

Subject: TP Msg. #1616 Students' Definitions of the College Classroom
From: Rick Reis <reis@stanford.edu>
Date: 1/29/18, 1:34 PM
To: "tomorrows-professor@lists.stanford.edu" <tomorrows-professor@lists.stanford.edu>



The college classroom is no exception. Students' satisfaction with a course and their willingness to engage in certain activities will depend in part on how well the instructor's definition of what is and ought to be happening in the classroom aligns with their own

JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Brand

[Subscribe/Unsubscribe](#)

[TomProf Online](#)

1616 Students' Definitions of the College Classroom

Folks:



The posting below looks at how students define their own and the instructor's responsibilities in class and what impact this has on student learning. It is from Chapter 4 – Students' Differing Definitions of the Classroom in the book, *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*, by Jay R. Howard. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. Copyright © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., A Wiley Company. One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200. San Francisco, CA 94104-4594 www.wiley.com All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

**Connect with
us on Social
Media**

Regards,

Rick Reis

reis@stanford.edu

UP NEXT: Having "The Conversation" – Telling Your Advisor You Don't Want to Be a Professor

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

----- 2,388 words -----

Students' Definitions of the College Classroom

Sociologists note that social contexts must be defined (Berger and Luckmann 1967). How participants in an interaction define a situation will determine what behaviors they see as appropriate for that context (Goffman 1959; McHugh 1968). The college classroom is no exception. Students' satisfaction with a course and their willingness to engage in certain activities will depend in part on how well the instructor's definition of what is and ought to be happening in the classroom aligns with their own. An important part of the process is defining the roles, the expectations for behavior, of both the instructor and students.

Recall that these definitions and role expectations are not developed from scratch. We bring years of experience in similar contexts to our interactions. The normative social expectations we have learned in the past will influence our initial assumptions about what is going on in a particular situation. Recall the elevator norms discussed in Chapter 1. When we ride a particular elevator for the first time, we do not reinvent the wheel. We rely on our past experiences, which have taught us what is and is not appropriate behaviors for riding on an elevator. We face the front. We divide up the space to allow one another as much personal space as possible. We limit interaction with strangers to a smile, a nod of the head, or small-talk. We don't have to wonder each time we step onto a new elevator – is this one of those where we face the front? Or will other passengers expect me to face the rear or the side of the elevator instead? Elevator norms are nearly universal. We don't spend any time or energy wondering about which direction we should face when we step on board a particular elevator for the first time.

The college classroom has clear normative expectations as well. In Chapter 2, we explored the norm of civil attention. In Chapter 3, we described the individual and contextual factors that help to determine which students are most likely to be the dominant talkers who accept the consolidation of responsibility for participation and which students are most likely to be only occasional contributors to class discussion. Fortunately for instructors who want to engage their students in the pursuit of greater learning, there is enough variation in how college courses are structured to allow instructors, as well as students, some room for negotiation in the definition of the situation in the classroom. Students have encountered some courses where the only person who ever talks in class is the instructor. They likely have also been in courses that were very interactive with high expectations for student participation. Students may have experienced courses with a significant amount of peer-to-peer collaborative learning. So there is a continuum of experiences with college courses from the expectation for high levels of student engagement to the expectation that students will be very passive. But the majority of students' experiences in higher education are likely to have had a heavy focus on the faculty member with an expectation for some participation, at least on the part of a few students. In sum, students will assume that civil attention and the consolidation of responsibility are the operative norms unless faculty members make intentional efforts to communicate a different set of norms and a new definition of the situation. Without those intentional efforts to help students redefine their understandings of the classroom, they may resent, or even actively resist, changes and are likely to express their frustrations in the end-of-semester course evaluations.

Therefore, it's important to know our starting point. How do students define their own and the instructor's responsibilities in class? What reasons do they give for their own participation or lack of participation? With an understanding of how students define the college classroom and what they think is expected of them, we can then begin the process of creating a new definition and new expectations.

Students' Views of Their Responsibilities in College Courses

What do students typically see as their responsibilities in the college classroom? Through a series of studies, my colleagues and I have found high levels of agreement that students perceive they should complete assigned tasks, attend class, study, learn the material, pay attention in class, and ask for help when needed (Howard and Baird 2000; Howard, James, and Taylor 2002; Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt 2006). However, there was one area of consistent and significant disagreement between students who are dominant talkers and students who are less frequent participants in class. Given the topic of this book, you can guess what that difference is. Talkers are significantly more likely than non-talkers to agree that students are responsible for participation in class discussion (Howard and Baird 2000; Howard, James, and Taylor 2002).

This difference in how talkers and non-talkers define their classroom responsibilities has been shown in a variety of contexts. First Year Seminar students studied by Goodman, Murphy, and D'Andrea (2012) did not perceive that verbal participation was required of them, viewing discussion as strictly voluntary. Fritschner (2000) found that the quieter students defined participation much more broadly than did talkative students. For quieter students, participation included things like attendance, paying attention, active learning, and doing homework. So in their view, they could be actively "participating" in class without ever speaking – a point of view the instructor may not share.

Interestingly, Goodman, Murphy, and D'Andrea (2012) also found that the creation of a safe, supportive classroom environment, at least when not combined with explicit expectations for participation, can potentially undermine an instructor's efforts to engage students in discussion. In their study, students' desire to be supportive of each other (part of a safe environment) didn't allow for them to express disagreement. Therefore, the professor's emphasis on a supportive, encouraging environment caused students to perceive it was acceptable to not participate and absolutely inappropriate to challenge a classmate's statements. After all, a supportive environment can be easily construed to be a situation wherein one is never made uncomfortable or asked to do anything he or she would rather not do. As they explored students' emotional reactions to and understandings of the classroom, Goodman, Murphy, and D'Andrea (2012) also found a tension between students' beliefs that they ideally should be both invested in classroom discussion and emotionally detached. Given this tension, some students chose not to speak when they were the most emotionally invested or held the strongest beliefs about the topic. This may have been a strategy to prevent students' sense of self or core beliefs from being subject to uncomfortable scrutiny. However, as instructors we need to be careful not to make assumptions that reflect poorly upon students' decision not to participate verbally.

Reda (2009) conducted a yearlong study of a first-year composition course in which students were occasionally asked to write about their experience of classroom silence. Through class members' writing and through interviews with five of the students, Reda (2009) concluded that students tended to perceive speaking in class to be a high-stakes situation amounting to an oral exam in which they were expected to provide the "right" answer. If the instructor graded participation, the stakes were even higher for students. Reda (2009) found that students, through their observations of the instructor, would assess the type of questions asked and the instructor's responses to student input to determine if they were being asked to reflect, speculate, hypothesize, or perform on what they considered to be an oral quiz. Reda's (2009) students, like those of Goodman, Murphy, and D'Andrea (2012), were also quite concerned with their classmates' perceptions and how perceptions of the speaker could be shaped by what a student says in class. This situation made it risky for students to verbally disagree with or challenge the views of their classmates. For example, Reda (2009) noted that challenging a peer on a highly charged topic like affirmative action could result in being branded a racist. Therefore, not only was participation viewed as stressful because it was perceived as an oral quiz, it was also hazardous in that it could result in classmates developing unfavorable views of you.

While faculty members often think that controversial topics are great for discussion, students may not see them that way. Whether one is discussing evolution, global warming, gun control, abortion, or any liberal-versus-conservative topic, the faculty member may see these as interesting topics for students to debate and discuss. However, our students may perceive them as quite threatening to their sense of self or to dearly held beliefs and as dangerous topics because of the risk of classmates' negative judgments of them.

One strategy for helping students discuss such sensitive and strongly held topics is to ask them to articulate the opposite perspective of the one they personally hold. You can justify this by suggesting that in order to defend one's position you must understand your critic's position. If you held a pro-gun control perspective, what arguments could you make against gun control? If students are attempting to place themselves in the role of another who thinks differently than they do, they are learning to view a topic, like gun control, from a different perspective. In so doing they learn both the strengths and weaknesses of their dearly held positions.

Each of the studies cited above points to the complexities of defining the situation in the college classroom, particularly when it comes to participation. What the instructor may see as a collaborative construction of knowledge, students may perceive as a high-stakes test made even more dangerous because of the risk of a negative social judgment by one's peers. These findings point to a need for instructors to involve students in a discussion about discussion by making explicit our understandings and expectations for discussion (e.g., "Not only are you not expected to always provide the 'right' answer, in many cases there is no single right answer"). Additionally, there is a need to vary the format of discussion from whole-class discussion to small groups to pairs to online forums in order to reduce the sense of risk involved for students. Later in this chapter we identify some strategies to assist with this goal.

Students' Views of Faculty Responsibilities in College Courses

Not only do students attempt to identify and understand their own roles as they develop their definition of the situation in your classroom, they are attempting to explicate the role and expectations of the instructor. As noted before, students attempt to assess the type of input the instructor may be seeking in classroom discussion (Reda 2009). They also try to determine whether the instructor desires their participation at all. And what students perceive about expectations for discussion may be different from what the instructor thinks he or she is communicating. For example, in one study I conducted with colleagues, we (Howard, Short, and Clark 1996) found that instructors perceived themselves pausing for and inviting students to participate in discussion more frequently than did their students. The instructors included in the study felt they were offering frequent and safe invitations for participation, while students felt instructors moved on quickly without allowing sufficient time for students to first contemplate and then respond.

Different groups of students may interpret the instructor's behaviors in the classroom in a dissimilar fashion. Students identified as talkers, who accepted the consolidation of responsibility for student participation, in Howard and Baird's (2000) study were significantly more likely to agree that the instructor paused long enough and frequently enough to allow for student questions and comments than were quieter students. Crombie et al. (2003) found that active participators regarded their professors as more positive, as more personalizing, and as stimulating more discussion than did other students in the same class who perceived themselves as less active participators. In addition, the active participators had a more positive impression of their professors overall compared to the less active students (Crombie et al. 2003), which certainly has the potential to influence their ratings and comments on end-of-semester course evaluations.

In terms of their expectations of the instructor role, talkers and non-talkers tend to agree that the instructor should be knowledgeable, make class interesting, follow the syllabus, motivate students to participate in discussion, and know students by name (Howard and Baird 2000). However, talkers were significantly more likely to say that instructors should help them "think critically about material" than were non-talkers (Howard and Baird 2000). This may reflect a difference in preparedness between talkers and non-talkers for what Roberts (2002) calls *deep learning* – a topic to which we return later in this chapter. Howard, James, and Taylor (2002) found that talkers differed from non-talkers in their expectations on a number of levels. Talkers were significantly more likely to agree that it is part of the instructor's responsibility to know students' names, to motivate students, to encourage discussion, and to pause long enough and often enough to allow

students to participate.

Students' expectation that the instructor be knowledgeable about the subject matter can be something of a double-edged sword. When students view the faculty member as the sole source of authoritative knowledge, it can reduce students' self-confidence, increase their fear of criticism, and thereby hinder participation (Weaver and Qi 2005). Given that self-confidence is a strong predictor of student participation, anything that undermines students' self-confidence will inhibit discussion. So while students rightfully expect the instructor to be knowledgeable, instructors must be careful not to create a definition of the situation wherein the instructor is the only source of knowledge and understanding. When an instructor over-relies on lecture, it is easy for students to perceive her as the only authoritative source of knowledge in the class. By taking intentional steps to involve students actively in class, we can make them co-creators of knowledge and understanding. Finding the proper balance between a focus on the instructor, who does (hopefully) bring added value to the class through her training and expertise, and engaging students in each other's teaching and learning is a challenge. The proper balance will likely vary based on the subject matter of the course, the course level, and the instructor's pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. Goodman, Murphy, and D'Andrea (2012) note that students may themselves split over whether the instructor should focus on covering the material or having student-centered discussions with some seeing discussion as desirable while others prefer the instructor-centered focus on the material.

References

Berger, P.L., and Luckmann, T. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967.

Crombie, G., Pyke, S.W., Silverthorn, N., Jones, A., and Piccinin, S. "Students' Perceptions of Their Classroom Participation and Instructor as a Function of Gender and Context." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2003, 74(1), 51-76.

Fritschner, L.M. "Inside the Undergraduate College Classroom: Faculty and Students Differ on the Meaning of Student Participation." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2000, 71(3), 342-362.

Goffman, E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1959.

Goodman, S.B., Murphy, K.B., and D'Andrea, M.L. "Discussion Dilemmas: An Analysis of Beliefs and Ideals in the Undergraduate Seminar." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2012, 27(1), 1-21.

Howard, J.R., and Baird, R. "The Consolidation of Responsibility and Students' Definitions of the College Classroom." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2000, 71(6), 700-721.

Howard, J.R., James, G., and Taylor, D.R. "The Consolidation of Responsibility in the Mixed-Age College Classroom." *Teaching Sociology*, 2002, 30(2), 214-234.

Howard, J.R., Short, L.B., and Clark, S.M. "Student Participation in the Mixed Age College Classroom." *Teaching Sociology*, 1996, 24(1), 8-24.

Howard, J.R., Zoeller, A., and Pratt, Y. "Students' Race and Participation in Classroom Discussion in Introductory Sociology: A Preliminary Investigation." *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 2006, 6(1), 14-38.

Reda, M.M. *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students*. Albany, NY: SUNY, 2009.

Roberts, K.A. "Ironies of Effective Teaching: Deep Structure Learning and Constructions of the Classroom." *Teaching Sociology*, 2002, 30(1), 1-15.

Weaver, R.R., and Qi, J. "Classroom Organization and Participation: College Students' Perceptions." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2005, 76(5), 570-601.

"Desktop faculty development 100 times per year."
Over 65,000 subscribers at over 950 institutions in more than 100 countries

TOMORROW'S PROFESSOR eMAIL NEWSLETTER

Archives of all past postings can be found here:

Sponsored by the Office of the Vice Provost of Teaching and Learning at Stanford University

NOTE: To SUBSCRIBE or UNSUBSCRIBE to the Tomorrows-Professor List click [HERE](#)

tomorrows-professor mailing list
tomorrows-professor@lists.stanford.edu
<https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fmailman.stanford.edu%2Fmailman%2Flistinfo%2Ftomorrows-professor&data=02%7C01%7Cslawrence%40sas.rutgers.edu%7Cc3edb10c1d20479803d808d567475028%7Cb92d2b234d35447093ff69aca6632ffe%7C1%7C0%7C636528478350763724&sdata=1160DI5K3un2FCAnYgty0GagorrWtAbN3qYtab0WHx0%3D&reserved=0>