

# Defining and Denouncing Student Shaming: A Teacher's Reflection

[facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/defining-and-denouncing-student-shaming](https://facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/defining-and-denouncing-student-shaming)

February 10,  
2020



*\*Editor's note: Every so often we like to give Faculty Focus readers an inside look into [The Teaching Professor](#). The following article was recently featured on [The Teaching Professor](#). If you're interested in similar articles, you can check out a [Teaching Professor subscription here!](#)*

One of the reasons I love teaching is that each semester provides a fresh start: empty grade books, eager students. I also cherished this time when I was a student myself: poring over course syllabi, purchasing new textbooks, meeting my professors. Although I reside on eastern South Dakota's frigid plains, the first day of class consistently brings me a warm feeling.

But once the newness of the semester fades, it's not long before I casually share with a colleague something a student did or (more commonly) failed to do. This habit started in graduate school. Years ago, student shaming provided a humorous means of connecting with my fellow TAs: in my early 20s, commiserating over student issues felt normal, even cool. Perhaps, too, a case can be made that swapping stories of students' shortcomings had little effect on our students themselves. They didn't hear us laugh at their misspelled words or poorly constructed sentences. Yet, 10 years later, I'm haunted by the thought that I might have spent more time complaining about my students than championing their success.

What does shame look like for our students? Fueled by strong emotion, shame creates perceptions of the entire self, not just how one performs on a task (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). An F on an essay means “I am a bad writer,” not “I performed poorly.” Because our traditional college students likely haven’t yet formed a strong sense of identity, shame brings potential to influence our students’ roles not only as students but as people. Like failure, however, shame has its merits. Indeed, the role of shame in academia has been touted for its motivational effects. For highly motivated students, a failing grade can propel them to change their study skills and perform at a higher level (Turner et al., 2002). These definitions align with my personal experience, and I suspect that most of our students have felt these forms of shame too. But when shame moves beyond instructor-student exchanges and into the public sphere, it becomes devoid of utility. Perhaps more troublingly, in the digital age, student shaming contributes to a shift in academic culture.

Recent scholarship on student shaming in higher education focuses on its social media presence. Some argue that shaming students on social media proves particularly harmful because of the ease with which posts are shared (Lauricella, 2019). Why disparage a student’s plea for extra credit over lunch with a colleague when broadcasting it via Twitter will garner more laughs? While I don’t share “It’s in the syllabus” memes on my Facebook page, my assuming the role of office gadfly sanctions anti-intellectual snark—a pose that has no place in higher education.

Having worked in other fields before I started teaching full time, I have observed others indulge in similar office gossip: tales of rude customers and ignorant clients passed down from company supervisors and firm partners alike. Within higher education, however, could this practice of student shaming have significant consequences for our students? Our profession?

Because students are increasingly adopting a consumer mindset, we need to get creative on how to preserve the instructor-student relationship. Students are not our customers, clients, or colleagues; they are our students. And if we want to strengthen the instructor-student relationship, we need to pay attention to when we behave less like instructors and more like students. This, in my view, proves especially important when it comes to disparaging students for their writing. If writing is the process I claim it to be when I’m in the classroom, that process doesn’t disappear when I step through the office door. Surely there are other ways to connect to and create comradery with my colleagues than denouncing students’ writing. Entertainment has limits. And mocking students’ work in the proverbial town square isn’t the work of an intellectual.

I wonder whether student shaming pervades my classroom environment, whether I know it or not. And if the answer is “probably yes,” I am the one ashamed. That one of my former English professors would have circulated a screenshot of my clunky prose or shared a story of my public speaking jitters would have embarrassed me as a student and crushed me as a

writer. Even now, the thought of it feels like shame, sinking slowly. Perhaps that's the feeling I should keep in mind when I'm tempted to share, or post, or blame. And so, a decade later, I resolve to be more aware of my own student-shaming habits and shall choose instead to celebrate my students' success.

*Katie O'Leary is an Instructor of English at South Dakota State University in Brookings, SD.*



The Teaching Professor  
20% off with promo code TP20  
[Purchase Here](#)  
Expires 2.14.2020