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CHAPTER 4

WHERE'S THE PROFESSOR?

First-Day Active Learning for Navigating Students' Perceptions of Young Professors

Reba Wissner

Without fail, every semester since I taught my first college class in fall 2006, when I have students who don't know me, those students ask other students in front of me, "Where's the professor?" The looks on their faces when I say, "Hi, I'm Dr. Wissner!" are priceless. I've taught college classes for over a decade, but I look younger than I am, and I have an inner ankle tattoo of a treble clef, which makes me simultaneously the cool music history professor and the one who students assume may not know what she's doing—enthusiasm about the course material, while important, can only go so far in building credibility with the students.[1] This is equally true for the traditionally college-aged students as for my older, nontraditionally aged students, both undergraduate and

graduate, who are skeptical about the ability of someone who looks like they could be their daughter to teach and fairly evaluate them.

As a woman, the issue of looking too young (or otherwise) to be a professor is compounded since women are often treated suspiciously regarding their expertise in the classroom.[2] It is important to consider that ageism is real, and appearing young all too often contributes to student bias, but it is also important to note that this should not be equated with systemic racism and other types of discrimination, such as gender discrimination. Young-looking, female-identifying professors of color often have an even more challenging time in getting their students to consider them competent, skillful, and credible, frequently facing microaggressions throughout their careers.[3] One study using computer-animated lecturers demonstrated that students who listened to the same lecture delivered by a White male professor versus an African American professor or a male professor versus a female professor scored higher on a postlecture quiz on the material. It is the same lecture, but students simply paid more attention to the White male professor as a more credible, more normative, source of knowledge.[4] Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) professors who teach at predominantly White institutions have all of these issues amplified, even if those students are also the same race as the professor.[5] But it's not only young women—young men also face skepticism, as Kevin Gannon (a heavily tattooed White male who does not immediately appear to fit the professor stereotype) has recounted of his early teaching career, "To compensate for what I imagined were dubious stares and doubts about how well I, a young white dude, could teach them, a racially diverse class of older students, I resolved to be prepared for any eventuality

and to dazzle them with my command of the material."[6] So, how can we simultaneously dispel doubts and dazzle students with our knowledge?

Not surprisingly, students' first impressions of a professor can bring forth preconceptions about them simply because of their gender, age, or how they look, all of which can affect how the class runs for the rest of the semester and students' perceptions of their professor's ability as a teacher.[7] One study demonstrated that in comparing White and Hispanic instructors, students ranked the White professors as having a greater sense of immediacy, caring, and competence than the Hispanic instructors.[8] Immediacy and caring, as we know, are crucial for creating trust and rapport in the classroom. So we must address these preconceptions on the first day to avoid them clouding the course and the students' ability to take you seriously. While some of these preconceptions can be eliminated through one's dress (which is problematic), organized and clear syllabi, and demeanor, the more effective solution is to do so through the classroom activities on the first day.[9] One instructional strategy we can use on the first day to help dispel students' skepticism is active learning activities. Using active learning activities in the first class helps the professor to demonstrate their expertise by getting students right into "doing" the discipline and the course. This approach allows faculty to confidently create an energizing learner-centered classroom from day one.

Active Learning on the First Day to Build Instructor Credibility

Active learning means having students perform activities that help them to learn without passively listening to a

lecture. This might mean group work, or work with tangible objects, or both. Active learning is an effective pedagogical technique, proven to aid students' development of critical thinking skills.[10] It also empowers students, is learner-centered, and stimulates engagement.[11] The more students are actively learning, the more information they will be able to retain and transfer to other contexts.[12] If one's discipline facilitates it, active learning with physical or material objects aids students in critical analysis and evaluation skills.[13] It also helps students to make the course topic seem relevant and interesting rather than a nebulous or irrelevant thing they're required to take a course on to graduate.

The first day of class occurs in a preconstructed learning space, but "how it invites students in or discourages them from entering, can decisively shape our everyday pedagogical practices."[14] This invitation to learning includes how students perceive us and our courses. It is crucial that the first day of class cover some aspects of the course content; this can help faculty gain credibility.[15] James M. Lang identifies four basic principles that help faculty construct a good first day of class: curiosity, community, learning, and expectations. These four principles can also be used to dispel students' preconceived notions about their new professor. Essentially, you want to create a spark of interest in the course material, create a sense of community and humanize yourself, encouraging students to engage with the course material and shaping the future of the course for students.[16] This can help set expectations for students about what they should take away from the course. Marguerite Mayhall suggests that these first-day activities must connect to the course material and allow the students to discuss and consider these topics and their interconnected issues.[17]

Maryellen Weimer notes the importance of faculty

sharing their commitment to student learning and success on the first day as a way to build classroom community.[18] We often underestimate the power of faculty enthusiasm when teaching, but doing so, and demonstrating one's commitment to student learning, has powerful implications for whether or not the students perceive the professor as credible as early as the first class meeting.[19] The instructor's enthusiasm can be contagious and help students gain more interest in the course, but enthusiasm cannot replace students' confidence in their professor's knowledge and ability to teach the content.[20]

Setting course expectations doesn't end on the first day. This also extends to the first week of classes, when students (hopefully) continue to be enticed by the course.[21] The very beginning of the semester is when we leave a lasting impression on our students, for better or worse.[22] These first impressions are not easily dispelled after the first day—or even the first moments—especially if we do things that reinforce them. We must, therefore, give the students confidence in us and our skills if we want to eliminate any questions about our right to be in the front of the classroom.[23] But there is a more practical reason to be sure students are confident in our ability to teach: student perceptions about instructors' credibility are shown to correlate with learning gains over the course of a single semester.[24] After all, as Jessamyn Neuhaus writes, "Student perception often becomes teaching reality."[25] We don't want to jinx ourselves, do we?

Ultimately, we must consider that students scrutinize everything we say and do from the moment we walk into the classroom. This includes not only being our true selves but also personable and—dare I say it—human.[26] By the end of the first class, successful teachers introduce themselves, demonstrate accessibility and immediacy toward

students, and model their instructional methods, all of which create perceptions of us and our courses.[27] Regardless of whether we fit into the traditional professor mold, if students believe we are competent, then they are more likely to view us as competent.[28] The idea that what a professor looks like and what to expect from her is called implicit professor theory (IPT), and these IPTs shape what our students think of us as early as the first time they meet us.[29] The experiences that we provide for our students and what they think about us on the first day correlate with higher motivation throughout the course—and even higher grades.[30] As faculty, we need to not only entice and engage our students but also consider our expectations of our students and our students' expectations of us.

While we want to entice our students (with good reason), we also want to set expectations for how the course will be run and the material that it will cover—what Gannon calls "peeking under the hood."[31] We can do this by presenting some of the most unusual or intriguing aspects of the course to keep students wanting more. We do not have an opportunity for a second first impression, neither for us nor our course, so we must be very careful how we present both.[32] Even if you are someone who lectures regularly, active learning can be a way for students to become more involved in the course from the beginning. First-day active learning activities can include bringing in material objects relevant to the course that the students likely have never seen, allowing them to encounter firsthand what the course is about and experience the course material.

But, despite its increased use and proven success in college classrooms, some faculty remain hesitant to incorporate active learning into their courses. One common fear among faculty considering using active learning in

their courses is that students may feel that the professor is incompetent or doesn't know the material; the perception is that these activities will force the students to teach themselves rather than be taught. Students must not only be taught to trust their professors, but they also must understand that they are not doing more work than their professors.[33] Because of appearance and identity, women-identifying and BIPOC instructors will face additional obstacles in terms of student preconceptions and stereotypes and therefore experience more resistance to nontraditional learning formats than their White male counterparts. We must acknowledge the roles that the professor's identity and appearance play in student perceptions of them and therefore how they play into the way active learning activities are received.

As if these fears were not enough, faculty also fear that as a result of this perception, the use of active learning in classes will negatively impact their student evaluations of teaching (SET). One recent study showed that this fear is unwarranted: 48 percent of physics faculty members at one university who incorporated active learning in their introductory courses believed that using this technique increased their SET rankings, and 32 percent felt that it had no effect on their SETs.[34] Therefore, there is good reason to try active learning, especially on the first day of class when the students are building their impressions of your competence as a teacher and your knowledge of the course material.

My First-Day Activity: The Object Petting Zoo

In facilitating active learning activities on the first day, you are cultivating trust among your students and creating

rapport, making for a learning environment conducive to learning.[35] Part of creating expectations is to run the class on the first day how you plan to all semester. For classes like mine that are heavily interactive, I don't want the students to think for a moment that I'm not lecturing because I don't know the content; after all, students consider a professor credible if they can show they know more than the textbook and provide real-world examples of course material.[36] So, having students participate in an interactive activity with objects related to the course not only sets the stage for how I will run the class all semester, showing them around "under the hood," but also grounds the course in a real-world context with the unusual and interesting things we'll cover. I love to have students interact with material objects, especially since so many of the things that students will encounter in my course are those they may never have heard of or seen in real life (or even virtually). While this use of material objects may not be possible in every discipline, it is beneficial for orienting students to the course, building positive views of the professor and her qualifications, and cultivating student interest from day one.

On the first day of my music history classes, I hold a "material objects petting zoo," depending on the course topic. I place students in teams—students tend to be less resistant to group work when you don't actually call them groups—to circulate and examine objects. When I teach early music, for example, I bring in various music books, vellum chant manuscript fragments, and other relevant objects and have the teams tell me what they think the object is, what year they think it's from, and what it can tell us about music history. They use worksheets from the National Archives to guide their answers, using the written document analysis sheets for everything but those related

to instruments (instruments or gut strings) or the vellum chant fragments; for those, students use the artifact or object analysis sheets.[37]

During each activity, I circulate, and the students always ask me, "Is all of this yours?" or "Did you buy these with your own money? The university didn't pay for any of this?" (For the record, the answer is yes, these are mine and no, the university did not pay for any of this). My answers help to dispel the notion that I'm a novice. After the activity, we reconvene and discuss their findings. That's when I reveal a lot of information about the objects, often not covered in the textbook (as they soon find out when they start their reading) and that helps them to continue to alter their perceptions about my content knowledge. These objects, often unfamiliar, allow us to spend some time on intercultural competency and lead to a discussion on assumptions and stereotypes. Inadvertently, we're drawing attention to exactly what the students may be doing with us!

I refer to the items used in these activities throughout the semester, so this sets the stage on the first day for the semester's material. For example, when talking about music printing, I can say, "Remember the partbooks you looked at the first day?" I've had students who take subsequent courses with me—sometimes a year or so later—refer to those objects in the context of that class. If planned correctly, these kinds of activities can also serve as icebreakers (though students don't know that—this is good since many students hate typical "icebreakers") that can create a sense of community not only between the students but also with you.

These material object activities achieve all four of Lang's criteria for teaching a good first day of class, as well as Gannon's and Mayhall's suggestions. By putting the

students in teams, they are building a sense of community through learning. They are learning about the course material by handling the objects that they will be discussing throughout the semester. This kind of active learning is like hiding the broccoli in a kid's dinner so that they eat their vegetables; students are learning to analyze materials and objects, teaching them to become visually and culturally literate, but they just don't know it! In both cases—the broccoli and the learning—it's good for them!

In the first day of class context, hiding the broccoli is especially crucial since one recent study showed that students disliked delving into course material during the first class session, but if they have to, they feel it should be accessibly presented.[38] In doing this kind of activity, I accessibly set expectations for active learning and the use of material objects in the course. Regardless of the objects chosen, these activities can allow students to directly engage with historical and cultural objects that promote the synthesis of knowledge through analysis.[39] Therefore, they don't notice (or don't notice right away) that they're learning about the course and its material. This conveys to students that you care about them, their preferences, and the course material and helps to dispel any skepticism about your qualifications while you demonstrate the course format.

With a little planning, these activities can be incorporated into online and remote classrooms. Using photos, videos, and audio files from existing sources like YouTube helps provide a similar experience and demonstrate how the items work. You can make a video demonstrating these objects yourself. Having digital analogues for these items helps you be more inclusive, even if it is in the face-to-face environment. For example, having a digital version of a

handwritten letter posted on the learning management system allows a student who may have a vision impairment to enlarge the text or adjust the playback speed of video or audio.

Even if you teach in a discipline where using material objects is not an option, active learning activities are useful for providing the students with course context and making them confident in you. So how, if you are in this kind of a discipline, can you use active learning to increase students' confidence in you and decrease the chance that their preconceptions of your ability become reinforced? Find something that is part of the course topic that might seem interesting or unusual to students. This should be something that may seem esoteric (what I think of as knowledge that seems useless to the ordinary person but still cool) that will pull students in and that is not part of any of the course readings or materials. By showing students how much you know while giving them little-known material to grapple with, you are telling them that you know your stuff, despite looking young (or otherwise not like the "typical" professor).

Conclusion

Despite what people may assume, we *can* influence what our students think of us. One study showed that race and gender combined with teaching style influenced the way students perceived certain professors.[40] How we teach from the beginning of the course can also help with student perceptions. With careful planning, we can dispel any skepticism about our abilities as teachers from the very first class meeting

that will last far beyond the end of the semester. This will likely increase the number of students who will return for more of your courses and giggle when new students ask, "Where's the professor?"

Teaching Takeaways

- Students are more likely to be engaged from the first day of class when active learning activities are employed immediately in the course.
- These active learning activities help the professor build rapport and trust with the students, who will soon realize that any preconceived notions about their professor that surfaced from their appearance or identity are unwarranted.
- Using primary sources and material objects as part of a hands-on active learning activity helps to foster inclusive and diverse teaching practices.

REBA WISSNER is assistant professor of musicology at Columbus State University. She is the author of *A Dimension of Sound: Music in The Twilight Zone* (Pendragon Press, 2013), *We Will Control All That You Hear: The Outer Limits and the Aural Imagination* (Pendragon Press, 2016), and *Music and the Atomic Bomb on American Television, 1950–1969* (Peter Lang, 2020). As a faculty developer, her interests are in universal design for learning, adjunct support, and active learning.

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