Reducing Students' Fear of Assessment

Early in my college teaching career, I spent hours carefully reading my students' first major paper of the semester, writing constructive comments with my green pen in the margins and at the end of each document. Providing such detailed feedback, I assumed, would help students understand how they could better articulate their ideas in writing, and would guide them on future writing assignments. Yet, when I returned students' papers, instead of widespread appreciation from students for providing extensive feedback in the spirit of improvement—and for taking their ideas and writing seriously—I heard several students gasp in horror at the amount of green ink.

The gasps of horror, reflecting students' inaccurate assumption that multiple comments would be accompanied by a bad grade, represent a concrete example of how easily students' fears can interfere with my instructional goals and potentially limit their ability to learn and succeed.

Beyond the procedural issues involved in accurately evaluating students' knowledge and skills is a set of **non-cognitive considerations**. Clearly, students who panic or "freeze" while working on a math exam are less likely to successfully demonstrate their skill level than students who are not overcome by anxiety. A student who has had multiple, negative experiences with teachers in the past may be particularly hesitant to receive feedback—whether on assignments, in class, or during office hours. In the course of one research study, when I asked a student to explain why she had postponed taking her composition course until her fourth semester of college, she mentioned her bad luck with English teachers: "A lot of the teachers that I had in the past had been not so helpful when you had questions; and … they would just throw the paper back to you, and embarrass you in the class."

In the course of conducting classroom-level research, I have realized that many students enter college classrooms with a firm conviction that they will not succeed at college-level work. Sometimes, that conviction is limited to specific courses and subject matter. Other times, students are convinced that they are simply not "college material" and will end up failing in an array of disciplines. This "total fear factor," as one student described it to me, can severely limit a student's level of engagement with the course material. As psychologist Albert Bandura neatly summed up the dilemma: **"It is difficult to achieve much while fighting self doubt."**

Across college classrooms, I have met students who have taken in-class exams, then chosen not to turn the exam in for grading. I have observed students who attend class, often sitting in the back row to avoid the instructors' attention, but do not submit any major writing assignments. One student explained the logic of this strategy by telling me, "I don't like turning anything in, because every time I do, I get a bad grade." Still other students simply withdraw from their courses mid-semester, without having undergone any formal assessment.

On the other hand, I have also talked to students who have managed to work around their anxiety about being assessed. One student explained his initial response to his first test of the semester as sheer panic. But after taking a deep breath, he told himself, 'Well, I'm going to try it.' "And then I started writing and that was it. I just got two questions wrong." This example highlights the self-efficacy conundrum facing fearful students: fear can drive students to the point of avoidance or quitting, yet **making the effort in the face of that fear may provide the evidence that they can succeed.**

Some of the most fearful students may not have always succeeded in their prior academic experiences, and as a result, may be risk averse. As Pat Cross has articulated the problem, students who have experienced prior failures...

...are more fearful of putting their abilities to a test than are their more successful peers. … There is, after all, **always the chance that in approaching any new situation--which is the essence of learning--they might**

fail. Whereas the past experience of **good students** tells them that they probably will succeed, the past experience of **poor students** tells them that they will probably fail.

From my own experiences with students—both as instructor and researcher--I have come to understand how easily instructional and assessment goals can be undermined by students' prior academic experiences (and possible failures) and students' current fears about failing my class.

After observing the practices of highly skilled instructors, I have also adopted a number of strategies for alleviating students' fear of assessment. The principle behind each strategy is the same: to assure students that I am interested in what they know and can do so that I can help them know and do even more. In the end, since I am a fan of show and tell, these are all ways of showing students the same messages about my assessment goals that I also tell them.

Strategy 1: Begin the semester with multiple, low-stakes exercises

A single problem, case, or question can provide the basis for a low-stakes exercise in any discipline. A low-stakes writing exercise could involve 5-10 minutes of in-class writing, or a short reflection piece that students write outside of class, then submit for comments. This strategy allows instructors to "ease" students into more substantial, and potentially high-stakes assessments. A low-stakes assessment may "count"—in the sense that it is required, and may contribute to the students' participation grades—but does not have to involve an actual grade. A successful low-stakes exercise can accomplish two simultaneous goals: (a) demonstrating to students that an **instructor might review their work for reasons other than identifying their deficiencies**; and (b) **establishing a relationship—in written form—with students**. Once students have submitted such an assignment, then received an encouraging written response, the path has been paved for them to feel more competent and less fearful of being assessed.

Strategy 2: Offer feedback using a compliment sandwich

Think of every piece of constructive criticism for improvement as the "meat" in a sandwich, and surround it with positive comments. When students receive only "critical" feedback, it is easy for them to interpret the overall message as "I am not doing anything right." In contrast, providing a few unambiguously (and sincere) positive comments to accompany the suggestions for improvement helps students understand that assessment involves identifying strengths and weaknesses, and is not intended to be embarrassing or demoralizing.

Strategy 3: Provide recorded comments to accompany written comments

Several instructors have reported to me that they record their spoken comments to accompany their brief written comments on each student's paper. In turn, their students have raved about the effect of hearing the instructor's voice explain the written comments. The benefits of this strategy are twofold. First, the instructor can provide more precise detail than might be possible in written form. Second, a student who listens to the instructor talk through the comments hears cues—such as intonation, stress, and volume—that improve the communication exchange and encourage instructor-student rapport.

Strategy 4: Role play "office hours"

Many students, especially new college students, are entirely perplexed by the concept of professors' office hours. Even when their professors invite them to visit during office hours, many students are unsure how or why such a visit might be useful. As one third-year student (and peer mentor) once admitted to me, she simply could not envision what would occur once she showed up at a professor's office. Instructors can address some of students' confusion through explicit discussion about the purpose of office hours, and how students can benefit from an office visit. A brief role playing exercise offers two additional advantages: providing students with a protocol for asking for the professor's help, and demonstrating the kind of encouragement that students can

expect from the professor when they seek assistance. This kind of performance, in which a student seeks help, and the professor responds cooperatively, can help clarify the "office hours" mystery, and <mark>help alleviate students' possible fears about approaching the instructor</mark>. Interestingly enough, it can also affect students' understandings of assessment more broadly, and help convince them that the instructor's efforts to assess their knowledge are nothing to fear.

This fall semester, I incorporated strategies 1, 2 and 4. When I returned students' first writing assignment, no one gasped at the sight of my detailed written feedback (in purple ink this time). An ungraded "draft," this assignment counts towards the final grade, so that students know that it matters. I conducted short consultations about these drafts, during the last third of class, then during my office hours; and all but one student understood my written feedback on this assignment as I had hoped, as comments on the strengths and weaknesses of their submissions, with suggestions for improvement that they could apply to their subsequent submissions. <mark>With at least some of their anxiety around assessment alleviated, students are more likely to benefit from my feedback and guidance.</mark> Ultimately, I know I can expect greater levels of learning when students are not overwhelmed by that total fear factor.

References

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