



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Mutiny on the Bounty

"We the undersigned, respectfully request far more time to complete the exams given in this particular class. We feel that if a majority of the class needs more time, time should be given to accommodate their needs. Thank you..." Imagine my horror as I received this note from my class one day several years ago after I had handed back a test. Signatures from every student in the class, save two, followed the request. I read the note, tucked it away, and began the lecture as if nothing had happened. Yet deep inside were great feelings of sorrow, frustration, fear, and anger. Should I honor the students' request or not? It was a challenge to my authority, but at least it was done in a respectful way. But as I tried to lay my own ego and the student's self-interest aside, I began to analyze the situation from the perspective of what would help them learn the most.

I first asked myself, "Was the test indeed too long?" I looked at the test and compared it to tests from previous years and other sections from the current semester, as well as tests by other teachers of the same course. I was reassured to discover that most fellow faculty didn't think the test extraordinarily long or difficult. I then asked myself, "Had the students learned the assigned material and put themselves into a position to do the test and do it well?" Embarrassingly, I did not know.

There appeared to be four possibilities: I was teaching wonderfully, and they were being lazy or at least not diligent with their homework; I was teaching in a way that hindered their learning; they were not capable of learning the material and had been placed into the class inappropriately; they were placed appropriately into the class but had reached the limits of their abilities and could go no further.

To try to prove my suspicion that the reason was, generally, the first possibility, the next day I told the class that all students who wished could retake the test and be given more time if they could prove to me that

they had done the homework and done it thoroughly. I asked for a show of hands of those students who wanted to explore this option further. To my (secret) delight, they all shamefully looked down at their desks. Aha! I was right. Case closed.

A Matter of Conscience

Well, not actually—my conscience got the better of me in the weeks to come. I would lie in bed at night, having numbers of conflicting thoughts. As it happened, the class that semester didn't turn out especially well. The pass rate wasn't very high—not too surprising. After much thought, however, I decided:

1. I can teach students responsibility by becoming co-responsible for their welfare and considering them, in effect, a trust from the college.
2. Students must demonstrate to me that they are doing the homework in order to become eligible for the next examination.
3. If a student fails an examination, I will schedule a meeting to explore the reasons why.
4. I will communicate all of these ideas verbally on the first day, as well as share my values of responsibility, fairness, honesty, hard work, and compassion with them personally.

Practical Change

With these four axioms in hand, I approached the following semester with a *vested*, rather than a *disassociated*, interest in my students' learning. On the first day of the semester, I shared some personal things: I told them that I was a Christian (ACLU, come and get me!); that I cared about how they did; that I considered it a failure on my part if they failed; that they, too, must share a sense of commitment and responsibility; that I would pledge them fairness and honesty throughout the course; that I hoped they felt the classroom was always a safe place to come to learn; and that I hoped they would not view me as an imposing figure (as I did most of my math professors when I was a student). I also challenged them to confront me if I did not live up to these promises.



Wow! I think they were as shocked as I was. Their faces expressed an unusual mix of curiosity and respect. I think they were truly surprised that a professor would open up that much to them. But my hope was that if I could open up to them and express interest and responsibility in their welfare, then perhaps they might buy into the concept of being responsible for their own learning, as well.

I also implemented a policy—students had to show me their homework before they took a test. In fact, their completed homework served as a ticket to each exam. At first, a couple of the students were a little uppity: “What if I don’t get to finish my homework? What if I feel I don’t need to complete my homework? Why can’t I just take the test and see how I do?” I refused to back down, but reassured them that I felt the policy was in their best interest. A couple of students challenged the policy, by showing up for exams without completing homework, but I stood my ground and refused them the exam. I think that over time word got out that I was strict with the policy, and students signed up for my class knowing what they were expected to do.

Furthermore, I required those who did not complete the homework or who did poorly on the exams to come to my office and talk. Often, I would have to call and or talk to them after class to remind them, but most would eventually show up. To my surprise, there was little animosity, mostly just fear and shame. It was a great opportunity to show them I was true to my word.

Results

The results were remarkable. Attendance in class was very high. Students were attentive and working hard. Homework was done regularly. Students came to class with lots of questions. There was more classroom involvement. Scores increased. Grades were higher. My pass rate almost doubled. I would hear the comment: “If you didn’t have these policies, I know I couldn’t make it through.”

The amount of work for me increased substantially. I did not check every homework problem, but just keeping track of which students had completed what homework required a fair amount of organization. There was more time spent interacting with students during office hours. Since the homework had become a “stick,” I tried to counter this by making it a “carrot,” as well. I offered extra credit to students who presented homework problems on the board and could explain them to the rest of the class.

Conclusions

That darned petition—actually if not for that, I don’t think I would be the teacher I am today. I can still recall the haunting question: “Were they prepared for the exam?” Not knowing the answer to that question is wrong. I have come to accept that it is part of my job to know why students are not succeeding and whether or not they are properly preparing themselves for each examination.

I have modified my approach somewhat. I have collected and checked the homework, with students sitting at my side in my office. I have had them hand in homework before taking exams. Recently, I have decided to give quizzes every day (maybe just one question, five minutes), taking the question directly from the assignment. This helps ensure that each student is completing the assignments on a daily basis.

Finally, at the end of the day, when I ask if it’s all worth it, it’s the passing rate that gives me great satisfaction. The semester before I adopted this approach, one of my classes had only 30% of the initial roster of students move on. Now, in most of my classes, the pass rate is between 50% and 80%. My hope is that students who might not have passed without this approach will become successful and perhaps some day will look back fondly on their learning experiences with me.

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