



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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On the Same Wavelength? Clarifying Course Expectations and Goals

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When reading end-of-semester evaluations, have you experienced the all-too-familiar frustration of finding that some students had expected something other than what you had designed, written into your syllabus, and explicitly explained the first day of class? Such misconceptions and cross-purposes-sometimes lasting 15 weeks-are not uncommon. Yet they can be rather easily avoided. More important, clarifying everyone's expectations of the course encourages students to engage more and to take responsibility for learning. Because people are more likely to embrace ideas they generate themselves, this discussion of course expectations focuses on students' considered answers to your probing questions.

Within the first week, as soon as the student population stabilizes, ask your students to think and write about what they expect from the course. They then discuss in small groups before sharing with everyone their answers to one or more questions that you phrase as appropriate, for example:

- "What do you expect to learn in this course?"
- "How do you expect this course to expand on the one you just finished?"
- "Why did you enroll in this course?"
- "How do you expect this course to prepare you to go on in this discipline?"

During the ensuing discussion, focus on students' ideas: you provoke them, hear and acknowledge

them, develop them when necessary, write them for all to see, help analyze ways to fulfill them, and respond to them. Compare students' expectations with yours, explaining why your objectives make sense in the context, why they are important at this point in the curriculum, why you must make choices among equally valid goals-whatever is pertinent in the comparison. You might, in fact, modify your planned expectations in light of students' thoughtful ideas.

Once the students' expectations as written parallel yours, ask one student to copy them for everyone. If you have a course e-mail list, that student can send everyone the expectations. Or you might prefer to edit the list for accuracy and distribute it as part of the syllabus. In either case, you and your students have created a mutually acceptable list of attainable goals. If students later complain about the workload, assignments, or high standards, remind them of what they expected to get from the course and of what it takes to achieve those objectives.

Undoubtedly, explicitly juxtaposing our expectations with those of our students makes the course much more meaningful for them and sets the stage for us to cue them in on the "whys" of various teaching and learning activities. As responsible thinkers, students are more likely buy into a course when they know why they are asked to invest and what they should expect to reap. At the same time, hearing what students expect from the course you have designed and learning what they value in studying your discipline can help mold your own expectations, leading to more focused goals and supporting activities.

Continue for a snapshot of how this process works in French 332, "The Writing and Reading of Texts," a

required course in composition and literary analysis for French majors and minors:

FREN 332 students typically offer the following expectations of the course: learn to speak, read, and write better French; learn the history of French literature; gain more confidence in using French; read “real” French literature. Each of those expectations is pertinent except the survey/history of French literature. I write all their expectations on the board, addressing first the appropriate ones, working on developing students' understanding of both why they are relevant and what will be necessary in order to realize these expectations.

“Of course,” I say to the students (in French), “we will be using French all the time, so you will be practicing and improving all of your language skills. But what is the title of the course?”

“Advanced Composition.” “Writing and Reading of Texts.”

“So which skill will we most focus on?”

“Writing.”

“You say that you want to improve your writing in French. You've been working for many years on your writing in English. What do you already know about what it takes to learn to write well?”

Occasional groans, accompanying the following ideas: “Writing.” “Lots of writing.” “Rewriting.” “Reading good models.” “Editing.” “Thesis statements.” “Organization.” “Writing is hard!”

“Yes, writing well is hard. So what's the value of it? Why is it worth doing?” (I am working toward turning expectations into goals.)

“Writing helps you think better.” “You need to persuade others of your point of view.” “You don't really understand a story until you write about it.”

It at first may seem remarkable that students so often give the “right” answers to such questions, the answers we ourselves would give; but they have experienced years of school, and many U.Va. students are thoughtful about their learning. Moreover, through this activity, peers educate some who have not yet learned to be reflective learners. Now several students are eagerly telling

the others what I used to have to say to students (who were probably paying less attention than they do during this brainstorming process): “This is a composition course, teaching a skill that is valuable in many ways but mastered only through hard work.”

Once we have clarified the issue of composition, I turn to the literary analysis aspect of the course: “Many of you expect to read “real” French literature. You're right: we'll be doing that. What does it mean to “read literature”?”

“You have to look beneath the surface.”

“Sometimes there are symbols.” “And metaphors.”

“It's more than just a story.”

They are now ready to hear about how we will study rhetorical figures of speech with an eye to helping them read literature more analytically and write more persuasive papers. Finally, now that they have more thoroughly explored the demands of learning to write and analyze literature, they understand that there will no time available to survey French literature. I simply tell them that many of the courses following FREN 332 are literary surveys.

Later in the semester, when I hear the traditional query, “Is another composition due already?!?”, I pull out the list of their expectations and ask whether they remember what they said it takes to write well; the complaints subside. And actual comments about the workload from final student evaluations are downright satisfying:

- “We did a lot of writing and rewriting in the class but I feel like I've improved a lot.”
- “The course definitely made me work very hard. I think I've improved a lot on my grammar and writing and organizing skills.”
- “The course was very challenging and the grading tough, but I learned a lot.”
- “Probably wrote around 20 pages-writing assignments were always relevant.”