


Turn Your Classroom Irritation Into Compassion

 chroniclevitae.com/news/2128-turn-your-classroom-irritation-into-compassion



✎ Jim Lang

Professor at [Assumption College](#)



November 12, 2018

Image: Alamy

I arrived at my Monday-evening seminar 10 minutes early to set up, get my bearings, and chat a little with the students before class started. While I was fiddling around on my laptop, a student spoke up from the middle of the room: "Professor Lang, I couldn't see the feedback you gave us on our last papers."

Two years ago, I began grading papers via my college's learning-management system (LMS, for short). I had evaluated the first round of papers in my senior seminar the previous week. Yet according to this student, while she could see her grade, she couldn't read either my comments on the paper or my end note, in which I give instructions on how students might improve their next papers.

"I couldn't see the feedback, either," chimed in another student. And another. And another. I stopped what I was doing and faced the room in dismay.

"Could *anyone* see the feedback I put on your papers?"

Seventeen heads shook in unison. I stood there baffled. Had I put all of that time into their papers for nothing? I quickly logged in, checked that section of the course-management system, and saw to my relief that it was all there. I poked around for a couple of minutes and eventually discovered that I had neglected to toggle the switch that would make my feedback available to them. Problem solved.

"But what I really want to know," I said before we launched into class, "is why didn't anyone tell me this a week ago, when I posted the grades?"

"Because you told us not to," someone said, and they all nodded. "You told us just to ask someone else in the class if we couldn't see our feedback."

Oh.

How my heart sank in that moment — because she was right. And it showed, once again, how the best-laid teaching schemes, in the words of the poet Robert Burns, *gang aft agley*.

This semester I have been trying something new. Each week I use the "announcement" feature of our LMS to record a video note giving students a preview of our next class session. I might talk about the reading they are doing, prepare them for an activity, or discuss a future assignment. The videos are no more than five minutes long, and I enjoy making them. I can also see from the course analytics that the students all watch them. The class meets only on Mondays, so the videos give me one more opportunity to connect to them each week.

I've been very proud of myself for using this new teaching strategy. You can teach this old dog a new trick now and again, I have smugly thought.

The week I finished grading their papers, I'd talked about the work in the video. As I was filming it, I remembered that some students in previous semesters couldn't figure out how to find the online feedback on their papers. Rather than take up valuable class time walking them through the process, I thought I'd use the video to forestall those questions and encourage the students to help one another. *"If you can't see the feedback," I said in the video, "just ask someone else in the class to help you."*

That's what I said. But the students heard something quite different from the helpful message I intended. For them, my words translated into something like: "If you can't see the feedback, that's your problem, and don't bother me about it. Get someone else to help you."

So they talked with one another about the problem, and of course that did not help, since my technical mistake meant the feedback was not going to be visible to any of them. And thanks to my own words, not one of them approached me about it.

After class, thinking about all of this in my office, I realized that – whatever my conscious intentions – I probably did make that statement on the video out of irritation. In previous semesters, I'd found it annoying when some students couldn't seem to master the mechanics of our LMS and kept asking me basic questions about it. That frustration might have been evident in what I said and how I said it. If you can't manage the LMS, my tone implied, it's because you're not committed enough to mastering it. If you really want to read my feedback, figure out how to find it.

A few days later, with this experience still freshly in mind, I stumbled upon some advice that has helped me rethink how I handle "irritating" questions from students. I was on a plane reading the latest book by the Rev. Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. A Jesuit priest, Father Boyle has been widely praised for his writing and his work as founder of the deeply inspirational ministry Homeboy Industries, which helps Los Angeles gang members who wish to turn their lives around. His first book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, is often selected as a reading in first-year programs.

Both books tell story after story of how gang members hardened by poverty and violence are brought into the fold of Homeboy Industries through a simple word or gesture of compassion. Father Boyle's message: When you are faced with challenging questions about a relationship or a social problem in the world, just assume that the answer is always compassion.

The same principle would serve us well in the college classroom. Whatever question a student brings to us – or neglects to bring to us because we have attempted to ward it off in advance – the answer will always be compassion:

- Students who can't access my comments on their papers want nothing more than what they were promised by a college education: the opportunity to test their skills, receive feedback from an expert, and try to improve. I made the choice to put that process online, and I have the responsibility to ensure that it works smoothly. The last thing they deserve is my irritation, especially given that I have made mistakes on our learning-management system before, and will certainly do so again.
- A student might ask me questions that, initially, seem like ones she could find the answer to herself by reading the syllabus. But behind those questions might be something more: However carefully I have designed the course, and however much I know that some big project will benefit her learning, she still has to balance it with four other courses, a part-time job, and perhaps trips home to deal with a sick parent or some other personal problem. She may even be dealing with food insecurity or homelessness. She deserves a compassionate response.
- A student who asks me whether something will be on the test, when I am in the zone and focused on presenting some essential concept, wants to know how to focus his studies because his grade matters to him. Doing so might determine whether he keeps a scholarship or maintains his status in the country. He deserves a compassionate response.

So I must continually remind myself – and yes, it’s aspirational – to err on the side of compassion in my comments and communications with students.

Rest assured, at some point in the future, I will be annoyed by some student’s question, as I have been in the past. I can guarantee that within the next few months (weeks?) some student will ask me a question that could have been easily answered if he or she had bothered to check the syllabus, read the assignment sheet more carefully, or click one more screen in the LMS. And I will struggle to contain my annoyance.

In those cases, the answer I give certainly might involve pointing out how students can answer that questions on their own. A compassionate answer doesn’t mean I have to do their work for them.

It just means my first response should always be an acknowledgement that the human being in front of me has made major sacrifices to be in my classroom. A compassionate answer should dictate less the content of my response than the frame of mind from which my answer emerges, and which might manifest itself in myriad ways: tone of voice, gesture, posture, length of conversation.

I visited the offices of Homeboy Industries, in Los Angeles, last month and bought one of its coffee mugs, which now sits on my desk – a reminder of the power of compassion. Every time a student comes to my office, I will do my best to put this approach into practice.

The answer is compassion. Now what’s your question?

[Jim Lang](#) is a professor of English at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass., and director of its Center for Teaching Excellence.

His latest book, [Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning](#), was published in the spring of 2016. Follow him on Twitter at [@LangOnCourse](#).



[^ Read More from Jim](#)

This article relates to...

More News & Advice

‘How Much Do You Want Your Final to Count?’

[Jim Lang](#), March 14, 2018

An economics professor devises a way to allow a class of 200 students more choice over how they are graded.

Join the Conversation

3 Comments *E*

I [Log In](#) or [Sign Up](#) to leave a comment.