Reactive to Proactive—
A Path to Teaching Success

What is your overall success strategy this term? Are you reactive or proactive when it comes to teaching? Do you wait for things to happen and then react to the myriad of situations, setbacks, distractions and disappointments that seem to pop up from moment to moment during each class? Or do you prepare, plan, analyze and act with purpose and direction?

Take a moment to think of someone you admire greatly. Does this person seem to be overwhelmed and battered by chaos? Does he or she randomly react from minute to minute? Or does that person function smoothly with a calmness of thought and action that for them leads to seemingly greater fulfillment and positive outcomes?

What does it mean to be proactive in teaching and learning? The more teaching experience you have the easier it is to assume a proactive mode of teaching. Why? Through the trial of experience, one learns firsthand what works and what does not.

Skilled instructors can more accurately predict their students’ reactions to and the effectiveness of a planned learning activity. With experience, you learn to make more rapid adjustments to the course speed, difficulty, mix of audio, visual and hands-on activities. So how can you traverse the chasm between a reactive novice instructor and the proactive, intuitive classroom or online veteran instructor in as brief of time as possible?

First, the more unfamiliar you are with teaching, the more performance feedback you need from students, peers and administrators in order to improve. Unfortunately, in many instances you will have to initiate a request for meaningful feedback from these sources.

The proactive instructor:

- Is grateful and hungry for feedback—the lifeblood of continuous improvement. Proactive teachers continually self-assess their performance from self-observations and from audio or video tapes recorded during their teaching activities.
- Seeks out training resources like this periodical and the brand new TFS Quickcourses, and commits to modifying (if necessary) and applying the improvement tips as soon as practical.
- Uses good models of teaching—such as the TFS PIE-R3 teaching and learning system explained in the September 2003 issue of TFS—to help optimize learning activities.

Be proactive and succeed.
Long-term, Solution Learning—Is This Perspective for You?

Michael Griffith
Communications, TFS Partner Editor
Northampton Community College
Tannersville, PA
mgriffith123@yahoo.com

Social critic Neil Postman once told an audience that many students view classes they take in a manner similar to the way many patients take medicine.

So long as an illness exists, the patient takes medicine. So long as an assignment or a course exists, students learn the required material. Once the illness is gone, the medicine is no longer taken. Once the assignment or the course is over, the student may stop learning and using that skill or knowledge.

Postman calls this “prescriptive learning.” Instead of prescriptive or short-term learning, why not offer your students long-term, solution learning?

In his book Solution Selling, Michael T. Bosworth explains that the best way to sell is to describe the goods or services as solutions to a problem.

In education and the seller becomes the teacher, the buyer becomes the learner, and the product or service becomes the body of knowledge. In effect, you view the material you are teaching as solutions to some problem in your students’ lives. What hole are you filling? What eventual fires are you teaching them to put out?

A good teacher must understand and demonstrate for his learners how their lives are presently without the knowledge they will be learning, and then how their lives will be after learning the material. And the successful teacher must answer the age-old question on students’ minds: “What can this subject do for me?”

As Bosworth states, in the complex world we live in, it is difficult for people to understand all the applications, options and configurations available to them in the products and services they buy.

Consider the course you teach. Can a novice student adequately understand what they are expected to get out of the course? While your syllabus may well contain a section on course outcomes, the student probably cannot fathom what you mean and how these outcomes apply to them until the point in the semester when they encounter each particular outcome that you have listed.

Once you get to a point where a given skill or outcome is to be learned, you should explain not only what the student is expected to learn or do, but also how best to learn, do and exhibit that skill or knowledge. And more, you have to show them how mastering the skill or knowledge will benefit them beyond the length of the course. What solution to some problem in their life does this skill or knowledge offer?

To teach successfully, you should have a knowledge of the student’s life and understand how the knowledge, skills and attitudes that you teach fits into that situation. You should also understand the capability of the student to learn what you are teaching, have the skills needed to teach your subject well, and have the people skills required to interact with your student in a meaningful way.

References
Lay the Seven Foundations of Successful Teaching

Susan Sharp
English instructor
Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA
Tidewater Community College, VA
writegurl@hotmail.com

Recently, a reporter asked a remarkably successful business entrepreneur the secret to her success. She revealed that she had built her business using seven fundamental rules. Her recommendation? No matter what your personal business style, no matter how you operate your business or no matter what your business is, you should never stray from these fundamentals.

Since education is my business, the students are my clients, and knowledge and skills are the goods I offer, I modified this entrepreneur’s list to fit the teaching profession and posted this list in my office. If these fundamentals worked for an extremely successful businesswoman, I reasoned, shouldn’t they work for me as well? The answer is a resounding yes.

Always follow through
Say what you’re going to do. Stick to the syllabus and your promised grading scale. Return papers when you say you will. Keep your office hours, and come to class on time. If you don’t keep your promises and meet your own deadlines, how can you expect students to keep and meet theirs? Set an example. After all, the students are there to learn from you.

Be positive and keep company with positive coworkers
Negativity can lower classroom morale and lessen your stamina. You set the emotional tone for your class; therefore, your students won’t have a good attitude about your class if you don’t. Positive colleagues can boost your moral as well as offer positive solutions to classroom problems. Also, because you might spend much of your time in the classroom, you’ll tend to be isolated from colleagues. Keep up your professional and social networks with your coworkers. You’ll benefit from their emotional support as well as fresh teaching ideas.

Never say anything negative about a student or coworker in front of a student
Be careful of who’s listening to what you’re saying. Venting in private about a student or coworker to a trusted colleague is one matter, but complaining about a student or coworker around or to students is another. In the student’s eyes, this behavior undermines your professionalism as well as the credibility of yourself and other faculty. Students will be less likely to listen to and learn from those they don’t respect. Also, students suspect their instructor might say unfavorable things about them to others as well.

Nurture the now
When the current term becomes wearying, it’s inviting to abandon the now and start to live in the future by diverting energy to the planning of future lessons and the meeting of a new group of students. Shifting your focus away from what seems to be a transitory relationship is always tempting. Remember that even though students come and go, your efforts are not wasted by focusing on the students in your care now. If students sense your inattention to them, who can blame them for losing interest in your class. Even though they’re with you for a short time, what they learn from you stays with them for a lifetime.

Check your personal value hierarchy
What is your highest value? Being a parent, sibling, friend, etc.? How do these more permanent relationships compare in value to a job that could be gone tomorrow. My personal life recharges my batteries for work, not vice-versa. How about you? How can you keep your enthusiasm high?

Be personal
Of course, you want to act like a professional around your students, but good teaching is about building good relationships. Students are motivated to do well when you take an interest in them. Remember their names and get to know them. Recall the little details they share about their personal lives. When they return from an illness, ask how they’re feeling. Share a bit about yourself: hobbies, a good joke, or professional interests and practical job experiences. Also, establishing a relationship can give you a leadership advantage with a potentially problem student.

Be creative about rejection and negative feedback
Learn from your mistakes. If students seem bored in class, don’t despair; get feedback and make changes. Learn from unfavorable evaluations rather than beating yourself over the head with them. Negative comments and evaluations aren’t predictors for the future, they’re springboards for change. Keep a sense of humor and look forward to improving semester after semester.
Unteaching Pseudoscience and Misconceptions

Brian R. Shmaefsky, Ph.D., TFS Partner Editor for Science
Biology and Environmental Sciences
Kingwood College
Kingwood, TX
brian.shmaefsky@nhmccd.edu

College students enter science classes with years of science misconceptions drummed into their heads. Some of these result from teachers who inadvertently taught the misconceptions as facts. Others slip in as pseudoscience.

Pseudoscience is incorrect information and unsubstantiated beliefs presented in the guise of science. Misconceptions introduced as erroneous facts are simple to unlearn. However, pseudoscience is difficult to remove from a student’s science conceptual framework.

Pseudoscience in the form of advertisements and testimonies for astrology, homeopathy, psychic readings, and unsubstantiated medical products bombard students daily. Other types of pseudoscience come as amazing stories on television shows.

Plus, a bulk of the e-mail chain letters and spam contains pseudoscience messages. Unfortunately, this sets up a difficult environment for college science faculty trying to instill accurate scientific principles and reasoning. Successful teaching under these conditions means that faculty need to undo the pseudoscience before teaching the real.

Attitudes not easily changed

A study of science attitudes in students conducted between 1979 through 2001 showed that traditional science teaching does not reduce pseudoscience beliefs (see Losh, et al, 2003). Overall, thirty percent of the population holds pseudoscience beliefs. Yet, the same proportion of people with a college education that included science believes in some type of pseudoscience. This shows that college-level science teaching is not reducing the tendency to accept science misconceptions.

The educational literature is replete with research about factors that influence science teaching. Previous learning is one major factor that hinders the learning of subsequent information. This sounds counterintuitive considering education uses repetition as a teaching strategy. However, inaccurate information and thinking that was learned earlier makes it more difficult to accept related concepts taught later. So, misinformation about science can prevent students from learning what is taught later in college introductory science courses.

Pseudoscience is dangerously close to true science because it is comprised of what appears to be rationale reasoning that has seemingly logical conclusions or outcomes. The inaccuracy of pseudoscience is only evident if the flawed facts or inappropriate conclusions are exposed. Inappropriate conclusions are not that easy to spot. The erroneous nature of the conclusions is sometimes due to subtle logical flaws such as misinterpreting correlation as cause and effect. It can also be attributed to the accepting outcomes that are not statistically supported.

Action steps

So, what should science educator’s change to reduce science misconceptions in students? First, the research shows that presenting a lecture on scientific method does not necessarily reduce science misconceptions and misunderstandings.

The lecture must be following with higher-order learning activities to reinforce true scientific reasoning. This means that faculty need to provide problem-solving activities in which students analyze, apply and evaluate the scientific method. Plus, similar experiences must be provided that teach students how to recognize science misconceptions. One successful way to achieve this is to have students critique accounts or news stories of science, pseudoscience and science misconceptions. Robert Parks’ article referenced below is very usual for teaching a simple set of criteria for recognizing pseudoscience.

In summary, why should college science faculty be concerned that students have science misconceptions and misunderstandings? Society has flourished with thirty percent of population having these beliefs. One reason is that funding for the advancement of scientific research could suffer if society focuses its resources on erroneous science.

Another reason is that science misconceptions can lead to a society that puts its future and health into useless endeavors. Many people die every year because they embraced ineffective pseudoscience cures and treatments for conditions that could have been easily helped by true scientific applications.

References

Do you need more information on this topic? Dr. Shmaesky has provided a full list of references. To access his reference list go to: <http://teachingforsuccess.com/IssueSupport2/IssueSuptIndex.html>.
How to Better Manage Homework Discussions

Rebecca Schantz
Associate Professor Mathematics, TFS QQ Editor
Prairie State College
Chicago Heights, IL
rschantz@prairie.cc.il.us

I have attended and have taught many classes in which the homework discussion was held at the beginning of class. Many of us, as instructors, try to set a time limit on this period, which can sometimes cause friction between the students and instructor.

A common scenario

You’re reviewing homework from a previous class assignment. A student wants you to do just one more homework example and then another student wants just one more problem covered. The result is that the planned 10-minute time limit for this activity turns into 20 minutes and now you’re stressed and pressed for time to make progress on learning the new material for this class session.

Try this approach

I have discovered a way to cover more material at a slower pace: I save homework discussion for the end of class. I usually administer short quizzes or CATs (Classroom Assessment Techniques) at the beginning of class and these assessments usually provide a nice review.

I usually block 75-minute classes and have found that this schedule has allowed me to reserve the last 10-15 minutes of class for an optional homework discussion at which time students are free to leave, but are encouraged to stay (“attends homework discussion” is one of the items listed on their student participation grade rubric).

Not perfect, objections raised

I have only found a couple negatives with this form of classroom management. One is that students who are doing poorly and choose to not attend the discussion are shooting themselves in the foot.

A student wants you to do just one more homework example and then another student wants just one more problem covered. What should you do?

These are usually the students who claim that they don’t have time to stay and are usually the first to complain that they don’t have time to visit me during my office hours. We have to remind ourselves that it is their choice and remind them that homework discussion is scheduled during the scheduled class time. The other negative I found is that while one item on my evaluation is improving, another item is not. Students find me very helpful, but they claim I am not holding class for the entire time. I am… they just choose to leave!

Solutions tried

One recommendation I have is to remind your students throughout the semester that even though a student chooses to leave instead of stay for the homework review session, you are there for anyone who chooses to stay and take advantage of this learning activity. We should also remind them of this right before handing out evaluations. My other recommendation is that we need to give students with homework questions priority over students who want to use that time to discuss their grade or personal concerns. I make this very clear in the syllabus.

Benefits of better management

Aside from being able to control how much time I spend on new material, there are other benefits. The feedback I receive does not complain of my “spending too much time answering students’ questions” and boring them with what they already know.

For example, students who get stuck on a particular concept are encouraged to stay at which time I will assist them. I have also found that holding homework discussion until the end of class encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. It’s giving them the opportunity to make their own choice and discovering the consequences, good or bad, of their choices.

The greater the obstacle, the more glory in overcoming it.

—Molière
Extra Credit Should Equal Extra Learning

Lynette G. Esposito
Instructor
Burlington County College
Mount Laurel, NJ
nichec0m1@aol.com

Each semester it seems that some students are more interested in earning extra credit to raise their grades than they are in completing the work that earns the basic grade.

Therefore, I decided to offer extra credit in more positive ways that would build additional knowledge and skills while expanding the possible ways students may earn grade points. I discovered that there are two important considerations when planning to include extra-credit points in a course grading system. These considerations are:

- The extra-credit opportunities should not create too much additional evaluation work for the instructor.
- The extra credit learning activities must lead to the achievement of valid learning outcomes.

Suggestions for use

The following points describe ideas that I have incorporated into my English 101 and 102 classes and you may find useful when offering extra credit.

Point research

Offer students a one- to two-point bonus for finding a unique fact or facet of English literature that is beyond the normal scope of the course. (I learn something new and the students use the research effort to benefit themselves academically.)

Test items

Add bonus points to the midterm or other test. Beyond the standard questions ask special questions that serve to add bonus points. These questions should be at a level beyond what the students are expected to know. The value of the bonus questions can be adjusted as needed to meet the specific situation of each course.

Contest corner

Create a contest and ask your students to create their own poetry after the form of the poets being studied. Participants earn bonus points to be added to their final grade.

Product sharing

If you assign several short papers and one more lengthy research paper, then your students could earn a one-point bonus for reading their papers aloud in class and for evaluating their own papers in comparison to those that have been read. And if a question-and-answer period follows the reading, a bonus could be awarded for handling questions in a superior manner.

Process sharing

When students are completing the research for a final paper, ask for student volunteers to present the information that they have found to be surprising, unusual or unknown. Bonus points are earned for these presentations and then added onto the final grade.

Keeping extra credit in perspective

A major consideration when creating extra-credit point activities is to ensure that the extra-credit work does not become more important than the required work. Students should complete the required work first to be eligible for earning extra credit. Students also need to know exactly how extra-credit points will affect their grade.

I explain my system using examples such as “If a student is one point away from a C, the extra credit will raise the grade to a C.” It should be made clear that bonus points are added to the final score. If a student earns 78 basic points and has earned five extra-credit points, the total will be 83 points.

Most students respond favorably to having a chance to raise their grades. Since not all students desire to read their papers aloud and many do not wish to write poetry, a variety of bonus-point opportunities should be created.

And it’s especially important to ensure that these extra-credit activities promote the attainment of additional learning outcomes so not only will the students be eager to do the extra credit learning and projects, but in completing them, they will increase their knowledge and skill levels.
Six Strategies to Boost Intercultural Communication

Anne McIntosh, Ph.D., Speech Communication Instructor; Staci Williams, Reading Instructor; Steve Mullis, English Instructor; Central Piedmont Community College; Charlotte, NC.

Here are six tips that we use to encourage our students to communicate more effectively with one another in a culturally rich community college setting.

Employing these tips may help you create innovative solutions that gently persuades international students and traditional American students to learn about each other and work through language barriers and cultural issues.

Teams

For assignments and projects where the students work in groups, you can create the work groups ahead of time to ensure that ethnic groups, genders, socioeconomic status, learning levels or any other salient demographic variables are being appropriately represented in each group. Research has proven that diverse teams are more creative and productive than homogeneous teams.

Resource matching

For help, determine if your institution has an Academic Learning Center, Writing Labs or Tutoring Labs. Find out what resources, personnel and other services are available to the international students to aid them in their acquisition and fluency of the English language. If time allows, plan a tour of these facilities so international students will know exactly where these labs are located. If labs are lacking in personnel, encourage native English speakers to consider a work study, internship, volunteer or paid position with the labs.

Key phrases

Train all students to write key phrases and words on chalkboards to help others comprehend what they are saying. Key phrases are appreciated by both groups of students: first, the international students will see the word in English and can take this as an opportunity to look up the word in their native language dictionaries if necessary, and second, the traditional students can better understand the international students’ pronunciation of collegiate terms. You should...

Prepare Student-to-student Feedback for Next Term

Steven McNamara, Ed.D.
Montgomery County Community College
Blue Bell, PA

Students who are currently taking your course have many suggestions and hints that can be recorded anonymously toward the end of the term and then presented early next term to students who are taking the same course.

These suggestions may be listed under categories such as tests, papers, class participation, textbook and so on. Students will more likely pay attention to class tips that are suggested by former students than if offered by a teacher alone.

These comments could be placed on a web page for easy access by your students. Some suggestions that my students recorded this semester include:

Class Time
- Be prepared for pop quizzes.
- Participate – Participate!!

Tests
- Multiple-choice questions are tougher than essays.
- Know and understand concepts, not just definitions.

The textbook
- It’s fairly easy to read and interesting. Read it!
- Review each chapter periodically.

Miscellaneous
- Have fun—you’re learning.
- If you cannot explain a concept in your own words, then you really do not know the concept.

Student-to-student feedback is simple to collect and valuable to students. As a teacher, you will also learn much about your class from a student’s point of view.
Six Strategies to Boost Intercultural Communication

exercise caution in translating for the traditional students or speaking for international students—you do not want the class to become dependent on you as a translator.

Instructor Teams

On college campuses that address English proficiency skills in courses for developmental students, at-risk students, or GED students, we encourage the reading and writing instructors of English and humanities to team together and create overlapping assignments that will reinforce what each instructor is teaching.

For example, if you are a writing instructor, you can require students to write an abstract or summary of an article from the reading class. The message to students is that the college is made up of a TEAM of instructors who are working towards the common goal of student success and that the courses create a continuity of learning.

Role models

Investigate your campus to determine who might be a successful role model for your students. This may be someone who identifies with the specific issues that are directly related to coming into a new culture, language, and environment.

A seasoned international student can serve as a role model by sharing firsthand knowledge, tips, guidance and support to inexperienced students who find themselves in unfamiliar academic settings.

If you are not able to readily identify a person on your campus, you can use national figures such as Les Brown. Les Brown, a successful motivational speaker, was once doomed with many of the problems that currently plague traditional and international students.

Game

Facilitate a hands-on ethnocentrism sensitivity exercise. Divide the class into thirds. One-third of the class gets blinders placed over their eyes; one-third of the class gets a gag across their mouths; and one third serves as ‘mute observers.’

Then select one student from each of the 3 above categories to form a group and give that group a simple task to complete—(e.g.: putting a CD-ROM into the computer drive; putting desks into a semi-circle). The teams can use ANY type of communication means to get their point across to team members in order to complete the task. After seeing how difficult it is to do so with the restrictions and limitations, call time and ask students to remove their blinders and gags.

Then allow them to complete the task that had been made so difficult. Summarize the exercise by saying that we are the ones who put blinders and gags on ourselves when interacting with each other. By being aware that we are stifling cultural diversity, we can then sensitize ourselves to remove the metaphorical blinders and gags and proceed with the real task of learning from each other!

Comments and improvement suggestions to these strategies are welcome. Please contact Anne McIntosh via e-mail <Anne.McIntosh@cpcc.edu> with any modifications that work well for you.

Communication continued from page 7

Service-learning makes the perfect couple out of the community college student and life beyond the classroom.

How to Analyze Course Content and Amaze Your Colleagues

Jack H. Shrawder
Editor and Publisher Teaching For Success

There are two fundamental questions to be asked when analyzing the body of knowledge that comprises your course of study. First pick a topic in your course. Then ask, “Why is this topic taught?” You will discover that the answer to this question will move you up a continuum toward a more general level of knowledge. If you keep asking, “Why?”, you will eventually arrive at a point where your course content branches off to another course of study and you will clearly see the reason to learn this material. If you ask, “How?” the answer will lead you to greater and greater topic specificity about what knowledge needs to be taught to fully support the learning of the topic that you picked as a starting point.