I resented my fellow 30 classmates, most of

whom had been collecting coins since childhood, for caring about such a stupid topic. I did a rotten job of grading, and I didn't care. I couldn't make myself do any of the things which I knew would improve my performance. I didn't linger after class and ask questions; I didn't stay in the room during breaks to check on my mistakes. I didn't engage my classmates in discussions; I didn't think about the subject when I wasn't in class. For the first time in 39 years of schooling, I was going to fail a class.

This dismal state of affairs persisted for five sessions. Then, I thought about an answer I heard when I was watching "Inside the Actors' Studio" and Tom Cruise was being interviewed. "Tell us, Tom, don't you sometimes find you have nothing to bring to a part? What do you do then?" Tom replied: "Sometimes late in the day when I'm tired I will approach a scene and realize I feel nothing. When that happens the important thing is to stay with that feeling. Don't start thinking, 'I can't feel anything! I'm going to lose my job! I'm going to fail!' Instead, start from, 'I don't feel anything' and stay with it. Say to yourself, 'I wonder what my character would do in this situation if he felt nothing?'"

So, I started exploring the situation of hating my class, not from a viewpoint of how angry and resentful I was to be there, but from a viewpoint of "This is an interesting development for me. I wonder what I can learn from this."

And here's what came to me in this class where I wasn't learning.

- So this is what school feels like for average students. No wonder everyone thinks I'm strange to always want to take classes.
- Teachers deserve a lot more money for having to put up with students like I was in this class.
- Learning can be hard on your ego. Ego can get in the way of learning a subject, but you have to have some self-esteem to help overcome the waves of "I'm an

idiot! I'll never understand this!" Feeling good about yourself and believing that you will eventually grasp a subject keeps you hanging in there when the going gets tough.

- For students who are having a hard time with a subject, hearing concepts explained by a classmate can really help bridge the distance between a student's understanding and the teacher's understanding.
- Motivation has to come from within. Despite all the reasons I had to want to do well in this class: fear of losing money if I couldn't grade coins, wasting the tuition fee, having great teachers, competitiveness with my husband; I didn't care about the class until I was able to find a spark of interest on this side topic.

The happy ending to this story is that my tiny spark of interest began to spread. The next time the class broke into small groups for consensus grading, I participated more and paid more attention to what my classmates had to say. I found I had an easier time relating to their explanations of why they graded coins a certain way than my teachers' explanations. I started looking at the world through a coin grader's mindset. When someone asked me how I was, I'd respond with a cheery, "I'm an EF 45!" (That's coin talk for the upper limits of Extra Fine.) I found myself judging other metal objects with these coin grading standards.

By the end of the class I had improved enough to pass! Best of all, I have more respect for my husband's hobby, a budding new skill for myself, and new insights into learning and teaching. 🍀

Learning by Doing: Teams Present Math Homework

By Roxane Gunser, University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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Early in my career, my basic teaching approach consisted of an enthusiastic, interactive lecture for several class periods followed by one class session devoted to solving homework problems. Each class period that the homework was due, I was disappointed by how few students actually completed or at least attempted the homework prior to coming to class. Rather, most students feverishly wrote down the solutions I provided on the board. Test scores were also disappointing because students simply memorized problem solutions instead of understanding them.

I realized there was one simple way to ensure that the majority of the students would complete the homework prior to coming to class: have them present a homework problem to the rest of the class. Although I was fairly sure this approach would encourage more students to do their

homework, I still felt that I knew the “best” way to explain the homework solutions. I was afraid that the students would not gain the same level of understanding from their peers as they could from me.

The next semester, I implemented the change. Students were assigned to small, informal teams the first day of class. The day the homework was due, each team was randomly assigned a homework problem after being given time to review their answers to all the homework. Once each group’s solution was written on the board, a member from that team orally described how they solved the problem. The team then answered any questions from the class. Only after all the questions were answered did we move on to the next problem.

I have continued to use this approach and consider it a complete success. Most of the students come to class with their homework at least attempted. I have used the same exams and more students are earning perfect test scores than ever

before, and more students are finishing their exams in less time. In addition, the students in the small learning teams develop a rapport with each other, which facilitates learning among team members. They actually solve (not memorize) the problem once again thereby cementing their understanding of it. Those students who do not understand the solutions freely ask questions of other students. They are much more willing to ask their team members a question than the instructor. They are learning from each other, and in fact, I believe they are learning more from each other than they did when I explained the homework. In addition, I see students practicing public-speaking skills, learning how to work as a team and building their confidence all while learning the material.

I now use this teaching method in all my classes. Although initially I found it difficult to relinquish the duty of solving the homework to my students, it became apparent very quickly that they learned more by being responsible for it. 🍀

Pedagogical Scholarship: An Innovative Example

Scholarship doesn’t always have to take the form of articles in refereed journals and sometimes when the scholarship is pedagogical, other formats make very good sense.

The case in point is a new program at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine that recognizes innovation in the classroom. The thinking was that it might be easier to objectively evaluate the scholarship and quality of the various products of instruction rather than the complex and subjective challenge of evaluating teachers themselves. The program was designed with four objectives in mind: 1) enhance the profile of scholarship on teaching and learning by using a rigorous peer review process; 2) raise the level of discourse on educational activities; 3) better communicate about new and successful

pedagogical ideas; and 4) create a template for teaching recognition that is easily replicable elsewhere.

Faculty submit a one- to two-page description of a recent educational activity, resource, strategy or approach they have implemented in their classroom. Those descriptions are evaluated by two to three external peer reviewers with interest and expertise in the activity described. They rate the activities based on clear objectives, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, measures of quality/effectiveness, effective presentation, and reflective techniques. Then an internal awards committee meets and selects awardees using the peer review feedback and supplementing it with internal assessment information.

Among early awards were ones for a yearlong faculty development program

that joined faculty and medical students in a collaboration on a curricular project; a new multi-media curriculum in cancer genetics and a web-based resource that supported medical student learning in community-based primary care practices.

Dr. Dan Wolpaw, associate professor of medicine, who has been instrumental in designing and implementing this still- new program, reports that it is too early to tell how the award will affect faculty during the promotion and tenure process. “I am hopeful. For the first time these medical educators will have peer-reviewed teaching efforts to tuck into their portfolios.”

If you have questions about program details, e-mail professor Wolpaw (Daniel.wolpaw@case.edu). 🍀

Grade ‘Insurance’ in Large Enrollment Classes

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I employ a system of “grade insurance” in my large (450 student) introductory chemistry course. Students use it to guard against the very real possibility of ending the semester close but just below the numerical cutoff for a letter grade. Insurance may be purchased by completing a small number of additional problems throughout the semester as “premiums.” Since it must be purchased prior to the final exam, students do not know if they will finish the semester in a situation where the protection afforded will be needed.

Although students know from the beginning of the semester exactly what the grade cutoffs will be (90 percent = “A”, 80 percent = “B”, etc), I find somewhat unsettling when a student with an average of 89.50 percent receives an “A” (with rounding) while a student with an average of 89.45 percent receives a “B+”. The difference in those two percentages does not reflect a significant difference in performance. Simply lowering the cutoff a fraction to help those who have come up short only serves to place a different group of students into the “just missed” category. Overall, nearly 15 percent of students in the course end up within one percentage

point of a grade division. Insurance allows students in that group to earn the higher grade through a modest investment of time and effort.

Insurance is purchased by completing a series of six problems distributed at the beginning of the semester and related to topics discussed throughout the term. Problems are typically more challenging than average homework questions and frequently involve synthesizing multiple concepts or extending ideas to systems unexplored in lectures. The effort put forth in solving these problems can be used to gauge a student’s grasp of the course material, their motivation, and most importantly their desire to succeed in the course. Problem sets may be turned in up to, but not after, the final exam (you cannot purchase fire insurance after your house has burned). I simply evaluate each submission for thoroughness and correctness to decide if credit should be awarded. Students who acquire coverage can “jump over” a grade boundary if they are within one percentage point of the cutoff.

Premiums for high-quality insurance are steep. The same turns out to be true with my grade insurance. Typically only about 10 percent of the students are willing to put forth the necessary effort to secure coverage without a guaranteed return on their investment. Surprisingly, it

is not just the top students who take advantage of this opportunity. In fact, the best students often feel that they will never need grade insurance and choose not to participate, while many weaker, but hard-working students recognize the potential benefit. With 15 percent of the class positioned at grade boundaries and 10 percent covered by insurance, the result is that about 1 percent to 2 percent of the class improves their grades. Although the percentage of students affected is small, those who do cash in benefit substantially. The system is not intended to improve class performance overall, rather it is set up as a mechanism to gauge (and reward) motivation and desire to succeed, characteristics that are easier to judge in smaller more personalized classes.

The system has been remarkably effective at smoothing the harsh transitions built into a letter grade system. Any student close to a cutoff point knows that they could have received the higher grade if they had paid the necessary premiums for insurance coverage. It is clear to everyone that an undesirable grade result could have been avoided with foresightedness and a little additional effort. Students who do reap the benefits of insurance coverage are delighted to know that their hard work paid off in the end. 🍀

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