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Teaching Students the Importance of Professionalism

IN ALMOST A DECADE of teaching, I find myself lamenting that I still have to remind students to arrive on time, bring the proper materials, and pay attention to lectures. Despite admonitions and penalizing grades, students still use cellphones, do the bare minimum to pass an assignment, and struggle with constructive criticism. I often worry, how will they ever succeed in a professional workplace with these behaviors? So when my college introduced extracurricular workshops to help students develop professional behavior, I decided to go one step further and incorporate professionalism into all my courses.

On the first day of class, I explain why professionalism is 10-15% of the overall class grade. I point out that the behaviors and attitudes that make one a successful student (commitment to excellence, comportment, integrity, etc.) will translate well to the workplace. The classroom can, and should, be a training ground for students as they prepare to enter the professional workforce. Accordingly, I list and define eight professional values on the course syllabus. These behaviors and attitudes are derived from my college's professionalism initiative and are commitment to excellence, honesty and integrity, expertise, humility, respect, compassion, awareness of interpersonal boundaries, and comportment. I also include a list of specific behaviors associated with each professional value. For instance, texting during class demonstrates a lack of respect to fellow students and the professor, just as texting during a business meeting would show a lack of respect for coworkers and the boss. In the workplace, behaviors like these may result in a poor performance evaluation and a less-than-stellar reputation.

As for grading, each student begins the term with 100 points and loses a point for each unprofessional behavior exhibited. However, there are also points lost on the paper grades if students turn them in late. So, missing deadlines costs points on the assignment and points on their professionalism grade as well. Incorporating professionalism into the course gives me a better way to explain my justifications for why late papers are penalized, why coming to class late is unacceptable, and why students need to be respectful to others.

Throughout the term, I remind students of the professionalism requirement. Sometimes it's a gentle reminder to be more civil during class discussions or in a formal assignment where specific values are explored. I regularly ask students to write a short paper on the professional code of conduct or ethics for their specific discipline. I also create assignments that let them demonstrate their professionalism, such as debates or a group project. In an attempt to help them gauge their level of professionalism over the term, the final exam includes the following questions: "Discuss the professional habits, attitudes, and behaviors that you feel you did NOT exhibit or that you could have improved upon in this class," and "Discuss the skills and attitudes you have gained in this class that can be used to achieve academic and professional success."

As a result of these changes in my courses, student behavior has improved immensely. One student confessed, "I have failed to exhibit the values of professionalism because I never arrived to class on time and I turned in one of my papers late." Others admitted that they knew their behavior would be unacceptable to other professors and employers. Finally, many students have used this opportunity to assess how their lack of appropriate behavior resulted in their poor class performance. Several students took responsibility for their scores, admitting it was their fault they did not earn a passing grade.

Bringing professionalism into the classroom in an explicit, direct way can remedy many of those student behaviors that drive professors over the edge. And as happened in my courses, it is an excellent way to have students assess their own conduct and reflect on their behavior and attitudes. This approach often results in students taking more responsibility for their academic performance rather than blaming the instructor. According to student feedback, the focus on professionalism helps them see their classroom experiences as preparation for the "real" world. We do not have to dismiss inappropriate behavior as a sign of youthful immaturity or let it exasperate us. We can instead help students develop the skills, attitudes, and behaviors they need to chart successful courses as students and soon-to-be professionals.

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Angela F. Keaton, PhD; Teaching Students the Importance of Professionalism; Faculty Focus; November 17, 2017; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/teaching-students-importance-professionalism/] December 1, 2017.

Classes End - December 4
Exams - December 5-8
All Grades Due - December 10
Commencement - December 16
Holiday Break - December 24-31

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Examining the Unexamined: Why Do Students Procrastinate?

"EVEN WITH YEARS of teaching experience since then [grad school TA experience], there were still areas of my pedagogy that remained as they always had been—unexamined and essentially running on autopilot." So writes Kevin Gannon in an excellent piece on redesigning his exams (Chronicle of Higher Education, March 6, 2017). I appreciate the honesty of his admission and suspect it resonates with many of us.

Some of what's unexamined in the practice of many faculty are what seem like intractable problems—say cramming and procrastination. Students have procrastinated for decades—some of us did when we were students and a few (?) of us still do. It's a perennial problem for anyone who teaches, there can't possibly be a solution or someone would have come up with it by now. In fact, that was basically the conclusion of a colleague who wrote to me recently. "My students procrastinate. It compromises the quality of their work and diminishes what they learn, but I've come to accept it as a given."

In response, I dug around in my collection of articles and revisited a study I hadn't looked at in many years. Two marketing educators approached the procrastination problem from an entirely different and fully productive perspective. They wondered if there might be characteristics of the assignments themselves or details related to them that encouraged procrastination. They identified what those might be, put them in a survey, and asked students to think about an important assignment they had completed last semester. With the assignment in mind, students answered some general queries about procrastination (allowing researchers to establish a cohort of high and low procrastinators) and 30 questions about features of the assignment and details that surrounded it.

Here are the assignment features and details researchers thought might be related to procrastination (based in part on some previously published conceptual work): **fear** (worry that the student wasn't going to do well on the assignment); **norms** (work on the assignment was started early/late by everyone else in the class); **deadline pressure** (lots of assignments due before this one); **rewards** (incentives for getting started early); **interdependence** (other work in the course couldn't be done until the assignment or parts of it were finished); **interest** (assignment was something the student wanted to do); **skill variety** (assignment required a variety of skills); **scope of the task** (assignment was time consuming); **difficulty** (it was a hard assignment); **clarity** (did not understand assignment requirements); **propensity to procrastinate** (usually waiting until the last minute before starting assignments).

And did any of these **discourage** procrastination? Yes, not surprising, students procrastinated less when they thought **the assignment was interesting**. Think authentic assignments—ones that give students a chance to do work like that done in the discipline. Assignments that involved using a **variety of skills** also made students procrastinate less as did **clearly understanding** the assignment requirements. **Incentives** get students to start working as does **having assignments connected to each other**, or broken into units, so that the second part cannot be completed until the first part is done. And **norms** are influential. If everyone else is at work on the assignment, that engenders enough guilt to get others started.

If those features and details aren't part of the assignment, those likely to procrastinate use them as excuses. It's not an assignment they have any interest in doing. It's a writing assignment that requires no other skills, and what the teacher wants isn't clear. The assignment is due all at once and everybody appears to be putting off getting started.

Interestingly, for this cohort of marketing students, fear did not cause procrastination for either the high or low procrastinators. Students did not avoid working on the assignment because they were afraid they couldn't do it. Having other deadlines didn't cause procrastination either. One might assume students are used to deadlines and have learned to deal with them.

The study is 12 years old, but I'm not sure much has changed about procrastination and the assignment features and details likely still make a difference. Whether this particular list makes a difference for students working on assignments in your courses merits exploration. But the point I'd most like to drive home relates to those aspects of our teaching practices that we're taking for granted, doing as we have done, assuming as we've always assumed. They merit our attention, not all at once, but at least on a semi-regular basis.

Reference:
Ackerman, D. S. and Gross, B. L. (2005). My instructor made me do it: Task characteristics of procrastination. Journal of Marketing Education, 27 (1), 5-13.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Examining the Unexamined: Why Do Students Procrastinate?; Faculty Focus; November 15, 2017; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/why-students-procrastinate/] December 1, 2017.