Real Challenges of the Classroom

Real Challenges of the Classroom:

The Hahas, Oh Nos, and As Ifs that Lead to Better How-Tos

Edited by

Stephanie Kelly and Suzy Prentiss

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Real Challenges of the Classroom: The Hahas, Oh Nos,
and As Ifs that Lead to Better How-Tos

Edited by Stephanie Kelly and Suzy Prentiss

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-4564-5
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4565-2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

A Letter to Our Readers

Stephanie Kelly
North Carolina A&T State University
Suzy Prentiss
University of Central Florida

Dear Reader,

Teaching can be a dynamic and unpredictable practice. Even the most meticulously planned lessons can go awry. Sometimes, our best ideas simply do not work as intended. Other times, students surprise us with unexpected challenges. Despite the frustrations, misadventures in teaching offer invaluable opportunities to become better educators. When teaching disasters strike, it is important to reflect on them.

Reflective practice, stepping back to consider how a situation was handled, what went well, and what could be improved, is a powerful tool for continuous improvement (Schon, 2008). This practice invites educators to understand themselves more deeply, along with their students and the dynamics of the ever-evolving classroom. Reflective practice considers cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, forging connections between past actions, present insights, and future intentions (Karnieli-Miller, 2020). It builds an awareness of personal strengths and limitations while nurturing resourcefulness and decreasing stagnation (Colomer, 2020).

This book offers a collection of reflective practice cases in teaching, offering real-world stories and insights drawn from educators' lived experiences. Each chapter showcases lessons learned from the messier moments of teaching, inviting readers to reflect and grow, and introducing research that helped the educators unpack their reflections. This book celebrates the messiness of teaching, honoring both the triumphs and the setbacks as essential steps in each teacher's journey of shared learning and professional

growth. May these shared experiences encourage your own reflective journey, inspiring growth and resilience as you embrace the inevitable fiascos of your own classroom.

All the best,
Stephanie & Suzy

References

Colomer, J., Serra, T., Cañabate, D., & Bubnys, R. (2020). Reflective learning in higher education: Active methodologies for transformative practices. *Sustainability*, *12*(9), 3827. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12093827

Karnieli-Miller, O. (2020). Reflective practice in the teaching of communication skills. *Patient Education and Counseling*, *103*(10), 2166-2172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2020.06.021

Schon, D. A. (2008). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

Chapter One

From Disconnected to Reconnected: Adjusting Materials and Expectations to Reach Alignment with Students

Ian Berry
University of North Dakota

Completing a Ph.D. is a cumbersome task, often marked by sleepless nights and copious amounts of coffee. From my experience, juggling a full-time teaching position, caring for a 15-month-old, and expecting another baby, the final stretch of my dissertation felt particularly overwhelming, and I'm astonished that I even finished. Reflecting on this period of my life, I realize how these challenges led me to a particular teaching problem that I experienced during the Fall semester post-graduation. This experience ultimately impacted my students' learning outcomes and completely took me by surprise. This chapter recounts my journey, highlighting a critical teaching mistake I made and the steps I took to reconnect with both my students and my teaching pedagogy.

To provide some context, my trajectory in academia was a little more nontraditional than most. Instead of the approach of a typical graduate school student where one earns their undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. sequentially, I secured a full-time public speaking position and taught for five years after I earned my master's degree. After this, I pursued my Ph.D., and right after completing my coursework, I obtained a full-time teaching position (again) while also finishing the remaining year of my Ph.D. and completing my dissertation.

Once I finished my dissertation, I remembered updating my curriculum for my Fall courses late in the summer months before the next semester began. Despite reviewing my teaching notes and student feedback from the previous semester, I couldn't quite comprehend why students often

commented on being confused about the relevance of the content or misinterpreting my expectations with assignments. As the semester approached, I continued preparing my courses, increasingly aware of the impending start and the unresolved issues from previous feedback I received. Looking back on it, my internal monologue was trying to tell me something that I was completely oblivious to.

It wasn't until midway through the Fall semester when I had a casual conversation with my department chair who was checking in on me to see how things were going. I'll admit, those eight weeks were tough, as I found myself in a constant state of disappointment with students not understanding their work and being frustrated by the large amount of feedback I was giving for each assignment. At one point during our conversation, she casually asked what an average undergraduate-level class looked like from me. I explained that the typical course expectation would include weekly papers (often with a 2-page minimum with references), midterm and final, a literature review paper, and other measures that included quizzes and "mini" papers. I went on to say that the readings covered were often dense materials that included books, research articles, and other post-modern theoretical work.

In what can only be described as a *very* long pause my department chair replied simply, "That's too much."

Analysis

A Misbehavior Pedagogy

In the following days after our conversation, I started to reflect on what exactly I was doing wrong. Clearly my department chair saw something, and my students experienced it, but I was unaware of it. I started rereading my student evaluations from the previous semesters and reviewing past assignments that I previously used. Everything seemed fine to me, but it really didn't become apparent until I decided to track down my files from when I was an undergraduate nearly 12 years ago. I even began to review my own assignments from when I was a TA during my master's degree and when I taught full-time as a public speaking lecturer as well. And that's when it occurred to me.

I was assigning and expecting way too much, and I was completely disconnected from my student's learning outcomes. In a sense, I could argue that my threshold of understanding, and their threshold of understanding did

not align. According to Meyer and Land (2003) a threshold concept develops as a portal to a new way of thinking that was previously inaccessible. They argue that once a transformed view has developed, the threshold perception, apprehension, and experience become increasingly complex and different and that the prior learning experiences becomes detached (Meyer & Land, 2003). Generally speaking, this is a prevalent issue in academia because once that threshold has been procured, there is a sense of privilege and a disconnect between the current and former way of comprehending subject matter. In my case, my graduate training transformed all aspects of my academic life, leading to a disconnect in everything I thought I was teaching correctly according to my own perception that was influenced by my training.

However, there was more to this than just simply realizing that my threshold was misaligned. I also began to see my mistake from what Goodboy and Myers (2015) discuss as instructor misbehaviors. Specifically, I was causing two issues. First, I was overwhelming my students with information overload and second, my inflated expectations were dramatically decreasing student learning outcomes, all of which were negatively impacting students' affective learning, cognitive learning, and state motivation in my courses (Goodboy & Myers, 2015).

As I reviewed and reflected on my pedagogy, it was clear that I had to make some changes. My expectations were unrealistically too high, the material I was teaching was overwhelmingly complicated, and the outcomes I expected from my students could not be achieved in the method I was teaching in. The assignments I created didn't have rubrics (of all things, rubrics!). And, when I did have them, they were often enigmatic at best. My assignments and material were unclear and dense, and it showed when it came time for me to grade them because the material my students created went somewhere outside of my own narrowed expectation which ultimately hindered their understanding and creativity to learn.

I began to question, what happened? In the five years between my master's and Ph.D., I had eager students asking me to enroll in my already-over capacity classes. From my perception of this, I likely had a positive reputation, and, in those years, I was even nominated by the student body as a candidate for the instructor of the year award. Instead, now, I was a postgraduate turned teaching professor in a full-time position, expecting students to recite Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* word for word when I spent four months using his book in my dissertation!

Disconnection

Looking back at the start of my Ph.D., I knew the challenges that lay ahead. I embraced these challenges because I was intrinsically motivated to learn the material. The rigor of my courses and the high expectations I set for myself worked well for me. However, reverting to my previous teaching mindset from before my Ph.D. proved very difficult. Not every student learns the same way that I do, not every student is intrinsically motivated to learn the same material that I did, and most students will probably not use the entirety of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in their careers post-graduation. In fact, most students desire a professor who is organized and structured with well-defined assignments and rubrics (Bloom et al., 1956), brings enthusiasm, mindfulness, transparency, and embraces modern technologies (Goodboy and Myers, 2015), and emphasizes clarity, competency, and relevance to the material they are learning (Goldman et al., 2017).

Just like what I experienced in graduate school, everyone who survives knows that the courses, albeit invaluable, are very challenging. The curriculum of these courses often does not include things like rubrics or specific writing prompts (but that doesn't discredit the graduate faculty who *do*). This is because, traditionally, graduate school is meant to prepare students to learn and generate novelty and creativity without constraint. Put another way, to learn how to research and write original publish-worthy papers. This is really where my disconnect originated from. I was still stuck in grad-mode, only this time, I'm the professor and I'm taking this disconnection out on my students without even being aware of it.

In essence, my mistake was neglecting the importance of clarity on assignments and rubrics, which are fundamental components of good teaching. Bolkan et al. (2016) explain that "it is crucial for instructors to remember that simply providing information is not enough to ensure that students have engaged with the material in ways that promote deep learning and a lasting memory" (p. 130). Yet, the assignments I created were ambiguous and I also did not have rubrics (I wish I was joking). Even a flawed or incomplete rubric would probably have sufficed better than what I was doing. When it came time to grade, it was entirely left up to me, often subjective, to assess, and those grades were often not understood by my students either. Thinking back on it, they were arbitrary at best and most likely led to student anxiety and apprehension.

However, reflecting on this matter, I began to ask the right questions. Previously, I would wonder why students did not understand a prompt—did they even read it? But this line of thinking was unproductive. After some continued conversations with colleagues, I shifted my approach. Instead, I asked, what is it that I want them to learn, and how can I assess their outcome? This perspective was simpler and clearer. The rubric became a tool for me, forming the foundation as I recreated the curriculum and assignments. It did not matter if the rubrics contained mistakes; what mattered was having them in the first place. After all, a simple announcement on any LMS (learning management software) would suffice to correct any errors and students always appreciate the transparency and honesty from their instructors.

Reconnection

From this revelation of my disconnected pedagogy, I took a step back to reconnect with myself as a newly employed teacher and with materials that I wanted my students to learn. I do not want to dismiss the hard work my students had done previously before I reassessed my curriculum and expectations. Some of them created very strong papers on matters that were novel and worthy of graduate level writing, and I could tell how intrinsically motivated some of them were to learn the material.

Of course, as an excited professor on the materials of communication, I get ecstatic, but not every student felt the same way I did. Shin and Bolkan (2021) offer that, because of my optimism to teach the material, students would have higher self-efficacy and higher intrinsic motivation to learn. However, I also want to emphasize that my students are human beings, many of whom are taking several classes outside mine and additionally may have other activities and even jobs that they must commit to while in college. It's overwhelming for them, and it's getting harder, especially as tuition and the cost of living continue to increase.

I began to dissect and categorize the materials that matter away from the general scope of materials I was trying to force upon them. What was more important to them *and to me*, a class crammed with content or a class where they could concentrate on one theory that could be applicable to their personal and professional lives? The answer was clear. Instead of having weekly critical papers on new and dense material every week (sometimes even more), finding something of interest, exploring it in many different instructional modalities, and reflecting on those materials were much more effective strategies.

One final remark. Before my mistake, I frequently questioned myself if I was doing too much while simultaneously doubting that my curriculum was not enough. It was a familiar feeling when I got my first full-time position after my master's degree, but at that time, I was exclusively in charge of teaching public speaking, a course that most graduate students teach as part of their graduate stipend agreement. It's also a course that I taught four times a semester, and it is saturated with resources from virtually everywhere. This time, it was different. I had four "prep courses" and a scholarly attitude that I was required to fit everything I've ever learned (and then some) into every class I taught, no matter how difficult it might be and no matter how ridiculously dense it was. Reassessing this mistake, I took a step back and accepted that it's much more effective to start with something simple and build from there. Metaphorically speaking, I wanted them to build a house without a foundation.

Lessons Learned

Teaching will always have its ups and downs. It does get more manageable with practice and patience, and I am humbled to admit that even with the experience I had before this mistake, I am constantly revising, assessing, and creating new materials within my pedagogy. A reminder that helped me was that it takes years to find some sense of mastery, whether with teaching in general or even a specific class. According to Liston et al. (2006), most teachers do not find themselves established in a mastery stage until their fourth year of teaching and can take even longer.

The revisions that I made midway through the semester were not easy, but I was transparent with my students and reduced the workload as a precautionary to redesigning the fundamentals in my courses. My evaluations were surprisingly positive at the end of that semester, with many even stating that they appreciated the revisions to my material and assignments. They also appreciated the immediacy in my communication and how I listened to their concerns once I began to remedy my mistakes. This likely increased their perceived immediacy with me because I prioritized their concerns and fostered a sense of community within the mistakes and changes that I made (Vareberg & Westerman, 2023). In the following semester, I found myself less frustrated and even somewhat *relaxed* with my teaching—despite all my other endeavors in life. It's not that I became an easy instructor, but more that I discovered an equilibrium between me, my classes, and my students. Once that's established, trying to implement and revise new things becomes a bit easier.

Speaking of evaluations, one idea that reinvents feedback is to tell students that you are the owner of some type of business, and that you desire to produce the best product possible by seeking their individualized feedback (Bolkan, 2017). In this way, students start to review the bigger picture and, more importantly, the smaller potentially missed nuances that can improve teaching from semester to semester. It also establishes their perception of the value of their feedback and what it can bring.

Conclusion

For instructors who find themselves in a similar situation to me, I want to remind you of something very important: you are human, and *humans make mistakes*. What matters most is not that you failed but that you grew from that mistake. For me, realizing this disconnect and finding a sense of humility and ownership was difficult at first, but it allowed me to address the mistake and grow from it. My expectations for myself and for my students are more aligned, and my teaching is more attuned as well. And finally, yes, my students still learn about Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, but the process, materials, and evaluation are much clearer and more concise.

References

Bolkan, S. (2017). *Making an impact: Facilitating student success with lessons from instructional communication and educational psychology*. Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

Bolkan, S., Goodboy, A. K., & Kelsey, D. M. (2016). Instructor clarity and student motivation: Academic performance as a product of students' ability and motivation to process instructional material. *Communication Education*, *65*(2), 129–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2015.1079329

Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Handbook I: cognitive domain*. David McKay.

Goldman, Z. W., Cranmer, G. A., Sollitto, M., Labelle, S., & Lancaster, A. L. (2017). What do college students want? A prioritization of instructional behaviors and characteristics. *Communication Education*, *66*(3), 280–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1265135

Goodboy, A. K., & Myers, S. A. (2015). Revisiting instructor misbehaviors: A revised typology and development of a measure. *Communication Education*, *64*(2), 133–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2014.978798

Liston, D., Whitcomb, J., & Borko, H. (2006). Too little or too much: Teacher preparation and the first years of teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *57*(4), 351–358. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106291976

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practicing within the disciplines. In *ISL10 Improving Student Learning: Theory and Practice Ten Years On* (pp. 412–424). Oxford Brookes University. https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/threshold-concepts-and-troublesome-knowledge-linkages-to-ways-of-

Shin, M., & Bolkan, S. (2021). Intellectually stimulating students' intrinsic motivation: The mediating influence of student engagement, self-efficacy, and student academic support. *Communication Education*, *70*(2), 146–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2020.1828959

Vareberg, K. R., & Westerman, D. (2023). A little 😀 goes a long way: Examining the limits of immediacy cues on students' perceptions of instructor credibility, immediacy, liking, and clarity. *Review of Communication*, *23*(4), 312–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2023.2197974

Further Readings

Ashby-King, D. T., Iannacone, J. I., Ledford, V. A., Farzad-Phillips, A., Salzano, M., & Anderson, L. B. (2022). Expanding and constraining critical communication pedagogy in the introductory communication course: A critique of assessment rubrics. *Communication Teacher*, *36*(3), 187–203. https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2021.1975789

Engleberg, I. N., Ward, S. M., Disbrow, L. M., Katt, J. A., Myers, S. A., & O'Keefe, P. (2017). The development of a set of core communication competencies for introductory communication courses. *Communication Education*, *66*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2016.1159316

Getchell, K. M., & Lentz, P. (2020). Perspective as a threshold concept in business communication. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *14*(1). https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2020.140115

Nussbaum, J. F. (1992). Effective teacher behaviors. *Communication Education*, *41*(2), 167–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529209378878

Rice, R. E., Stewart, L. P., & Hujber, M. (2000). Extending the domain of instructional effectiveness assessment in student evaluations of

communication courses. *Communication Education*, *49*(3), 253–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520009379214

Chapter Two

Shock Talk: The Emotional Strength of Audiences

Heather Crandall
Gonzaga University

Ahhhh, the persuasive speech, the last assignment of the spring term. A chance for students to practice their delivery skills as well as invention and arrangement. I have approved their topics, I have lectured on appeals to friendly, hostile, and neutral audiences. I have provided time for them to prepare their speeches. They know their speaking order. It's their time to shine!

A student I will call *Aaron* confidently walks to the podium at the front of the room. He is as sunny as the spring day. He is a white kid with blonde spikey hair and light eyes. He is a traditional undergraduate at a large state university, and throughout the semester he has shared how important his faith is to him and his affiliation as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). By now, we have heard Aaron deliver five enjoyable speeches. He is comfortable with himself, funny, prepared, and his low communication apprehension is both delightful and relaxing. He lays his notes on the podium tray, takes a breath, looks around at us and says sadly: "I have cancer."

The air in the room stiffens. We are caught off guard and full of feelings. He continues talking, but we have not adjusted to the sad news and he has not noticed. He is telling us what kind of cancer (skin) and his reason for sharing (to save us from his situation). I snap out of it because I have a role here, my responsibility is to grade him. Introduction. He is hitting all the required areas. He gained our attention, he set a serious emotional tone, he previewed his main points, he gave us a reason to listen as he transitioned to the body

of his speech. Check, check, check. He goes on in a problem-solution organization pattern to explain that skin cancer is largely avoidable. There are things we can do to prevent our own skin cancer. His main points and supporting arguments have us convinced we are going to adopt some new behaviors should we find ourselves in sunlight. He is doing fine with his time limits as he transitions to his conclusion. His conclusion reviews how much he cares for us and that taking his advice will benefit us. He gathers his outline from the podium. He starts to leave. He takes a step back to the podium and faces us again. “One more thing. I don’t have cancer.”

Again, the whole class feels. These feelings are anger and betrayal. I look around to furrowed brows and faces registering disbelief. “Did he just lie to us?” “Why would he do that to us?” “Isn’t lying against his religion?” I looked down at my rubric and thought about the low regard he had for his audience. Did he not understand the chapter on ethical speaking and the lecture on the good person speaking well? I have some work to do.

The Analysis

Some contexts leave few options, and this was one of them. Aaron’s lie landed in the exhaustion zone of the semester. Summer was a few days away, parents were coming to town, and their first year was almost behind them. We were out of class sessions, so students were not in a place for reflection, discussion, or community building. I was also in the early stages of my teaching career. I was focused on cognitive learning (content) that I thought was so important. In time, I learned the importance of affective learning and building learning communities in the classroom. A strong learning community might have prevented Aaron from feeling like he could lie to us. As I look back, I see that the surprise of Aaron’s decision to lie about having cancer and experiencing his peers’ responses improved my teaching in three ways: the degree I involve students, the focus I put on presenters to consider audiences, and the discussions I hold about credibility and intersectionality.

Regarding student involvement, I used to lecture some, assign readings and then quiz students to gauge their comprehension. I thought I was preparing students for their upcoming presentations. What I needed was more integration; I realized I had to get students more involved. Now I have students give peer advice during the invention stage of speech crafting. For example, now I have a whole day of speech preparation meetings built into the schedule. In these meetings, two students and I sit down with the

presenter for five minutes, hear their plans and goals, and offer ideas and feedback. I am continually impressed with peer advice. Hosek et al. (2017) found that students feel that constructive feedback from their peers is more important to consider than that of their professor. Their peers' similarity in age makes their feedback more credible. Students take this role seriously and give advice to presenters that would not occur to me to give, advice that their peers really absorb. In the process, I learn more about students and what they find engaging. Training students to advise others, helps them think more critically about their own communication (Moore & Teather, 2013). The process of getting students involved in feedback enhances critical thinking skills and reflective practices that can serve them throughout their lives.

I also engage in direct, individual feedback with my students. My decision to sit down with students individually and to include students in these conversations supports what scholars who study different sources of confirming messages in college classrooms have found. This practice is supported by Johnson and LaBelle's (2020) work on teacher confirmation which has found that when teachers are interactive and include students in the learning process, students are more likely to offer confirming messages to each other.

To get students more involved, I also have more workshop time in class to flip the classroom. After I cover introductions, I tell students to come up with a couple of ways they could introduce their next speech based on my lecture and their reading. They are to bring their two ideas to the next class meeting. In that next class meeting, I set aside 20 minutes for students in groups of three to hear introduction ideas and, again, offer advice. I also give each group an "introduction checklist," so they can help each other remember all the components. It is in the introduction that presenters should establish their credibility. When I circulate to each group, I get student questions about how to establish credibility. It is in these small groups that I can suggest ways they can establish their credibility that are specific to their topics and connected to who they are as a presenter.

Aaron's lie was such a shock because I had yet to experience a student's ability to shift the class dynamic so intensely. Now, after years of teaching, I have several responses I can rely on to navigate surprising situations. Today, if this situation repeated itself during the final presentation in the final week of the semester, I would have all students do a two-minute free write. I would pass out note cards and ask students to articulate their thoughts and feelings about how Aaron's rhetorical strategy landed. For

Aaron, he would have to write about how it felt to first lie to his audience and then come clean. I would then be able to review the note cards on breaks from grading finals and learn more from students. How I talk about audience has also improved as I have discovered that the main source of anxiety students have in speaking situations centers on their own performance. Students are often anxious and preoccupied with their own insecurities. Since the shock of Aaron's lie, I began to emphasize the responsibility speakers have to handle their audiences with care. The idea that their audience is fragile seems to resonate with them. I used to have students tell me the different ways they would adapt their material to their audience. Now I have them tell me what steps they have taken to take care of their audiences. Even if they have audiences that are not going to be receptive to their material, they need a plan to treat their audience with care. As example, McCroskey and Teven's (1999) seminal research on the topic of credibility showed how perceived caring is critically important to a rhetor's credibility. Specifically, they confirmed that when audiences perceive that a speaker does not care about them, their credibility tanks. I ask students to share reasons they "turn off" a presenter's message. I find that students can easily discuss when and why they stopped listening to a presenter. Often reasons have to do with feelings of alienation and exclusion. Students understand the idea that you are no longer communicating with your audience when they are feeling left out or offended. We also talk about non-verbal cues disengaged audiences send. Thinking of others is a great way to get out of your own head and reduce your anxiety. Thinking of others is also a great way to make sure you have adequately prepared.

Finally, I tell Aaron's story to kick off a class discussion about credibility and intersectional identity. One of the reasons for our collective surprise that day was our prior knowledge that Aaron's faith tradition was an important part of his identity. In other words, we *extra* believed that he had cancer. If aspects of a rhetor's persona involve identity, and according to Palczewski, et al. (2022) they do, then how should we think about that as a class? To help students see the complexity, I ask a series of questions I think are compelling like, "can you have goodwill for your audience --an important part of ethos --and ruin your own credibility in the process?" or "what assumptions do audiences make about intersectional identities such as white, cis-gender, LDS, male college students?" and "how do those assumptions constrain and enable rhetors?" This list becomes a springboard to what difference changing aspects of the intersections can make. For example, I ask students how Aaron's lie might have been different had it come from an elderly lady. We play with the categories from there (e.g., how might the lie have been coming from a person of color, and/or a

member of LGBTQ+ community, and/or a member of a different faith tradition). Sometimes these discussions turn into larger discussions of celebrities who do bad things for good reasons or get canceled by their fans.

In short, this experience was an "oh no" of teaching. Yet, reflecting upon how that experience affected my students was necessary to develop the practices I have now. Just as our students need to reflect upon their speeches to improve their skills, we as the instructors must reflect upon our classroom management to improve the learning experiences of our students. Engaging both earlier in the learning process with students and in more personal ways lead to better results. Grappling with how to talk with students about their responsibility to take care of their audiences was an important shift for them. Fearing their audience's judgement is less productive than caring for them. Finally, helping students deeply consider how their identities and involvements are part of the impressions they may want to manage carefully brought more gravitas to some of my lessons.

References

Hosek, A. M., Munz, S., Bistodeau, K. C., Jama, Z., Frisbie, A., & Ivancic, S. R. (2017). Basic communication course students' perceptions of the purpose and their role in the peer feedback process. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, *29*(1), Article 5. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol29/iss1/5

Johnson, Z. D. & LaBelle, S. (2020). Confirmation in the college classroom: The connections between teacher's use of confirming messages and student's own communicative behaviors. *Communication Research Reports*, *37*(4), 172-181. https://doi.org/1080/08824096.2020.1800449

McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communication Monographs, 66*(1), 90-103. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759909376464

Moore, C., & Teather, S. (2013). Engaging students in peer review: Feedback as learning. *Issues in Educational Research*, *23*(2), 196-211. https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.354576626678153

Palczewski, C. H., Fritch, J., Ice, R. & McGeough, R. (2022). *Rhetoric in civic life* (3rd ed.). Strata.

Further Readings

Dannels, D. P. (2015). *Essential questions teachers ask: A guidebook for communicating with students*. Oxford University Press.

Gehrke, P. & Foley, M. (2023). *Contemporary public speaking.* W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

Mailloux, S. (2016). Rhetorical ways of proceeding: *Eloquentia Perfecta* in American Jesuit Colleges. In C. Gannett & J. C. Brereton (Eds.), *Traditions of eloquence: The Jesuits and modern rhetorical studies* (pp. 162-174). Fordham University Press.

McCroskey, J. C. (2005). *An introduction to rhetorical communication* (9th ed.). Routledge.

Vangelisti, A. L., Daly, J. A., & Friedrich, G. W. (1999). *Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods. Edited* (2nd Ed.). Routledge.

CHAPTER THREE

WE WERE ALL LAUGHING…

MICHAEL K. CUNDALL, JR.
NORTH CAROLINA A&T STATE UNIVERSITY

As a humor scholar and philosopher, I teach an upper-division class on humor. To set the stage, readers should be aware that I am a white professor teaching at a historically black university. Later in the semester, we cover a unit on racist and ethnic humor. When we reach this section, given the fact that most such humor in the USA refers to black jokes and there are far more jokes that are racist and ethnic than simply black jokes, I suggest we use a better, more inclusive, term, *blason populaire* (BP; cf., Cundall, 2012). Since this is a topic that can be difficult and create uncomfortable feelings, I work on creating a solid rapport with the students throughout the term so that there's a well-established baseline of camaraderie and community among the students and with me as the teacher. I take time to create a strong community in the classroom, where I as the nominal leader of the course, create spaces where people feel safe, seen, heard, and open to a variety of subject matter—even if that subject matter is difficult in various ways.

Once the class is close to reaching the section on BP humor, I remind the students of a couple of things. Firstly, they are going to encounter some humor or jokes that may personally offend them. The world is full of content that can offend. In understanding a phenomenon like BP humor, we need to face it on its own terms. Secondly, I invite and encourage them to bring in examples that are as strong as they can. An intuitive way I get at this is I ask them to bring in examples of humor that they knew when they laughed at them, "…they were going to hell." That little phrase does much better in orienting them to the sort of content that will work most effectively. Thirdly, I encourage them to bring jokes that make fun of white people as white people, or African Americans as African Americans. I emphasize that if we're to study the subject matter in any accurate and meaningful way, being bashful in this regard is unhelpful. If we tiptoe around the issue, not

engaging it as it exists, we lose the opportunity to have honest, frank, and open discussions about the topics.

No matter how hard I try to get the students to push that envelope, it's rare that students bring in humor that will really carry the point of how tendentious and troublesome such humor can be. In the hopes of not offending people or seeming like the sort of person that enjoys morally problematic humor, they tend to bring in rather milquetoast examples of such humor. As a result, I have to come ready with examples that are less timid and edgier.

It's important to point out that there are numerous difficulties and potential pitfalls in this part of the class. While it's satisfying as a teacher to see the student struggle with the issues, this isn't the goal. The idea is to help them learn how to approach, deal with, and confront difficult topics. Even though our students have been trained to avoid giving offense, it's crucial that they get a sense of the offense that exists relative to such humor. Without some level of exposure and understanding of that, the lesson is less impactful. This doesn't mean that the class is a race to see who can offend whom the most and most often. Rather, it means that there is a likelihood that something could be offensive. And indeed, that's what happened on one occasion.

Since students tend to avoid controversy, I have, at the ready, jokes that are likely to be found offensive by my students. I warn my students up-front that some of the examples might make them feel, to borrow my students' language, "some kind of way." In general, the humor doesn't cause much of a fuss. Some are shocked for a moment, but whatever concerns they have usually evaporate as we proceed with trying to understand the humor and investigate all the various concerns whether they be ethical, political, social, or rhetorical. One year, a student did not have her concerns dissipate in class. She was upset enough, that she scheduled a time to meet with me about her worries.

It's difficult to imagine what courage it took for this student to approach me with her concerns. She had to confront me with her sense of offense, her anger, and her discomfort at what had happened in the class. She did so with a maturity and deftness that impress me to this day. She explained that when she first heard some of the jokes, she was deeply offended. She was not sure that such content was appropriate let alone a white professor telling those jokes. What made matters worse for her was that she was further confused because many of her classmates were not showing any signs of offense.

They were enjoying the humor, seemingly despite the tendentious nature of the content. So there she was, feeling offended and angry, but then confused as to why she was the only one. Shouldn't other people, again to borrow language from my students, "that look like her" be offended by humor that seems racist?

It took her some time to get through this. She was understandably nervous, and this was new territory for her as well as for me. Here she is an undergraduate in the office of her teacher, and she was critiquing me. I thanked her for her candor, asked if she needed a moment or had anything else to say. When she declined, I asked her if I could have a moment to come up with a response, which she graciously allowed. I will cover my response in the next section, because it provides the basis of what I learned from the encounter. However, given my response, the student's worries were addressed, she felt much better after the discussion, and she became more active in the class. In sum, I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome. Not the least because of what I learned from the interaction.

As I was thinking of how to respond to the student, there was so much going through my head. I had to make sure she understood that I was taking her concerns seriously. I also had to find a way to reinforce the point that it was crucial to how I thought the course should go, that we deal directly with uncomfortable things, and then also find a way to do so in such a fashion that she felt comfortable in the class and with me as her teacher and director. These are things you don't get taught in grad school.

Analysis

Construal level theory explains that there is a level of abstraction in our minds towards any topic (Trope & Liberman, 2012). The greater the abstraction, the less we understand how we can respond to that thing in a way that is productive. The abstraction may be psychological, such as understanding (Fiedler, 2007). In this case, the student had high psychological construal towards the lesson because she did not understand why the material was presented or how it was appropriate. She also had high emotional construal, because she perceived disconnect in her feelings towards the lesson and her peers' feelings, combining confusion with anger. In all, this class session had heightened her construal with BP humor, making her less prepared to deal with it than before the lesson. My priority then shifted to lowering the construal, giving this brave student access to

the toolkit she needed to respond confidently, not just to the lesson, but to such humor when she encounters it outside of class.

Offense is a difficult topic. And when the offense is about sensitive and polarizing topics such as race, there is ample space for things to go wrong. There were several competing issues that caused the student distress. The first was the content of the humor. She was offended as a person of color. And she has every right to be. But before we could address the offense between me, the offender, and her the offended, she had asked the students she knew, why they weren't offended and indeed seemingly enjoying things. This added another layer of discomfort for her. She started to wonder if maybe she was overreacting or taking things the wrong way. The students that she asked told her not to worry about it. This only compounded her worries even more. That's a bonus lesson. Telling folks not to worry when they're, in fact, worried, is probably counterproductive – it heightens construal adding doubt to their existing feelings.

The first lesson I learned was how important sincerity and humor are in managing discussions with students. In this situation the student and I had a lot going on and we needed to sort it through. The conversation, and my subsequent response, didn't simply rely on humor as beginning with a joke would have put her off. She might have inferred that I wasn't taking the situation seriously. Instructor humor is only effective when the students see that humor as appropriate (Banas et al., 2010). So, I began by acknowledging her discomfort and thanked her for having the courage to bring the issues to my attention. It's important to realize that I wasn't simply saying those words. As opposed to the person on the customer service line who reads off a script that they're sorry you're experiencing difficulties, I showed my sincerity with body language by maintaining my focus on her. I didn't look away, kept appropriate eye contact, and made sure that she had control of the conversation. After my sincerity was established, I could then introduce a bit of humor.

I decided to point out an oddity of her situation. I said something to the effect of "It's the height of irony to feel bad about feeling bad because your friends aren't there with you." She got the joke and sort of chuckled at the irony. The tension visibly left her. I have found that often if we acknowledge pain with humor, it's helpful in temporarily dispelling discomfort. This is similar to the lesson our basic course experts extol, that when we allow students to acknowledge their anxiety, the weight of that anxiety lessens (cf., Prentiss, 2021). Humor and laughter's analgesic properties are well-studied (Lapierre et al., 2019), but there is also the oft-overlooked fact that in

inviting her to laugh with me at the irony, I was creating a space where we both laughed together. The simple sharing of mirth is deeply healing and an important way in which we build relationships (Foresman, 2021). But the humor wasn't simply used to dispel, displace, or avoid the issue, it was used to help us address it without the additional weight of the negative feelings. I also didn't have this sort of approach planned out, like the aforementioned customer service script. This particular case happened rather organically. I was trying to find ways to connect and make the student feel welcome and comfortable in the space. Had I just tried to laugh off the issues, the result would have likely been an increased division between us. Humor and laughter are deeply influential ways we create and strengthen interpersonal and societal relationships.

The second thing I learned from this, but only after the fact, is just how important the responses of people we identify with are to the development of our own responses. While she was initially offended and quite possibly angry, she almost immediately questioned the propriety of those responses given her friends didn't have the same reaction. She was further confused when she asked them directly and they dismissed her concerns as being incorrect. Much of how we respond is influenced, sometimes powerfully so, in the responses of those around us. Had the others around her also seemed offended and angry, they might have complained to an administrator or come to me *en masse*. But the lack of response dampened hers. It's sort of the opposite of emotional contagion.

As a teacher this situation reminded me just how important it is to pay attention to student responses, especially when dealing with tendentious topics. It's too easy to let the majority of responses, or the loudest or most noticeable ones take the lead in my understanding of how people have reacted to the materials. From this situation, whenever I teach the class, I use this example as a way to further encourage students to express themselves. I've found that relating a story of students from our institution, students "who look like they do" has helped open up and create further avenues of dialog (cf., Prentiss, 2004; Prentis & Horn, 2014 for more on the power of storytelling).

As I close, I want to note something that is also important that I've learned from my students. These moral judgments we make about a person's intent and or character when we interpret their behavior are not one and done. These judgements can and do change over time. Students and I had discussed that if I sporadically used tendentious BP humor, they might find no issue with it initially, but prolonged, consistent use might be an indicator