Atlantic Universities’ Teaching Showcase

2010

L’Expo- Engseignement des Universités de l’Atlantique

Proceedings/Actes

Volume XIV

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Think Like A Professor!: Student and Faculty Perceptions of Course Policies

Abstract

The “Think Like a Professor!” exercise is designed to enliven introductory classes while presenting course policies and regulations to students. The exercise pulls students out of their passive role as receptacles of course information, puts them in the instructor’s place, and asks them to apply the instructor’s course policies in various scenarios based on real incidents. The exercise accomplishes several goals, including establishing appropriate modes of interaction among students, asking students to read and extract information, requiring students to apply, analyze, and synthesize facts and ideas, giving students insight into how their actions are perceived by faculty and others, and giving faculty feedback on their regulations and a view of student attitudes and values. Students are encouraged to see that course policies and regulations have a purpose that is applicable to both students and instructors.

It’s the first day of class, and we all know the drill. The course outlines, with requirements, expectations, and policies detailing how your course will be run, must be handed out. You need to get your students to read what must look to them like the fine print of a long contract — one of several outlines they’ll be collecting in the first couple of days. Especially for first-year students just out of high school, course outlines may present a confusing array of do’s and don’ts: all assignments must use APA, or was that MLA? No late papers will be accepted, but sometimes late papers will have points deducted. You must have a note for absences, but some profs don’t take attendance. You have to write all the assignments to pass, but didn’t someone say that you could do extra assignments for additional credit?

For the course instructor, the necessity of going over the course outline can deflate the liveliest of introductory classes. You may find yourself standing in front of the class on the first day, plodding through each requirement and every policy statement, declaiming against errors and misdemeanours while your students’ eyes glaze over. Or, you can hand out the course outlines and tell your students to read through them on their own – in theory, not an unreasonable expectation; in practice, one that seldom works.

To enliven these introductory classes - both for my sake and my students’ - I present an exercise that pulls students out of their passive role as receptacles of course information, puts them in my place, and asks them to apply my course policies in various scenarios - in other words, to “Think Like a Professor!” Their task is to imagine that they are the professor of our course and have written the course outline, including all of its policies, expectations, and requirements, and that they will now be faced with various situations, all based on actual events, in which they will have to apply the rules of the course. The exercise serves many purposes: to introduce students to each other; to start developing constructive, collaborative discussions among students; to encourage them to read a text closely; to direct them to a knowledge of the rules and regulations of the course, and to gain some understanding of academic life. The benefits of the assignment are reciprocal: as the instructor, you gain insight into some of the beliefs and practices of your students. Sometimes, you may realize that you have to explain issues or revise requirements that you thought were clear and complete; at other times, your students can advise you on ways to deal with difficult problems. You may be asking your students to “think like a professor,” but this exercise also gives you access to thinking like a student.

The first step is to hand out the course outlines. However, instead of discussing each requirement in detail, I take a broader approach in which I emphasize a main theme: that all of my requirements are designed to make the course run effectively and fairly both for my students and for myself. The underlying point is that all of the policies and regulations have a purpose; they are not simply punitive measures created because I am “mean” but measures designed to encourage students to be active, courteous, professional participants in the class. In addition, I make sure
to explain that regulations and policies have a purpose that applies to me as the instructor as well, enabling me to teach effectively and fairly. So, for example, I might point out that I have regulations on late papers for the following reasons: first, to make the course run effectively and fairly for all students, who are thus encouraged to keep up with their assignments, which will help make them successful in their coursework, and so that students are rewarded fairly for pushing themselves to get work in on time. But the other side of the equation should not be forgotten either; the regulation is also designed to help me run the course effectively and fairly by keeping assignments coming in an organized and steady flow that will allow me to manage my workload and so give me enough time to provide effective feedback on assignments; as well, the regulation ensures that I am grading according to equal expectations of all students. It doesn't hurt to give students such insights into the demands of academic life. The instructor's expectations and workload have to be made transparent to students, who, like the general public, rarely have a clear idea of what a professor's job entails. While I assure students that I am not complaining about a career that I love, I do give them a snapshot of what the job entails. They seem to be interested in hearing that professors do not just teach two or three classes a week but that these classes require preparation time, that professors are expected to do research and administrative work while often carrying a heavy marking load. The goal of the initial overview of course policies and regulations is to emphasize that there is a good reason for each requirement, both from the instructor's and the students' point of view. From the start of the discussion, then, you can reinforce the idea that a course is an experience shared by faculty and students, not imposed by one on the other.

After giving students my general thesis for all of the requirements, I leave it up to them to discover the supporting details. They get a copy of the course outline and the "Think Like a Professor!" handout, which usually contains about half a dozen scenarios that an instructor might come across. If there is time, students can divide into small groups for discussion in class, or they can be asked to post their responses in online course management systems like Blackboard or Moodle discussion forums. In live class discussions, the students have the advantage of face-to-face introductions and interactions in a small group, preparing them for further small-group work or contributions to the class at large. On the other hand, asking students to respond online has the advantage of giving them a task right at the beginning of the course that will require them to figure out how to log on and post responses on a course site; in addition, some students find it easier to participate at first in an online forum rather than in a live in-class one. Online discussions also have the advantage of giving the instructor a step-by-step view of how the discussion among students has been shaped and what individual views might be, not just the consensus of a group. (The quotations in this essay come from such online postings on a discussion forum.) Whatever mode of discussion is used, while giving students the assignment instructions I can suggest models of interaction: supporting other students, rewording their understanding, courteously disagreeing and offering another opinion. Students typically do not see the exercise as a difficult one, so they are unlikely to be intimidated by having to express an opinion. Establishing these models of interaction right away provides a foundation for future discussions, for peer editing, in which students are sometimes reluctant to comment on others' ideas, and for critical reading and thinking, in which students have to engage actively with others' ideas and facts.

The "Think Like a Professor!" handout that students are given contains this preamble: "You are the professor of this course. You've handed out your course outlines, and you've pointed out the course policies to the class. And yet, the following things happen. What will you do?" Each scenario is based on past incidents with students, although of course details are altered so that no one can be identified. Each scenario is presented in a few sentences and ends with a version of the question, "What will you do?"

When I first created these scenarios, I thought that most of them would simply require the application of straightforward facts; for example, if I stated in my outline that late papers will have one grade level deducted for every twenty-four hours they were late, and if I stated that papers should be handed in directly to me or our department secretary and in other circumstances they should have a faculty signature and date on them to mark the date and time of submission, then the answer to the following scenario would be obvious:

Your students have an essay due on Wednesday. You collect the papers and leave at the end of the day, and since you don't have any classes or meetings this week on Thursday or Friday, and Monday is a holiday, you decide to do your research, prepare your classes, and grade papers at home. You finally come back on campus on Tuesday morning. When you open your office door, you find a paper has been slipped under the door. It only has the student's name on it as well as the date the paper was due. What will you do about the grading of this paper?
Mostly, students respond in expected ways, applying the one-grade-level-per-day-late rule and pointing out that papers left under the door without a faculty signature and date would be considered to have been submitted on the day they were picked up. Of course, you might find a student who simply has not read the course policies or not read them carefully enough, providing a response that is basically a guess: “I would tell the student that no late papers will be accepted.” What I find interesting in such a response is that the student does not seem to recognize the need to consult a text in order to extract information to be applied to the situation, in spite of being told to do so in the assignment instructions. Or perhaps the student has consulted the text but skimmed over it so quickly that the essential information has been overlooked. In either case, even superficial or surface reading, which involves “the tacit acceptance of information contained in the text” (Hermida 92), and which is thought to be the predominant mode of reading among university students (Hermida 93; Hunt 1-2), is absent. Should such problems arise, the instructor has an opportunity to recognize and address the issue from the very beginning of the course. How many students are skimming/misunderstanding/ignoring the text? Is your course regulation clearly explained? Should you present it differently? If you think that the text you have provided is clear but a significant number of students are not able to extract and apply information from it, then you may have to address basic reading skills in your course before throwing your students into more complex scholarly prose.

In fact, the “Think Like a Professor!” scenarios, although presented in plain language in a few sentences, typically call on more than surface reading skills. In being presented with a real-life context that includes details of student and faculty actions, the student must bring into play some of the cognitive activities associated with deep reading, such as “the ability to analyse, synthesize, solve problems” and to think “meta-cognitively in order to negotiate meanings with the author and to construct new meaning from the text” (Hermida 93). I deliberately include elements in some of my scenarios that raise issues that go beyond the application of facts from the course outline, as in this scenario:

You get the following email from one of your students: “hey, I couldn’t come to class yesterday sorry : )
did i miss anything imp.? if u cld send me ur notes that wd be gr8.” What will you do?

The obvious response is to apply my policy that “Students are expected to make correct use of language to the best of their abilities in all non-graded written materials, including emails to the instructor and discussion posts to the class.” In my overview of course policies, I explain that the reason for this one is to encourage students to recognize that different styles of writing are appropriate in different situations, and that any correspondence with people in the university who are not personal friends is a professional communication that should be written accordingly. So far, the reason for the policy from a student’s point of view is clear. What other reasons, particularly from the instructor’s point of view, could explain this policy? This is where the opportunity to reveal aspects of a professor’s life, to make our jobs and attitudes more transparent to students, comes up. I am frank with my students when I tell them that emails written in textspeak annoy me and that other people in the university—other professors, admissions officers, registrar’s office staff—react similarly, with such communications creating a negative impression of the student. But this brief scenario packs a further punch. “Did I Miss anything important?” I explain to students that this common question implies that instructors’ preparations before and efforts during class are totally insignificant; in other words, the question is usually perceived as insulting. “Can you send me your notes?” is another question that instructors may deal with in different ways, depending on whether they post lecture notes or not for their classes; if they don’t, then the issue of attendance and requests for extra help will arise; if they do post lecture notes, then the tone and context of the question needs some thought. This brief scenario, then, should elicit not only a response that demonstrates reading for information (the course policy states “correct use of language...”) but also a response that brings into play policies on attendance, that requires a recognition of purpose and tone in writing, and that asks students to suggest ways in which the instructor should respond to the student of such an email. The student is asked to imagine both writer and audience in this rhetorical situation and to see that, as writers themselves, their communications have an effect on the people who receive them; in doing so, my hope is that they will also begin to understand why the instructor would write such a policy in the first place. My intention is to move students to see reading and writing “for real,” as Russell Hunt would say—to view the course outline as “something more than a load of neatly baled information to be internalized and remembered...” (1), and to understand the “rhetorical motives of texts” (Hunt 2).
In some cases, students elaborate on the course information with responses that tend to soften the effect of a regulation. Going back again to the scenario of the late paper slipped under the office door, one student writes: “I would take one grade level off for the first day and I would talk to the student and ask when they submitted it, and hope that they are honest and take off one grade level for each day that it was late.” In this case, my course outline included nothing about seeking out the student for his or her account of when the essay was submitted — and I can hear jaded teachers scoffing at the idea of relying on the hope that students would give an honest account of their late papers - but it is not uncommon for my students to inject a personal intervention into various scenarios where I would have thought none was required. Here is another example, in which a student brings into play the personal attentions of the professor and even the dean in dealing with a fairly minor attendance problem. The scenario involved a student who had missed five classes without notifying anybody, did not realize that an assignment was due in the last class, and had asked that no late penalties be assigned to her paper because she had been ill (though no medical note was presented). Here is one student’s idea of how such a scenario should be handled:

Considering this scenario, I would first want to sit down and discuss my expectations with the student. I would explain the terms of the policy regarding the attendance and the expectation of her contacting me. I would explain the expectations regarding handing in work and also the fact that I must be notified prior to the due date if there will be a delay in handing in the assignment. In this discussion, I would clearly articulate to the student that she was informed of these policies at the beginning of the term and I would discuss her prior performance in the early term and how she was doing academically in the course. I would review the fact that I wanted her and I to talk to the Dean and decide what the plan of action will be. In reviewing our discussion I will try to understand her response to the seriousness of her actions and if she can continue to attend class. This student and I met with the dean and decided since this behaviour had never occurred before I decided to give her a second chance to complete the course. In regards to the assignment, because the student did not contact me prior to the due date I deducted one grade level for every 24 hours that she did not pass it in.

The last sentence in this response arrives at what I had thought was the straightforward answer to the scenario, but in order to get there, a series of interviews is imagined as taking place. Not all students expect this level of personal attention; one response to the above student’s post stated:

I do not quite agree with you in the sense that I think you are giving this student way too much of your time. I do not think it is up to the professor to explain the course policies to a student, it is up to the student to read them and ask questions if they do not understand. I also do not think a meeting with the dean is necessary....

In the latter response, we have a student who has been acclimated, for better or worse, to the university environment; she understands her responsibilities in the current academic world. In the first response, though, we have a student who believes that professors and deans should undertake a personal intervention in a common student problem in order to keep the student on track. Perhaps this response is an idealized image of what a personalized education is supposed to be; perhaps it is the legacy of high school expectations that teachers, guidance counsellors, and principals will deal with behavioural problems. Whatever your view of this posting, these kinds of responses are an opportunity for instructors to question whether they should provide more personal interventions with students and/or whether they should explain that university students are typically considered independent adults who are expected to act responsibly and knowledgeably on their own — and then to take the consequences. Serious problems might elicit comments or an interview with the professor - or they might not, and students are usually expected to help from faculty or counsellors on their own. This is a difficult lesson especially for first-year students to grasp: that although they will be invited to consult their professors during office hours, the level of academic advice and support that they receive largely depends on their own initiatives. In their research on student perceptions of course policies, Duplaga and Astani discuss the relationship between justice and caring in the implementation of course regulations and suggest that “the ethical responsibility of an instructor does not end with the determination of fair course policies. There is still much ethical work to be done by the instructor in terms of presenting and enforcing the policies within caring relations with all students” (14). Many of the student responses that I have seen envision a student-faculty relationship based on such a blending of both justice and caring for the individual.

One of my scenarios is completely open to negotiation about how to deal with a sensitive situation that should be perceived as both just and caring:

58
One of your students sends you an email to say that he cannot hand in the assignment that is due today because his grandfather has just died and he has to go to the funeral. What will you do?

The issue revealed to students in this case is the alarming death rate, usually of grandparents, around midterm and exam time. In the spirit of revealing the faculty side of the situation, I explain to students that instructors are used to hearing such excuses and that their first reaction might be to disbelieve the excuse. The class discussion then turns to how can a student present such an excuse if a death really occurs? I also ask for advice about how an instructor should handle such a situation; for example, should the instructor insist on an obituary or death notice? Some students have told me that that is what is expected in other courses and that they consider this to be fair; others have told me that when asked to provide such a document, they felt offended. With a scenario such as this one, I am willing to be guided by the consensus of the class in deciding how the situation should be handled, but even if an instructor has a clearly stated policy for such a case, the scenario provides an opportunity for discussing how students can establish their credibility in a course so that they will be believed no matter what problems they run into. I think the argument could be made that dealing with scenarios such as these, even if only in general class discussions, is one way of combining a sense of justice with an attitude of caring and respect for students.

The "Think Like a Professor!" exercise is designed to bridge the gap between students and instructors, enhancing their mutual understanding of each other's attitudes and expectations. Does the exercise have an effect? Does it prevent plagiarism, ensure all essays are on time, make everyone attend every class? Sadly, no. The exercise may not change all behaviours, but I do find that on the whole my students at least know my course policies. Even when they are not at their best - handing in a late paper, for example - they will say something like "I know there's a late penalty." In other words, they have remembered some information; they know the regulations and policies. But I hope they know more than that: that faculty and students are in this endeavour together and that there are reasons for course policies that apply to both sides - for me, to let me do my job fairly and effectively, and for them, to encourage them to get the most out of the journey we are all taking together.

References

