

I Want to Make Students Uncomfortable

IHE insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/i-want-make-students-uncomfortable

As a college instructor, I believe that the most important thing I can do for students is to make them uncomfortable. In my course policies, I often share a quote from Cornel West that encapsulates this belief.

"I want to be able to engage in the grand calling of a Socratic teacher, which is not to persuade and convince students, but to unsettle and unnerve and maybe even unhouse a few students, so that they experience that wonderful vertigo and dizziness in recognizing at least for a moment that their world view rests on pudding, but then see that they have something to fall back on. It's the shaping and forming of critical sensibility. That, for me, is what the high calling of pedagogy really is."

I am particularly fond of that "wonderful vertigo" part because it resonates so thoroughly with my own experiences in learning. This sense that the world is not necessarily as you've understood it, and surviving an "unhousing" can be a very empowering experience.

My approach to teaching seems to be under constant renovation.

This applies in other pursuits as well. We're at about the five year anniversary of me writing a blog for *Inside Higher Ed*, and I can remember the panic of the early days, trying to find something to say, wrestling with the right way to say them.

Five years later, while the act of writing will always involve some measure of discomfort, I now find this space indispensable as a tool that helps me understand and express my own sensibilities when it comes to teaching and learning.

However, those of us who agree that one of the primary goals of education should be to make students "uncomfortable," should remember that in order to make students uncomfortable, they must first feel secure.

While there have no doubt been excesses when it comes to students declaring that they need a "safe space," I am consistently dumbfounded when faculty speak or act in ways that seem so cavalier when it comes to making students feel appropriately secure so that they may learn.

A student who experiences college feeling unsafe -- culturally, academically, economically, socially -- does not have the luxury of being challenged in the classroom because all of their energy is directed towards trying to survive.

Faculty pursuing tenure should be particularly aware of this kind of pressure, and understand its corrosive effects.

For me, making students uncomfortable is the first step to urging them to embrace their own responsibility to answer the core pedagogical questions of learning to write. When I tell them that I will primarily offer pathways of inquiry inside of the discipline, rather than hard and fast answers, many students feel uncomfortable.

But I've also learned -- often the hard way -- that to demand that students take risks requires me to incentivize risk, rather than punishing failure, that security must be a given.

Put another way, anxious and afraid are not synonyms for “uncomfortable.”

It's not that hard to establish appropriate security. When I started writing for *IHE*, I knew I had editors who would protect me from myself. I also knew I had nothing to lose, that if I was terrible at it, the worst that could happen would be to cash a handful of checks while knowing that I didn't have a future as a blogger.

I also think that the often well-intentioned practice of laying down the “rules” for students may, long term, prevent them from experiencing the security and freedom necessary to learn.

I am thinking here of a recent *CHE* essay that [“defines” the relationship between professor and student](#).

I agree with many of the sentiments. Students should not be viewed through the lens of customers. “Professor” and “teacher” are not the same thing. Professors cannot fulfill the roles of either parent or best friend.

This essay was Tweeted and Facebooked approvingly in my circles. These are things students “need to know.” The professoriate approved.

And yet, if I were to read this particular essay from the student's perspective, above all I am perceiving not an invitation, but a threat. These are the rules as handed down from on high, and it is the student's job to adhere to them because of course, the professor will be upholding his part of the bargain.

But what are we teaching our students when we strike the entire “bargain” without their knowledge of participation, and tell them it's time to take it or leave it?

If I were a student and read this missive, ostensibly aimed at me, I would not feel informed. I would feel afraid, intimidated...unsafe even.[1]

I think a superior way is to instead establish the [“context”](#) for the course. Rather than telling students what and who they are or supposed to be - roles they should get to determine for themselves - instead, simply share who you are, and your framework for the course.

Yes, there is a difference between teachers and professors, but first share your humanity, rather than establish your authority. Tell students where you're from, what you teach, what you research, what you do in your spare time. Show them a picture of your dog or your grandchild or the car you're restoring on the weekends.

Tell them your view of the course, where this view comes from, its roots and rationales. Don't just tell them what you're doing; tell them why you're doing it this way.[2]

Believe me that students will never forget that you're the “professor.” But if you want them to learn, the first step is to move them past that abstraction, show them how your humanity informs your work in the classroom, and they will come to see that their humanity is part of the classroom as well. They are not students, but something better.

The only way for “students” to learn something meaningful is to make them feel powerful, capable, bold enough to take risks. This does not mean the instructor's job is to validate all student effort as worthy. This is not an argument for an “everyone gets a trophy” culture.

It's a wish that when it comes to learning, we don't think about trophies at all, that we instead invite students into a classroom space where they get a say in their own rewards, and we, as faculty, are there to make them discomfited enough, that students forced to figure out what is meaningful to them.

[1] Even though the essay is framed as an address to students, the audience is clearly fellow faculty. It's an appeal to a particular kind of professor and their conceptions of the student/teacher relationships. Anyone who thinks that this essay, as is, read by a student will help students learn – as opposed to adhere to particular mores of academic activities that may or may not be conducive to learning – isn't thinking hard enough about rhetorics and audience.

[2] Using grading contracts are an example from my own teaching where I've learned the necessity of this kind of context and explicit invitation into the discussion. I thought students would love the freedom of the contract. Some did, but many saw it as a trick, and thought it was "unfair" because they'd only experienced traditional grading systems. I now know that I must invite students into the debate and discussion surrounding grades. They don't have the power to upend the policy, but once I discuss the philosophy of the contract, and why I've come to use it, they are able to question aspects that, to them, seem inconsistent with my own stated goals. This has led to alterations in the contract over time, and even during the semester, where those changes seemed necessary to bring my practice in line with my goals.