



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

February 2, 2017 ♦ Vol. XXXIX, No. 3

Navigating a Topsy-Turvy Classroom

“The only constant is change.” In fact, even that well-known saying was altered from the original: “Change is the only constant in life.” Either way, as educators, it’s safe to say we’re familiar with change. Often, the hardest adjustments—decisions made by campus administrators, the community college system, or the state legislature—come in the form of directives. Sometimes these decisions are welcomed, and sometimes they’re not. For example, in North Carolina we’re weathering another mandated policy that impacts students’ starting point on campus; the policy determines whether students start in developmental education English or math courses, or go straight into college-level courses. There are arguments to be made on either side of the issue; however, what is of greater importance, no matter the change being implemented, is how instructors adjust when such turbulence touches the classroom. While it’s one thing to recognize how we feel about change (i.e., early adoption, acceptance, ambivalence, burying our heads in the sand), it’s imperative to realize that our students are just as affected by these adjustments and, correspondingly, by our reactions to them.

The good news is there are strategies we can implement to help navigate a topsy-turvy classroom. First, allow me to provide a glimpse into where these ideas originated. As chair of a community college developmental studies department, I have the privilege of frequently observing and overhearing instructors in action. As it happens, developmental studies/developmental education instructors are often on the frontlines when students first arrive on campus, and they serve thousands of beginning students each year. Their teaching practices, then, must convey knowledge of the curriculum content and of the college operations, since they also assist students through the assimilation process of seeing themselves as college material. Therefore, the tips below come directly from the field, from lifelong educators on our team, as well as my own teaching practice. It’s also important to note that these tips are simple actions you can take regarding the delivery of content and instruction, rather than revolutionizing the curriculum itself. Instead of viewing these strategies as big changes, think of them as little ripples that can have a positive and immediate impact.

Tips for Tackling Turbulence

1. Provide Explicit Instruction and Directions

One of the most anxiety-inducing moments for students is when they’re facing a wordy, one- to two-page

assignment. In that scenario, it helps me to remember that students are likely not panicking about the assignment itself, but rather their ability to negotiate it. If you help students break down the assignment into smaller, more manageable chunks, it lessens the intimidation factor and they can redirect their panic to focusing on the process. Also, make your instructions as direct and concise as possible, and invite opportunities for questions and/or discussion for clarification. It can be dangerous to assume what students do or do not know (trust me, I’ve found this out the hard way), and it doesn’t hurt to explain the same assignment in a variety of ways. Here are a few other ways to connect the dots for students:

- **At the start of each class session, discuss the goal(s) for the day.** This provides students with context and gives them access to a plan. For example, recently, when a math instructor took students to the computer lab, he said, “The goal for today is for you to become familiar with login, navigating, and accessing assignments in this math program so you are confident in your ability to complete the nightly homework.” Setting the stage for students at the beginning of each class also provides an opportunity to draw connections between daily goals and broader course outcomes.
- **Share (and voice) your expectations for students.** Students aren’t necessarily skilled at negotiating instructor expectations, so this tells them exactly what you expect. For instance, after demonstrating a math problem on the board, this instructor said, “I want you to feel comfortable working with these numbers.” In saying such, she showed her students that there is more to working equations than merely copying a problem on the board. Another way to set expectations is through group work. Before you assign students to work together in a group, talk about your expectations for what their individual participation will look like within a group dynamic. Then set them forth to collaborate.
- **Whenever possible, connect course assignments to college knowledge.** For example, in our Integrated Reading and English courses, one of the first assignments for students is to send the instructor an email from their college email account. Not only does this provide the instructor with a preview of students’ writing skills, but it also reinforces the fact that student-instructor communication is crucial to students’ long-term academic success.

2. Translate the Content

Speaking of communication, closely related to clear delivery is the ability to decode information for students. For example, when students are panicking about a wordy assignment, remind them about a few useful strategies, such as skimming and previewing. Prompt them to look for the bolded words and the bullet points, or ask, “What jumps out to you on the page?” Sometimes students just need to be nudged in the right direction. Also consider these as additional opportunities to practice your translation skills, as well as occasions to reinforce students’ confidence in their own abilities:

- **Academic vocabulary can be intimidating.** This doesn’t mean that you should avoid it altogether, but you can provide students with context clues and visual aids to support their understanding of what a “literary analysis” or “annotated bibliography” actually means.
- **It’s OK to check for understanding.** Overheard in another math class, an instructor asked, “What is a positive number?” I’m assuming the instructor would have changed her instructional approach for the day if students weren’t eager to share their understanding of the term. Similarly, here’s an easy and nearly universal exit ticket prompt for the end of class: “What was today’s muddiest point?” Not only does this encourage self-reflection, but you can use these responses as a launching pad for the next class session.
- **Whenever possible, model and scaffold instruction.** Before I have students write a paragraph on their own, I demonstrate the paragraph-writing process on the whiteboard, thinking aloud about the topic sentence and the details that will support it. Then I put students in pairs and direct them to write a paragraph with their partner. There is often a level of comfort when working within a small group or with a partner that provides a safe avenue for asking questions that students might not feel comfortable asking in front of the entire class. By the time students finally sit down to complete their own paragraph assignment, they’ve had plenty of opportunities to practice the skill while also building confidence.
- **Toward the end of the course, provide a preview of the following course.** For example, when I teach an introductory curriculum-level English course, I provide a preview of the next class. In this case, students are moving from ENG 111 to ENG 112, so we discuss the ENG 112 textbook, syllabus, and curriculum. Additionally, invite the instructor who teaches the next-level class to visit the classroom and talk to students.

3. Maintain Consistency

I look forward to Fridays for multiple reasons, one of

which is “Coffee Friday,” my excuse to visit a local coffee shop before arriving on campus. Admittedly, I also have a tendency to name days for a course, such as Grammar Tuesday or Workshop Wednesday. As nonsensical as it seems, naming days provides students with a sense of routine each week, which can be especially calming in the wake of frequent change or with respect to their lives outside the classroom. Here are a few other ways to be consistent in the classroom:

- **Start each day the same way.** One of our longtime instructors, Mr. Z, begins every class the same way, so much so that I can set my watch by him. At 8:00 a.m., he takes attendance. At 8:03 a.m., he’s warming up with the joke of the day. Routinely groan-worthy, this anecdote or riddle often lightens the mood and gives students a way to ease into the morning: they laugh/groan together, their shoulders relax, and then they’re ready to begin. By 8:05 a.m., Mr. Z has turned everyone’s attention to that day’s topic. Conversely, another colleague begins her class with a short, instructor-led meditation that provides students a few minutes to breathe deeply and center their focus on the task at hand.
- **Create a consistent classroom climate.** Along with a sense of humor, a consistent demeanor in the classroom makes a big difference. Not only do we need to drop our assumptions at the door before we enter, but our bad day cannot make its way into the room either. I’ll never forget the humbling experience of walking into a class a few minutes early to find students deeply engaged in a conversation regarding the county food assistance program, and realizing that brainstorming for an upcoming essay is always going to be lower on a list of priorities than figuring out how to feed one’s family. Students are juggling multiple needs and demands—don’t add your bad mood to their burdens.
- **Have dependable deadlines.** Whenever possible, I try to set deadlines for major assignments so that they fall at the same time and day each week (i.e., every Friday at 11:55 p.m.). It’s a simple touchstone that sets a rhythm for our class, in addition to Grammar Tuesdays and Workshop Wednesdays. Speaking of deadlines, Stephen Covey notes that we judge ourselves by our intentions, but others by their behavior. Be honest: Are you holding yourself to the same deadlines and expectations you set for your students? Are you providing timely feedback and grades?

4. Build Confidence

We know that self-confidence, self-awareness, and students’ readiness to see themselves as college material are crucial to their success. With that in

mind, here are some ways to help bolster students' confidence and sense of self-worth in the classroom:

- **Share the classroom.** A shared classroom shifts the dynamic from you, as the sole provider of content, to an open classroom where students are also viewed as content experts and teachers. Certainly, this requires flexibility and planning on the part of the instructor and it places more responsibility in students' hands. However, it also provides a space for responses, questions, and revelations you might not have anticipated. Sharing the classroom also demonstrates that you value and understand that students' experiences outside the classroom can also have great relevance inside the classroom. Bring the real world in and use it to your (and their) advantage.
- **Reflect.** We've found it helpful to build in reflection points throughout the course. For example, when returning exams or essays, I also give students a reflection sheet with prompts to respond to related to their performance on the exam (e.g., "Do you feel your grade reflects the amount of time and effort you put into studying?" or "What did you do well? What do you need to improve?"). Midway through the semester, I ask students to assess their personal work ethic by rating their attendance, character, teamwork, productivity, and organizational skills. Then, at the end of the semester, I have students reflect on the class as a whole, looking back at what they learned during the semester and providing suggestions for future classes. In addition to increasing self-awareness, these exercises provide students with solitary thinking time, and serve as a counterbalance to heavy-involvement activities such as group work or class discussions.

Finally, Use Your Resources

Developmental education, by definition, is the integration of classroom instruction and support services. I urge you to take the time to learn about the support services available to students on your campus, and even schedule tours or a speaker to introduce your students to these services. If you and your students are better informed about the resources available on campus, it will be easier to help your students when they need it and easier for them to achieve their academic and other goals.

What classroom strategies do you use to deal with change? Share with us in the comments section or on [Facebook!](#)

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