Getting Our Students Wrong
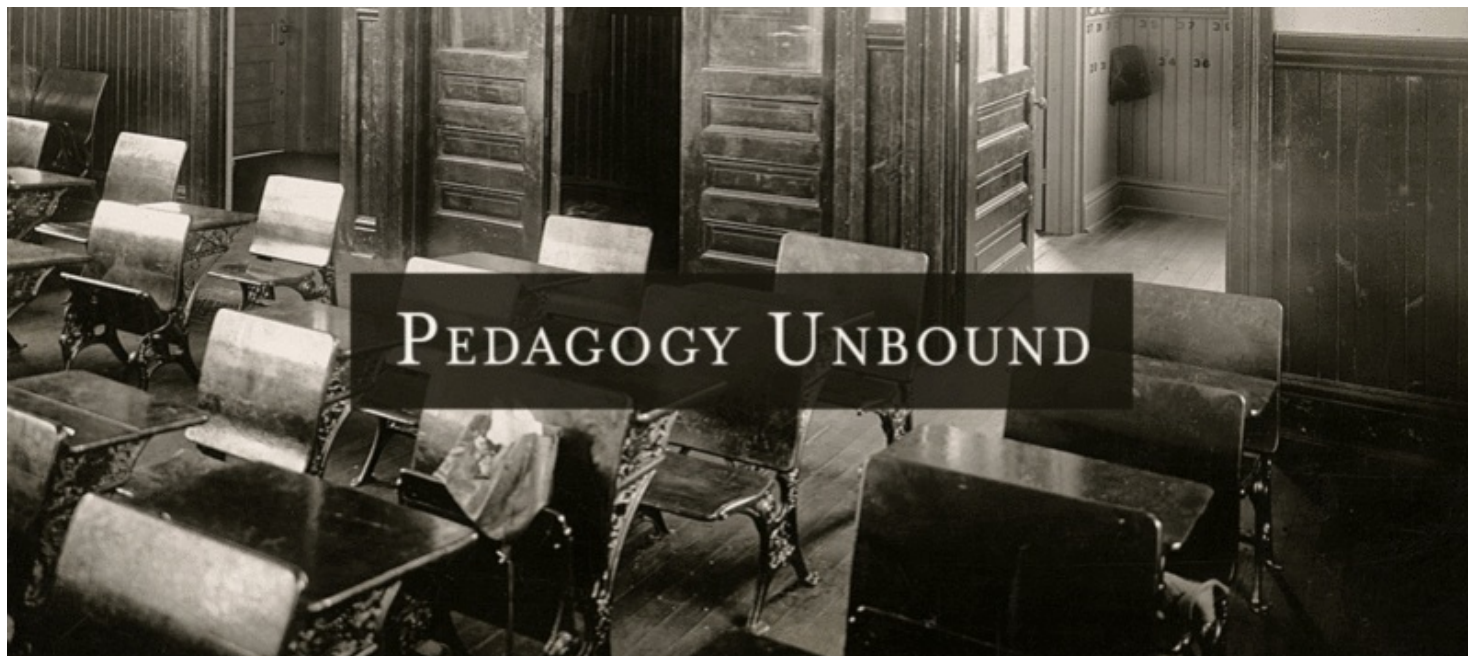
April 19, 2017

Want more teaching tips? Browse the Pedagogy Unbound archives or start a thread in our teaching group.

Last semester, I had a student who did so well on his second paper — after doing very poorly on his first — that I got suspicious. I must have Googled every sentence in that second essay, looking for evidence that he had lifted it from someone else. I even called him into my office and grilled him about his process, trying to catch him out. I couldn't believe that the same student had written both papers.

But I was wrong. He hadn't plagiarized. He was responsible both for the terrible paper at the beginning of the term and the excellent one later on. Eventually I learned that he'd been struggling with some personal issues earlier in the semester — issues that kept him from spending enough time on that first paper.

Why is it always so surprising when students prove our initial impressions of them wrong?

A year ago, I wrote a column about dealing with students who are struggling academically, and how — instead of just pointing out their mistakes — we should follow the practice of narrative therapists and "look for the exceptions." When patients come in with stories they present as problems ("my wife and I always fight," or "our son doesn't listen"), narrative therapists see their task as getting the patients to focus on the exceptions that reveal those problems to be solvable. In my column, I argued that instructors can use that technique in the classroom: Even as we're honest with students when they haven't mastered the material, we can make sure to also tell them the things they're doing right.

But sometimes — as in the case with my student and his two vastly different essays — the trouble is that we as professors develop our own narratives about students, and those narratives can just as easily be inaccurate or incomplete.

It can be overwhelming to walk into a classroom at the beginning of a semester and meet 20, 30, or 100 new faces. As we try to learn who our students are, we latch onto almost anything that will help us differentiate them.

Sometimes we work so hard to figure out each student — this one is a good writer, that one has good ideas but needs help explaining her thinking — that it can take the better part of a whole semester to realize that our first impression was wrong.

Every year I encounter some version of that realization: I discover I have been carrying around some preconceived notion about a student — formed in the first few weeks of class — that has little to do with his or her actual strengths and weaknesses. We do this all the time in life. Social psychologists refer to it as the "halo effect," a term used to describe the cognitive bias in which our overall sense of someone colors our subsequent evaluation of their individual traits or actions. We interpret their behavior through the lens of the story we have already told ourselves about them.

John M. Malouff, an associate professor of psychology at the University of New England in Australia, along with a number of coauthors, has published a handful of papers exploring the halo effect in assessment of college students. In one such study, 159 faculty members across a number of disciplines were asked to grade an oral presentation and then a written assignment, both by the same student. Every faculty member graded the same written assignment, but the quality of the oral presentation they viewed varied — some watched a poor presentation, while others saw an excellent one.

The results: The grades for the written assignment correlated closely with the quality of the oral presentation. "The graders assigned significantly higher scores to written work following the better oral presentation than following the poor oral presentation," the study reported.

We are a narrating species. Once we get a good story in our head it's tough to dislodge it.

That tendency isn't just a threat to our objectivity when grading, it's also a threat to our ability to help each student. What we learn about our students is necessarily limited. Outside of the classroom, they have rich and varied lives, of which we only get a glimpse. We also get a partial view of their capabilities, and their strengths and weaknesses. Although it's essential that we form opinions about students in order to assess them, we have to remember how little we actually know about them.

For teachers like me, who work closely with individual students throughout the semester, getting a student "wrong" can have real consequences. It is difficult to see which students need to be challenged more, which students need extra attention to excel, which students need to be drilled on basic concepts. It is doubly difficult if we're working off of faulty information. If we want to meet all of our students where they live, we need to be aware of how often we're wrong about where exactly that is.

How do we fix this? At this late stage of the semester, there may be nothing we can do aside from maintaining a healthy level of doubt about our assumptions. We can do our best to understand how the halo effect works, and work to catch ourselves falling prey to confirmation bias.

But when a new semester rolls around, maybe it's time to shake things up. Look for ways to vary how you get feedback from your students. Give them different opportunities to show you who they are, and how they best approach the material. And never forget that you only get a small window into what each student is capable of. As I mentioned in a recent essay on teaching revision skills, student work can be a valuable source of information to help us revise our teaching approach to better suit the students seated in front of us. Let's not forget, though, that revision isn't usually a straightforward, or particularly quick, process: Sometimes we have to revise again and again.

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.

Ā Read More from David