

Dealing with Teaching Anxiety

Dealing with Teaching Anxiety: A Personal View
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I suspect that, as we look back over our years of education, the only people who are more memorable than our best, most inspiring and beloved teachers are the ones who were really awful. I can recall with all too little difficulty Mrs. Crane, my grade school librarian who always had liquor on her breath and who sought to hide the fact with an endless procession of cough drops, transported to her mouth in a hankie during "coughing spells." I remember Miss McWilliams, my high school geometry teacher who alternated between screaming at her students and arguing with her hallucinated voices (she was literally "taken away" one day). Mr. Farris, my art teacher, attracted his students' attention by throwing erasers, chalk, and, once, a chair, at them (he was fired). Then there was Miss Dillon, the icy cold science teacher who responded to student inattention with either the full arm grasp or the ever-so-much more painful fingertip pinch. Music instructor Miss Wilson never overtly lost her temper but paddled her students to within an inch of their lives on their birthdays. In college, my economic geography professor watched his feet bring him to the podium, opened his notebook and, after a quick glance to ascertain that there were, indeed, students in the room, read the galley proofs from his textbook, word for word, without ever looking up again. He took no questions in class or afterward. He had no office hours. He also had no students conscious at the end of his lectures.

For years I assumed that these people were just "bad teachers;" that they were unmotivated, stupid, inconsiderate, or just plain crazy. For the most part, my assumption was probably correct, but a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and 15 years in front of college classes have helped me to recognize how important anxiety and stress can be in creating these educational derelicts.

Teaching Anxiety

The topic of teaching anxiety is of special interest to me because, though I am generally regarded as a good classroom teacher, I initially suffered with severe anxiety about teaching and I have never been completely free of it. There are not a lot of data on the prevalence of teaching anxiety, but I suspect that my early experiences are fairly common among teachers of agriculture (and other disciplines). I base this statement on the following logic:

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1. Anxiety over public speaking and being evaluated are two of the more popular problems reported by college students. Speech anxiety was second only to taking exams in a 1976 survey (Janisse & Palys, 1976) and it usually ranks high in "popularity polls" of various fears (e.g., Bernstein & Allen, 1969).

2. Classroom teachers are almost invariably ex-college-students.

3. Many college experiences with speech making, let alone teaching, sensitize rather than desensitize people to make a public presentation mainly because very few agriculture students get any formal training in teaching or ways of making teaching less traumatic.

Thus, every day many agriculture faculty probably face their classes while experiencing the physiological arousal, subjective distress, and behavioral disruptions known collectively as anxiety. Some of these people are quite obvious about it. I have met faculty who come right out and say that they have trouble teaching, that it "scares them to death." Their fear is usually very obvious and both students and colleagues are typically sympathetic and helpful. More problematic are people who refuse to talk about their anxiety. This is especially common among "macho" males who believe that competency and high status require cool, unemotional rationality at all times, and among females who, because they want to succeed in a male world, attempt to "out-macho" the men by keeping problems, weakness, and vulnerability to themselves. Usually, these individuals display their distress in less direct ways which are not likely to bring about an understanding response from others.

For example, it is consistent with what we know about the effects of anxiety in other settings to suggest that teaching problems of the following kinds *could be* due, in part at least, to anxiety:

1. Inability to "think on your feet" (e.g., giving confused or overly lengthy answers to student questions).

2. Consistently negative interactions with students (e.g., hostility and sarcasm toward students' questions or comments; inappropriately nasty remarks about student abilities, interests, and motivation).

3. Development of escape/avoidance patterns and tactics (e.g., inconvenient office hours; being "too busy" to talk to students after class or by appointment; lack of preparation for class; heavy reliance on films, guest lecturers, or student presentations).

4. Development of overly rigid or overly lenient relationships with students (e.g., fanatical adherence to class or institutional rules and regulations; insistence on outward signs of deference from students; obvious attempts to curry favor with students via easy exams, overly flexible requirements, capricious grading policies, revelation of upcoming test material, expression of indifference over the meaning of grades).

5. Appearance of "multiple personality" (typified by the person who is reasonably calm, relaxed, and gracious in most situations but who becomes defensive, hostile, and rigid in class).

6. Appearance of paranoid thinking (e.g., "students enjoy making me look foolish").

Over an extended period of time, teaching anxiety, like anxiety relating to other situations can, in severe cases, lead to such additional manifestations as physical illness (e.g., ulcers, colitis, cardiac arrhythmias, headache, chronic pain, hypertension), alcohol/drug abuse, disrupted family and collegial relations, and sexual dysfunction. Taken together, these problems may lead to a syndrome of depression, apathy, fatigue, disengagement, and escape which is referred to as chronic stress syndrome or, more popularly, as "burnout." The appearance of a stress syndrome is usually gradual, beginning with brief episodes, then longer bouts and, finally, a constant condition which includes both behavioral and physical components.

Agriculture teachers are by no means alone in facing anxiety and stress syndromes. The problem is now officially recognized by the American Medical Association, The American Dental Association, The American Psychological Association, The American Nurses Association, legal groups (Lawyers Helping Lawyers, Inc.), police departments, and other organizations. All of these groups have established referral and/or counseling programs for their distressed members. At least one school district not only offers counseling and referral services to its teachers, it provides 60% of base salary until age 65 for those who are mentally or emotionally unfit to teach because of stress (Young, 1980).

Dealing With Teaching Anxiety

There are many techniques available to help reduce teaching anxiety. The methods which will work best for any individual usually depend upon the sources of the problem. A teacher may be anxious because he or she fails to prepare adequately for classes or because of a deficit in basic lecturing skills. Here the classroom may actually be a very unpleasant place in which anxiety is an understandable response. Help and advice

from more experienced colleagues or an inservice teaching development program, may be very beneficial in alleviating this type of anxiety. To the extent that a teacher has developed an involuntary "conditioned anxiety response" in the classroom, perhaps because of previous negative teaching experiences, several standard psychological treatment methods (such as systematic desensitization) may be helpful (Bernstein & Paul, 1973). If teaching anxiety is just one result of a generally tense lifestyle, relaxation training, a time management program, or regular exercise may be needed.

While these methods can be useful in dealing with many instances of teaching anxiety, changing the way we think can also help to deal with this difficult problem. Along with psychologists such as Albert Ellis (1973), I want to emphasize the possibility that what we tell ourselves about teaching and about ourselves as teachers can have a lot to do with how much stress and anxiety we experience.

Consider this example: A student writes you a letter after the final examination in your course. He/she is a senior, has the highest grade in the class, is very smart, always has excellent questions, and obviously has a bright future. He/she says "I just want you to know, now that the class is over, that you are the worst teacher I've ever had. You don't lecture well, your exams are ridiculous, you obviously have only a superficial knowledge of your material, you are boring, and you dress like a slob. Why don't you quit and make room for someone who knows what they are doing?"

Now obviously, this person cannot count tact among their virtues, but you still need to deal with the message. There are at least two alternatives. You can get upset, agonize over the criticism, feel terrible that a student feels this way, let it cause you to seethe inside with a combination of anger, self-doubt, hostility, paranoid thoughts, and fear. Or you can examine the letter objectively, recognizing that (a) it is **one** letter which must be viewed against the backdrop of other student, peer, and self evaluations, (b) the student's reaction seems extreme and possibly reflects misdirected anger over something else, (c) there may be some truth in the criticism which could lead to improvement in the class, but it is unlikely that you are as incompetent across the board as is suggested, and (d) even if everything stated *were* true, you are still a worthwhile person who is competent in other roles and who can decide whether to work on or ignore the problems.

Unfortunately, most of us are prone to reacting in the first rather than in the second way. I think this is because, as Ellis has pointed out for life in general, most of us have developed *cognitive habits* which make teaching more stressful than it needs to be. When they occur in the classroom context, I have called these habits **Teaching Myths**.

Ten Teaching Myths

Most of us have adopted at least one of these myths, implicitly or explicitly, at one time or another. Those who try to teach while maintaining several of them probably find the classroom to be a rather uncomfortable place. How many of these myths are familiar to you?

1 "I must remain in the teacher role while I am teaching, even if that means suppressing spontaneous human responses." This often appears to relate to a desire to emulate our own teachers, and thus adds an extra burden. Combatting this myth is as easy as letting your own personality come through to students. But that may not be so easy because of Myth number 2.

2 "If I come out-of-role, I will lose the respect of my students." This is a variant of the notion that if you let someone really get to know you, they will discover how inadequate you really are. It also assumes that students are constantly probing for weaknesses to attack. The common tendency for people to build "walls" around themselves for protection against emotional pain is as problematic in the classroom as it is in other areas of life. One can begin to let his or her real self show by working against Myth number 3.

3 "I can never allow myself to be unsure, to admit I am wrong, ignorant, weak, vulnerable, or humorous. I should never say 'I don't know'." Yet, no one can ever know everything about a discipline. The teacher who lets students in on the fact that he or she is a fallible human being, just like everyone else, is likely to have a sympathetic and respectful class. The instructor who continues to posture, "vague-it-up" when uncertain, or otherwise "fake it" in class is likely to face students who are amused by but hostile toward the next display of pretense.

4 "My students **must** respect me because I am their teacher." This idea has been proven useless by parents for centuries, but some teachers remain attached to it and continue to be very upset at any hint that their students are less than totally obsequious. The fact is that some students may **not** always be respectful. This may not be desirable, but getting upset about it is not likely to help very much. Open discussion about the problem with particular students, in private, may be more useful.

5 "I must include in my course **everything** about the subject matter. Any omission makes me a poor teacher." This belief often leads to overlong reading lists and rushed, overwhelming lectures which neither the instructor nor the students enjoy. Since no course can ever cover all that **could be** considered relevant, it might be more adaptive and satisfying to relax and deal with a reasonable amount of material in enough depth to peak the students' interest.

6 "My students should always be interested in what I have to say." This would suggest that such student behaviors as sleeping, staring out the window, writing letters, or knitting should be dealt with as matters of utmost importance, deserving of immediate attention and remediation. In fact, every teacher has the option of simply recognizing that inattention can occur in any classroom. If there are students who are not interested in the class, perhaps they should be encouraged to drop it, or at least skip the lectures. On the other hand, a frank discussion with students (especially the better ones) may suggest that the lecturer could improve his or her lecture style or organization. The point is that student inattention can be a cue for anxiety or for efforts to better understand and deal with the problem.

7 "My students **must** learn everything I teach." This presupposes Myth 6 and leaves no excuse for the student who forgets most (or all) of the material covered in class. Again, the problem can prompt anxiety and anger (stressful either way) or an attempt to analyze the situation. Perhaps the instructor can be clearer. Perhaps, for many students, the course is an elective (taken pass-fail?) about which they care little and in which they expect to learn even less. If rational analysis points to a need for better lecturing techniques, why not do what can be done to improve? If improved lecturing peaks the interest and enhances the learning of previously apathetic students, so much the better. But even if some of them never learn or retain very much, the energy spent worrying about it could be put to better use in teaching the ones who care.

8 "Students are basically lazy, untrustworthy, and not very bright." While probably true in some cases, this belief reflects a rather narrow construal of the world and, to the extent that it is overtly communicated, is likely to make matters worse for the students and the teacher. Those students who really are lazy and not intellectually superior will probably respond by fulfilling the prophecy. That is, they will behave as the teacher expects, doing no more than the minimum and making no effort to improve. For the brighter, more motivated students, the teacher who subscribes to this myth will be a source of frustration and humiliation, not to mention a target for hostility and resentment. And from the teacher's point of view, he or she must now deal with a group of (justly or unjustly) insulted individuals who are likely to behave in a multitude of ways which make the classroom a tense and unfriendly place to be. An alternative approach would be to recognize that **some** students are lazy, **some** are untrustworthy, **some** not very bright, and **some** are all of these. Some, however, cannot be described in these ways at all. Whatever the case, the teacher is unlikely to drastically change these characteristics in one term. An effort to give each new

class the benefit of the doubt and to let each student remain innocent until proven guilty can, by minimizing the adversarial aspect of teaching, make it less stressful.

9 "This is my students' only class, or at least their only important class." Every teacher is tempted to overestimate the importance and value of his or her subject matter relative to other disciplines, but students must face the reality of reading and writing assignments in four to six courses each term. So, even if your course in agricultural economics were the most important course in some cosmic sense, your students would still have to figure out how to meet your demands as well as those of other instructors. This fact is worth remembering when drawing up syllabi, reading lists, project assignments and the like. If students' lack of class preparation, missed deadlines or requests for extensions are a source of stress for you, perhaps a partial solution lies in a reexamination of how realistic your expectations are. I am **not** talking about lowering standards or watering down course content. I **am** suggesting, however, that assignments which are unrealistic in the context of a normal student courseload may stress both student and teacher. Further, the student may feel pressured into doing the minimum to "get by" (learning little in the process) or even resorting to dishonest measures in order to get a decent grade (Barnett & Dalton, 1981).

10 "My colleagues probably teach better than I do" and "I must teach better than my colleagues do." This set of mythical beliefs may ultimately be the most anxiety-provoking and destructive of all because it threatens us at the core of our identity as teachers and scholars. Individuals who are caught up in these myths are likely to be secretive about their teaching methods, shunning any sort of teaching evaluation, and placing their classrooms off limits to visitors. Preoccupation with what other instructors might be doing and with the uselessness of student evaluations (especially positive evaluations!) may siphon off much of the energy the teacher has available for preparing and delivering lectures. This is an especially unfortunate situation because, first, most of us received little or no training in teaching at any point in our educational careers. So, chances are we are about average as teachers; true, some of our colleagues **are** better, but some are worse (often far worse). Second, while it would be nice to be a really outstanding teacher, by definition there are relatively few of them. A competitive approach to teaching and worrying about where one is in terms of teaching excellence is not likely to be very productive, either in terms of improving teaching skill or in terms of minimizing anxiety. In fact, this competitive attitude perpetuates anxiety by isolating the teacher from requesting help or advice and from exchanging useful ideas about teaching.

Solution

The most likely solution to this aspect of teacher anxiety is communication. If a teacher can overcome the fear that others would condemn his/her efforts if they knew about them (see Myth number 2), two things are likely to happen. First, the teacher will discover that most of what he/she does is viewed as perfectly adequate, that some methods and ideas are considered outstanding, even unique, and that only a few if any would be (gently) judged lacking. Second, an open discussion about teaching and teaching methods with other teachers will no doubt reveal a host of new ideas which are not only useful but which can enliven class sessions for the students **and the teacher**. If the teacher is not bored by the material he/she is presenting (or by the method of presentation), the students will not be bored, either. A visit to colleagues' classrooms, return visits from those colleagues, and lots of talk about similarities and differences, can do a great deal to reduce the anxiety which comes from competitiveness and isolation.

Some of the specific ideas I have presented about teaching anxiety and ways to deal with it may ring true for you or for someone you know. Others may not. The point is that teaching anxiety, like anxiety over other matters, is usually a result of learning through experience. By asking ourselves what we are doing, what students are doing, and what we think about in teaching situations, we can begin to see the sources of the problem. And when these sources are spelled out clearly, they can begin to suggest their own solutions. In most cases, those solutions will focus on **caring** about teaching and making adequate **preparations** for each class, but they are also likely to involve **taking things less seriously**, easing up on oneself, and countering the myths of teaching.

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