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# Re-wiring Student Perceptions of What a Student Is

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## **Abstract**

At times it is necessary to reframe instructors' thinking about what a student is. Within this process of reframing, instructors can find a new identity for themselves in both the in-class and online environments. Techniques for turning control of content over to the students are discussed, including using the students as classroom lecturers. The principle employed in this approach is that if a person learns content well enough to teach it, then real learning has taken place.

## Introduction

“A micromanager is the equivalent of a coach who cannot let his players play. He is a source of stress in a game where there’s enough stress already” (Arzola, 2000, p. 44). Present teaching leans toward micromanagement by accident and then validates it through practice. The student appears in the classroom to encounter a syllabus, reading material, prepared lectures, already-built PowerPoint presentations, schedules, assignments, rubrics, and grading criteria. In fact, the student receives everything to be successful except the most important things – his or her own ingenuity and ownership. In a desire to be fully prepared in classrooms as well as be validated as institutions, universities have become micromanagers, forcing students into the role of customer service reps to their instructors. Students spend their time finding out what needs to be done, how to do it, when to submit it, and then deliver it to get good grades and, with repetition, a degree. This can be neither satisfying to the student nor the teacher, nor in larger part to society.

One alternative approach begins by substituting the instructor, professor, or lecturer as the guiding force in the classroom (Gordon & Anderson, 1981) and replacing that person with the students in the class. In other words make the students the classroom lecturer, one student after another, individually and in teams, delivering the content.

In this approach the students are placed in charge of presenting the lectures each week. They must know the material well enough to communicate it. In the very first class, the re-wiring of student perceptions of what a student is begins to transfer from “a passive order-follower” delivering what is expected into “a creative, independent thinker” seeing beyond an assignment to the underlying reasons why the assignment was called for and delivering on those underlying reasons through multiple communications channels.

The instructor may or may not resurface as the most knowledgeable and resourceful person in the room. If the instructor does not resurface, then it is possible that a greater learning has been achieved than was originally planned. An even better out-

come is if the instructor keeps pace with the level of discovery in the environment. In such a case, learning has spread in all directions, both to students and faculty members. In any event the fact that the instructor remains the giver of grades holds an element of control in good stead. It’s just a different type of control.

The predominant views of the topic can be found in a review of the works of Milton H. Erickson (Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981; Festinger, 1957; Maslow, 1946; Reeve, 2009). Erickson is the most instructive. In his discussion of Pygmalion, Erickson warns that “intentionally or unconsciously we imbue the world around us with our own ideas about the way the world is, or should be” (Erickson, as cited in Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981, p. 12). Instructors communicate their views of content and students learn to feed those views back so as to be considered a reflection of the instructor, which students have learned the instructor considers beautiful. That is a limiting experience for both instructor and student. Instructors must learn not to sculpt their ideals of beauty into their students, then like Pygmalion breathe life into them and marry them. The best way for instructors to learn this is to get out of the way. If students don’t have a preconceived notion of what they are to look like, then they may discover and display their own natural beauty. Another thing that is learned from Erickson is the concept of ownership. Who owns the therapy? If the patient owns the therapy, then the therapy will be followed. If the students own the classroom, then they will expect the best from each other because it is *their* classroom.

Maslow (1946) and Reeve (2009) add a voice by instructing in the difference between the self-esteem need level and the self-actualization need level. Self-actualization is about others; self-esteem is about oneself. Self-esteem must be attained to be discarded, and it must be discarded lest the person live a life forever in the mirror, unable to truly embrace diversity of thought in others. The Hindus instruct that pride is the heaviest burden of them all. Yet instructors arrive at a position of teaching through achievement of self-esteem, and the Catch-22 is this self-esteem must be thrown away for effective teaching to begin. Teaching is about others, after all, and the instructor learns by being taught and, in being taught, nourished. Therefore, the instructor, in giving

over control to student, becomes self-actualized, and that is also the gift the instructor grants students in the paradigm of students as lecturers.

Festinger (1957) warns that cognitive dissonance can create burnout. Cognitive dissonance asserts that the brain causes discomfort when a person holds to a belief contrary to fact. To reduce this discomfort, the person uses defense mechanisms to hide the truth. The instructor, in pain from listening too many years to his or her own voice and pet phrases, inadvertently can brutalize students with a lack of enthusiasm. The cure is to let students teach with their first-time enthusiasm.

Instructors may find that treating the classroom environment as a real work environment develops improved student habits and performance. Rather than merely grade an assignment, students are invited to redo less-than-adequate efforts, and consider the original submission as practice. They also have the benefit of instructor feedback from the first effort. If you don't get it right in the workplace, you must do it over. Soon you learn to do it right the first time.

The background can therefore be summarized as follows: Don't look upon beauty as a reflection of yourself. Allow for diversity in content and opinion. Give others the chance to be brilliant in order to delight in their own achievements. Avoid burnout by sharing the load. Treat the classroom as a real workplace.

## Practices, Examples, Issues

The first class is critical. The second class is its validation. Therefore, do not expect students to believe change is really happening. However, the review of the syllabus will never be more attentively focused on when students know they will be responsible for content delivery. During student and instructor introductions, the question is raised as follows:

Instructor: "What are you here for?"

Student: "I'm here to learn."

Instructor: "So am I. Let's see if we can make that happen for both of us."

Teams are chosen after the standard introductions. Each team is responsible for one part of the content to be presented during Week Two. They vie for content responsibility on a first-come-first-serve basis. Thus, the first lesson is achieved: Respond quickly and be proactive. Now that students know what part of the Week Two lecture they are responsible for, they are told something like, "If you don't like the assignment, change it to your liking, but keep the intent of knowledge pure to the goals of the week." This is meant to confuse and free at the same time. It is likely that students will stick to the straight and narrow on the first assignment because they don't know the instructor's reactions. But at least the students know that the instructor has no preconceived notion of the presentation they will deliver. The students also know that they must discover the intent of the learning for the week.

The second part of the first class is critical to the success of the approach. The students are told something like, "Be creative. Make your points by filming a movie and posting it on YouTube or another social media site; link it to your PowerPoint, and we'll watch it that way; or use Facebook and Twitter to deliver your content and we'll go online and you can deliver your assignment like that. You can have handouts and signs and banners and skits. You can record your presentation. Take over the class in any way you want. It's your class, but it's mine too, so keep me interested. We're in this together. Show dexterity and knowledge." Instructors will find a buzz in the classroom as team members start talking to each other. Student will turn to each other and begin organizing content and setting up outside class meetings. Here is the first lesson for the instructor: Let the buzz continue for a while.

Another interaction may be as follows:

Student: "I am not creative."

Instructor: "For me, creativity is weighing the facts. There is a huge analytical component to creativity."

Student: "Maybe I *am* creative."

That kind of re-wiring is Erickson at work. If an instructor wants a student to understand something, what will that instructor *do* to help that student understand? That understanding is what is called being creative. This re-wiring goes on throughout the first couple of classes until every student becomes a cheerleader of the content presented. Instructors will discover learning scenarios that they would never have thought of on their own.

The second class is where the instructor establishes valid credentials and the students assert their claim to the success of the course. Several scenarios unfold:

1. The brilliant, comprehensive, inspiring, class-involving, interactive presentation/lecture
2. The conservative, incomplete presentation/lecture, or
3. The unprepared presentation/lecture

There are other variations on these themes, but in each the instructor's response is plenary. It is here that the instructor establishes that his or her job is not being turned over to the students, but rather it is how the instructor *is* doing his or her job. In the case of a brilliant presentation or lecture, the instructor can exclaim, "That's even better than the way I would have done it!" There is always a question and answer period following the presentation or lecture, and non-presenting students (the audience) are informed that this counts toward participation points, and since everyone was responsible for reading the week's material, specific questions based on knowledge are anticipated, including questions from the instructor, who is part of the class (audience) and who has the knowledge to confirm and/or expand upon the content details.

In the case of an unprepared lecture, it must be addressed directly with compassion. An interaction may be as follows:

Instructor: "Yes, this is what can happen when you get together late in the week...if you got together at all. So, what could be done better here? Would you like another chance at it next week?"

It is a natural outgrowth to discuss how the presentation or lecture could be improved. The instructor should also have a presentation ready—in the hip pocket, so to speak—and deliver in whole or in part as an example. The instructor can ask how the students could expand on the same topic in the redo, perhaps this time matching the content to something they are *really* interested in. One example of how an instructor can align student interest with content is, "If you love music, show how a band might approach this topic."

Then the instructor can ask, "Would you like another shot at it next week? You can do it however you want to approach it, and remember, you'll still have the Week Three one to do as well." Instructors will find that students want to redo the inadequate effort. This sort of real-world experience offers students an opportunity to rework assignments, but from a different angle, relieving the instructor of the *redundo absurdum* of having to see the same thing twice.

For Week Four through the rest of the course, brilliance then becomes the common occurrence. Classroom management techniques afford a student this opportunity particularly when a classroom session is reframed as a ceremony. What is learned from indigenous people is that ceremony begins with an intention. Many instructors, lecturers, and professors don't do enough preparation or do too much preparation or walk in with the same old preparation. They don't take a sacred breath at the entry to the classroom to consider the intention. Sometimes an idea can change when a student comes up with something better than the original intention. This happens in microcosm. A student says something or presents something that hints like a symptom at an intention, and the instructor must be sensitive to hear it and see it, embrace it, and expand upon it. The classroom, after all, is no big ship; it can turn on a dime and must. *Staying the course* may look like strength from the outside, but it is really the limiting perspective of arrogance hiding ignorance.

Each course attracts students of unique makeup. The instructor can uncover this unique makeup with an exercise. Each student can construct a shield, and on that shield the student is asked to draw who he or she is, and what he or she cares about. The second

class is filled with these shields. Each student presents his or her shield, explaining the significance of each symbol. These shields can be put up on the screen or placed around the classroom, a reminder of intention, upbringing, and experience. The third class has *team* shields. Students bring their individual shields to a team meeting and construct a team shield. The team shield is brought to class and is used as a team logo on presentations. The shields act as vessels to convey personal meanings that otherwise may have gone undiscovered.

These techniques or therapeutic patterns have a combined goal to move students from a classroom mentality to a career mentality. In the shifting process from order taker to creative thinker, it is common to establish the reality that “This can move you toward promotions in your careers.”

#### Real-World Interaction:

Instructor: “There are only two rules. Show up on time and be prepared.”

Student: “Why do we have those rules?”

Instructor: “They are to keep me sane.”

Student: “Are there any more rules?”

Instructor: “Everything else is fair game. Show up on time and be prepared. If you do that, you will be thought of well and become successful. You can be as creative as you want. In fact, you are encouraged to be creative.”

With this interaction, students suddenly understand that it really is *their* course. It's *their* classroom. It's *their* content, and they can't wait to present and show what they're made of.

On a macro level, it's all about managing the content the instructor wants to get through. But the instructor really should *not* want to get through all the content. The instructor should want to find the sticking points where students are showing most interest so the class can really drill down into those specifics. The students will then realize that for everything else that is touched upon superficially there is drill-down. Students are tasked with comprehensive drill-downs on their own time, knowing that much more comprehensive drill-down will be achieved in class.

Instructors should be sensitive to sticking points. It may be a good practice to make PowerPoint presentations available online to the class. Here is an interaction: “You've got this presentation on your computer so dive into it in your own time. See this bullet here? This is the one that interests me today. Here is why.” Then the students can see how the instructor teaches. They can experience how the instructor is willing to explore a topic in depth, pulling it from the list of other things that relate to it. These students can then get an idea how to teach when it is their turn to teach the instructor and the class.

Every victory must be celebrated. An instructor must celebrate small victories. Greatest among all small victories is trying. The more students try, the more they will discover correct answers or better yet correct questions. The only thing holding students back from correct answers is trying. Thus, Stephen Leacock's quote, “The harder I try, the luckier I get.” It is etched in stone on the side of the Leacock Building on the McGill University campus in Montreal. Instructors can tell students after a great presentation, “I know how much work went into that while you were outside of class. Congratulations! It paid off.” The instructor, in this case, wants students to know their efforts away from class are acknowledged through the lens of the presentation.

## Future Research Directions

Future research that might contribute to this topic could include an experiment in which students create the curriculum for a department based upon need, followed by faculty modifying that curriculum based upon knowledge. A series of experiments in classroom management might involve videotaping student presentations and instructor presentations followed by analysis by students and instructors. Experiments in online curriculum could include the instructor posting the questions on the discussion board for the first half of the course and the students posting the questions on the discussion board for the second half of the course.

## Conclusion

“Re-wiring Student Perceptions of What a Student Is” clearly begins with the re-wiring of the instructor. In a fast-paced technical world, change matters. Students come into the physical or online classroom with extraordinary tools. Their brilliance is acknowledged, unfocused, or untapped. If the instructor frees students to explore in creative delivery formats, students will be encouraged to step it up by their fellow students. In the same process, the instructor may discover a new excitement that can only come from being a student.

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