Dear New Instructor: It's Not All on You

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This fall, I will be one of three lecturers teaching my department's professional-development course, where we help new graduate-student instructors learn the ropes, concurrently as they teach rhetoric for the first time. Many of them have never been in front of a college classroom. So I've been thinking a lot this summer about what they'll be facing and how I might help prepare them.

One thing I remember vividly from my first semester of teaching was the terrifying sense that I had no safety net. If I ran out of things to say — if I got to the bottom of my lesson plan — there would just be nothing: total silence. All of the responsibility for keeping the class going fell on me alone. I continually felt like Wile E. Coyote, never sure when I would look down and find I had just run off a cliff.

That sensation — that you as the teacher control everything in the classroom, and that disaster is just a moment away — is a scary feeling. What I plan to tell my graduate students is that it doesn't have to be that way: It's not all on you.

As I've gotten more experienced in the classroom, I've come to realize that the best courses I've taught — when the students seemed to learn the most — were the ones in which they formed a real bond with each other. They came to know and trust each other, and seemed to honestly like spending time together as a group. Those are the classes in which I have to quiet the students down at the beginning of class because they are too busy animatedly talking with each other. There's actually a body of research that backs me up on this.

In the 1990s, Polly Fassinger, then a professor of sociology at Concordia College in Minnesota, was curious about the research on why students participate — or don't — in college classrooms. Most of the studies she'd seen were focused on the instructor's actions, on how some faculty seemed to create a "chilly climate" that made it less likely for students to speak up or participate.

Her training as a sociologist led her to wonder if that approach was missing something crucial: Students in classrooms are groups. There is a long tradition within sociology of studying groups — of paying attention to the ways that group characteristics can have strong effects on individual behavior. Fassinger set out to survey students, in the middle of a semester, not just on how often they participate in class, but also on their individual traits, their characteristics as a group, and their perceptions of the instructor.

In a series of articles, Fassinger detailed her results. One of the most surprising: She found that "professors' interpersonal styles" — whether they promote discussion, give students adequate time to respond, or interrupt students — "do not have a direct effect on whether students talk in class." Instead, she identified two factors that most influence class participation:

- **Student confidence:** The more confident they feel in class, the more likely they are to speak up and to participate fully.
- **Their perception of the classroom climate:** The biggest factor associated with students' confidence was their sense of the classroom as inclusive, encouraging, and attentive. When it comes to participation, students' perception of their peers — and of the extent to which the group of students is a friendly one —

turns out to be even more important than students' perceptions of the instructor.

It's not just participation that's affected by the nature of the student group. Robert J. Sidelinger and Melanie Booth-Butterfield, in a study of more than 400 students at a mid-Atlantic university, found that students were more likely to be well-prepared for class when they "feel a sense of connection with their peers."

In 2009, Ali Sher surveyed 30 sections of an online course at a Washington, D.C., private university, and found that student-to-student interaction — the degree to which they felt a sense of community with each other — was significantly associated with their learning. Likewise, Gloria J. Galanes and Heather J. Carmack interviewed students at a large Midwestern university on their perceptions of classroom climate, and found that a positive learning environment — one in which other students modeled positive academic behavior and offered each other support — has "a major impact on student learning."

Do those findings mean that instructors can just sit back and let the students take care of themselves?

No, but it might mean we can take a little pressure off of ourselves and operate with the knowledge that the most successful learning environments are created together — by both students and faculty.

The research also indicates that we could all stand to focus a little more — particularly at the beginning of the semester — on low-stakes, collaborative activities that enable students to form the kinds of bonds that can help their academic performance. Give your students the time and space to find their footing as a social group, even if it means proceeding a little more slowly than you usually do. When students are able to know and trust each other, they are more likely to take full part in the class activities and to be more fully involved in the course overall.

Whether this fall marks your first semester of teaching or your 20th, think a little bit about the nature of your classes as groups. Be alive to your students' experience of the class — not just their relationship to you, but also their relationships with each other. The group dynamic may be mostly out of your hands, but your approach, and your attitude, can go a long way toward creating the conditions in which good relationships can thrive in your classroom.

Here's what I wish someone had told me when I was just starting out as a teacher: Relax — you're not so important, after all.

David Gooblar is a lecturer in the rhetoric department at the University of Iowa. He writes about teaching for Vitae and runs the teaching website PedagogyUnbound.com.

Find him on Twitter at @dgooblar.

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