

THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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Every teacher has memorable classroom moments from which they learn and grow. One in particular comes to mind here. I chose this episode because the teaching of students who are themselves professional teachers seem to pose a special set of problems when considering rights and responsibilities.

I am lucky enough to have served as an instructor or “mentor” Workshop Program. This one-day workshop aims to prepare new Graduate Teaching Associates (T.A.s) for their role as undergraduate educators and introduces them to O.S.U. teaching guidelines. Each year, about two hundred participants are divided into classes of twenty and assigned a “mentor”. Mentors are experienced T.A.s drawn from all over the University. They lead the workshop activities, describe established teaching policies and share their observations and insights with the new T.A.s. For many new instructors, this workshop is the only formal preparation they receive before they are let loose on their students. The mentors are themselves trained by the excellent staff of The Ohio State University’s Office of Faculty and TA Development. My experience with this program has been extremely positive and influential. It gave me my first formal opportunity to critically consider contemporary college pedagogy and to interact with dedicated education specialists who are motivated to offer the best possible service to O.S.U. undergraduates. At that time, I had not encountered colleagues in my own department who were interested in curriculum reform or pedagogic research. I had never even heard of constructivism, so naturally I began to think that my emphasis on learning through hands-on exploration in the classroom represented a new approach that I had invented. I was happy to find that I was wrong.

The training sessions for the TA mentors place a strong emphasis on recognizing and responding to different learning styles and on the discussion of cultural and academic diversity in the classroom. One such discussion focused on the demographic breakdown of undergraduate classes at O.S.U. and how the predominantly Ohioan nature of the student body is likely to affect learning. An experienced mentor observed that some Ohio-raised students seemed either unsupportive, or ignorant of the “inclusive classroom” concept. Others gave examples of situations where thoughtless comments by students had negatively affected the performance of other individuals in the class. We felt that these commonly encountered teaching scenarios should certainly be discussed when training new T.A.s. but I for one was initially unsure as to the best way to go about doing this.

The workshop participants are a diverse assemblage of graduate students representing a wide variety of nationalities, ages, and educational philosophies. Some may come from cultures where diversity issues are rare, where student rights are few or where discussion of controversial issues in public is unlikely. To what extent then should T.A. mentors advocate views that may have political or philosophical ramifications when working with a group of students who will soon themselves be teachers (essentially, peers)? Could this be seen as a restriction of the academic freedom of a college instructor to teach a class however they see fit or according to their own personality? I must confess that since I knew that I was likely to have in my class bright, articulate students with strong opinions, I started feeling a little nervous about my upcoming interaction with them. I knew that I would have to tackle controversial issues that might challenge my student’s central philosophies. I should also mention that there was a small part of me that questioned the validity of me, an Anglo-Saxon male, presuming to teach anything at all about diversity to such a diverse group of graduate students.

Despite my concerns, the class seemed to go smoothly. I was able to resolve the conflict inherent in attempting to tell teachers how to teach by soliciting multiple viewpoints and presenting them as valid alternate models of instruction from which they might pick and choose elements appropriate for their own personalities. When considering diversity I used role-playing, case studies and short, mildly humorous “how not to generalize” sketches to introduce issues in a way which allowed students to feel comfortable enough to contribute in a constructive way. The class examined how their own subtle biases might influence a teacher’s interaction with their students and considered ways to make their classes a safe and inclusive environment conducive to learning for all. The only slight glitch was unexpected and thought provoking; a student who was a native of Ohio and a graduate of Ohio State pointed out that to assume that T.A.s need to encourage Ohio-raised students to support the idea of an inclusive classroom is in itself a generalization that makes such students look like “a bunch of bumpkins.” This point was well taken and has stuck with me ever since as an example of exactly the kind of generalization that the truly inclusive classroom should strive to avoid. It was also an illustration of the fact that it is impossible for an instructor to enjoy a career in which they never once make an offensive generalization of their own. The best we can hope for is to minimize the number of such events and be prepared to recognize and repair damage to the student-teacher relationship whenever it inevitably occurs.

I think that the ambiguities of moral relativism will thwart any attempt to make a universal list of rights and responsibilities in the classroom. The list must include valid variations based on the nature of the teaching situation and on the instructor's personality and teaching philosophy. Rights and responsibilities also vary considerably between cultures depending on the dynamics of the educational and social systems. It seems to me that very few universal rights or responsibilities really exist other than those guaranteed by international law. For example, in nations where state funding of colleges is common, higher education is considered a privilege which serves as a sort of separating assault course where only the strongest survive. In this case, the responsibility for education is placed firmly on the shoulders of the student, who has almost no rights. The instructor's only responsibilities are punctuality and a good working knowledge of the class content.

On the other hand, in the U.S., education is viewed by many as a product which students (or their parents) "buy". In this case, more responsibility seems to fall on the Instructor. Indeed, it could be argued that the American college instructor is little more than a waiter serving a meal to a paying customer. The customer may consider that their payment to the establishment absolves them of any responsibility and "entitles them" to a quality product. Customers in even the most exclusive restaurant have no responsibility to actually eat the food, although they are usually required not to annoy the other patrons. Similarly some students consider that they are "entitled to" a good grade even though they have no responsibility to learn anything in class if they choose. Some might consider that like the waiter, the instructor has few rights other than those allowed by law and common courtesy. In reality, American teachers claim varying amounts of rights the full extent of which may depend on their personal teaching philosophy or the size of their ego.

It seems to me that the situation is even more complicated for the T.A. Mentor Workshop because the participants comprise a diverse collection of teachers, teaching a diverse collection of teachers. Unlike restaurant patrons, the new T.A.s will have obligations to the establishment which will continue after their "dining experience" is over. A second complication comes from the fact that as soon as the workshop is finished, instructors and students immediately become peers, who may compete or cooperate with each other in the near future. The possibility for mutual infringement or overlap of rights and responsibilities is therefore much greater than in most classroom situations.

The following two lists of rights and responsibilities for mentors and trainee T.A.s is one that I have constructed based partly upon my own teaching philosophy, partly on feedback from students and partly on guidelines from the Office of Faculty and T.A Development. Some of these might be true of students at American universities in general and others are unique to the workshop. The first five points of the first list are ones that emerged by consensus from my

own "ncentes" as part of a discussion of the motivational principles or rationale for the necessity of the "inclusive classroom" concept.

Rights and Responsibilities of Students:

- 1) Every student has the right to be considered as unique, not part of a group.
- 2) Every student has the right to learn as much as they possibly can base only on their individual abilities and without hindrance or harassment. Students are responsible for recognizing and respecting this right in their peers.
- 3) Every student has the right to use a learning approach that is reasonably compatible with their own learning style. On the other hand they are responsible for ensuring that they do not monopolize too much of the instructor's time or influence the pedagogy of the class in a way which is incompatible with the learning styles of others.
- 4) Every individual student has the right to a learning environment that allows them to feel safe, comfortable and positive, but is responsible for helping to maintain this environment for all other students in the class.
- 5) Students are responsible for policing themselves and others in the class to make sure that the all students enjoy the above rights. It is the student's responsibility to keep the instructor informed if any of these rights are infringed.
- 6) Every student has the right to hear realistic and unbiased projections about their future teaching experience at Ohio State from their mentor but has the responsibility to describe accurately their prior experiences, expectations and concerns.
- 7) Every new TA has the right to pursue a teaching philosophy that they are comfortable with based on their own personality but has a responsibility to consider new approaches in the spirit of professional development and has the additional responsibility of learning and generally complying with official O.S.U. teaching guidelines, as laid out by the Office Of Faculty And T. A Development.
- 8) Every new T.A has a right to their own philosophical or political opinion with regard to cultural diversity but has the responsibility of making their classroom an equitable and safe environment where every individual feels included in the learning process, regardless of their own biases.
- 9) Mentees have the right to disagree with the mentor on any issue but are responsible for maintaining an open mind regarding new ideas and should try not to unduly disrupt the flow of information to others.
- 10) Students are responsible for informing the instructor of anything said or done in class that makes them feel uncomfortable or inhibits their individual learning process. They are also responsible for asking for appropriate clarification or assistance if

anything in the mentor's teaching style seems to limit their learning, and for pointing out apparent errors of content made by the teacher. Students should be 'understanding of the fact that teachers are human and are capable of error.

- 11) Whereas it could be argued that most students have the right to not complete assignments or readings as they see fit, so long as they are prepared to accept the concomitant decline in grade, students of the T.A. mentor workshop are required to complete all readings and training exercises as a condition of their employment as a T.A. (This is one example of where a student might have greater than usual responsibilities).
- 12) Similarly, whereas most students can choose to attend class regularly, rarely or never, participants of the workshop are responsible for being present at every lesson since this is also a condition of employment.
- 13) Participants in the workshop have the right to additional support and help with their preparation for teaching in the form of reasonable continued contact with their mentor and access to additional written material and support from the Office of Faculty and TA development. they have the responsibility of not making unreasonable demands of a mentor after the workshop has ended.

Rights and Responsibilities of Instructors.

- 1) The instructor has the responsibility of treating each student equally and as an individual. The instructor should aim to facilitate the maximum possible learning by every individual student using whatever means work best. To do this, the instructor must take the trouble to get to know their students.
- 2) The instructor has the responsibility of maintaining a positive and safe environment in the classroom so that the class is an enjoyable experience for every individual. (I have found this to be one of the most difficult tasks in teaching. It is easy to get some of the students to love a class while others hate it. It is much harder to get all of the students to like the class.)
- 3) The instructor has the right to expect a certain minimum amount of respect and attention in order to be able to complete their assigned task. They are responsible for behaving in such a way as to command at least this much attention. How much respect is enough? My own philosophy is that formal or strained relationships in class do nothing to facilitate learning and are unnecessary in a class of adults. I prefer to remain congenial and informal with my students.
- 4) The instructor has a right to voice their opinion on teaching issues but is responsible for identifying it as such, particularly in cases when their personal teaching strategy differs from official O.S. U. teaching guidelines. (Perhaps this right might be reduced in an undergraduate class where the

instructor's opinion could be considered overly influential and intrusive. Part of my personal teaching approach is to rarely reveal my true opinion on anything in undergraduate classes, and especially not to offer my opinion on controversial issues unrelated to the class material.)

- 5) The instructor has the right to moderate class discussions but is responsible for doing so in an equitable and inclusive way.
- 6) The instructor has the right to initiate controversial discussion and make controversial statements but only to further the educational goals of the workshop. The instructor is responsible for maintaining a comfortable and equitable environment in the classroom and for challenging and controlling the actions or words of students likely to offend others.
- 7) The instructor has the right to be human and to make mistakes. This is true of both the class content and in the instructor's interaction with students. It is the instructor's responsibility to listen to and be sympathetic of a student's problems or grievances and to be professional, flexible and sincere when responding. It is primarily the instructor's responsibility to nurture, protect, and if necessary, repair the student-teacher relationship.
- 8) The instructor has the right to describe teaching strategies that have worked well in their own classes but have a responsibility to describe those which failed or which they regret. Mentors should avoid overly boastful anecdotes or generating a false impression of infallibility. Every new T.A. will occasionally encounter negative situations or negative feedback and they need to understand that this is normal and that their mistakes can be (and should be) addressed.
- 9) The instructor has the right to describe examples or case-studies of diversity issues in the classroom but has a responsibility to avoid using examples in a way which may be unbalanced or offensive.
- 10) Theoretically, since instruction also involves learning, the instructor should have equal access to the rights listed for students above. In practice, I would argue that the instructor should be held to a higher standard of tolerance and restraint than the students and may have to conceal or forfeit the expression of their own opinions and feelings in the classroom. This is necessary because the power differential in the classroom can make an instructor's opinions overly influential and also (hopefully) because of a professional desire to protect the feelings of the students out of a desire to maintain learning as a positive experience. Sometimes the needs and feelings of the students should ultimately take precedence over the individual ego of the instructor.
- 11) Since the mentees are themselves destined to become instructors, it could be argued that in this case, many of the rights and responsibilities of the

instructor also apply to the students. In particular, we might hope that the students may consider themselves responsible for a “higher standard of tolerance and restraint” and consider it a responsibility to approach the workshop in a more professional way than a non-teacher might

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