‘100 Things Restaurant Staffers Should Never Do’: Adapted for Teachers

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On October 29 and November 5, 2009, The New York Times’ Small Business blog ran two parts of a posting titled “100 Things Restaurant Staffers Should Never Do.” As I read the list, it occurred to me that some of author Bruce Buschel’s ideas might be applicable (with minor alterations) to teachers. As we begin winter terms and spring semesters, here are 10 items from that list that I think could help us create classrooms even more conducive to learning.

#1—Do not let anyone enter the restaurant without a warm greeting.

Do not let anyone enter your classroom without a warm greeting. Smile, face your students, and make them feel welcome.

#9—Do not recite the specials too fast or robotically or dramatically. You aren’t delivering a soliloquy or auditioning for a part.

Do not lecture too fast or robotically or dramatically. Teachers shouldn’t be delivering soliloquies. They aren’t auditioning. We are talking to students who are hearing the topic for the first time. Although we have delivered this lecture once or twice each semester for the last 19 years, it needs to be as fresh and interesting as it was the first time we presented it.

#15—Never say “I don’t know” to any question without following with, “I’ll find out.”

Do you know everything about your discipline? An inquisitive student’s curiosity should not be turned off by a teacher who dismisses or avoids questions to which answers are not handily available.

#46—Never acknowledge any one guest over and above any other. All guests are equal.

Students are also equal and should not be acknowledged preferentially. It’s satisfying and easy to interact with academically talented students or those with whom we share a common interest. But all students deserve our attention and the opportunity to interact with us.

#47—Do not gossip about co-workers or guests within earshot of guests.

Do not gossip about colleagues or students when other students can hear you. Complaints, questions, or general observations about students, grades, your department, your colleagues, or the institution are better left unsaid when students are anywhere around.

#50—Do not turn on the charm when it’s tip time. Be consistent throughout.

Do not turn on the charm when it’s course evaluation time. Your behavior should be consistent across the course.

#63—Never blame the chef, the busboy, the hostess or the weather for anything that goes wrong. Just make it right.

Never blame the registrar’s office, the information technology office, the bookstore, or the department staff assistant for anything that goes wrong. Resolve problems or direct students to the person with the power to fix what has gone wrong.

#70—Never deliver a hot plate without warning the guest. And never ask a guest to pass that hot plate down the table.

Never deliver surprises to students. Don’t change important assignments or their due dates unless you must. Then give students plenty of warning about the change. Don’t suddenly spring new assignments or expectations on students without first giving plenty of advance notice.

#77—Do not disappear.

Be available for your students, your colleagues, your admissions office, or your undergraduate research office.

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How Effective Is Remedial Coursework?

For all but the most elite colleges and universities, courses in what’s now called “developmental” education are a staple. Many students now come to college without the knowledge and skills needed to successfully complete college coursework. But does taking remedial courses in math and English make a difference? Do those courses develop the knowledge and skills students need to successfully complete regular college courses?

Relatively few large-scale, methodologically sound, multi-institution evaluations of remedial programs have been undertaken. This study references two other such analyses: one of remedial math courses offered by four-year colleges in Ohio and a cross-state, multi-institution study of remedial English courses. The study referenced here looks at 85,894 first-year students enrolled in 107 different community colleges in California.

To answer the question of how well these courses were working, this researcher looked at two measures: credential attainment and transfer. He reasoned that remedial courses could be considered successful if the students who took those courses compared favorably on these two measures with community college students who did not take remedial math. Using these criteria he tracked the student cohort’s progress in math courses for six years and its academic attainment after eight years.

What did he find? “Students who remediate successfully in math exhibit attainment that is comparable to that of students who achieve college math skill without the need for remediation, and this finding generally holds true even across the various levels of initial math skill deficiency.” (p. 442) Remedial coursework in this study works extremely well.

However, there is a large and troubling caveat. Seventy-five percent of the students who enrolled in remedial math courses in this study did not complete or pass those courses. And more than 80 percent of this group did not complete a credential or transfer to a four-year institution. So, the more sanguine conclusion is that when remediation works, it works extremely well. The problem is that for many students it does not work.

This study identified three predictors of success in remedial math: the final grade in the first math courses taken in college, the depth of remedial work needed, and the breadth of remedial work needed. Remedial work is most successful when you need less of it.

Because when remedial courses in math work, they do so very well, these programs should not be abandoned. Second, more than 80 percent of the first-year students in this cohort needed remedial work in math. That makes offering this kind of coursework a truly central part of what the community college does. And finally, steps must be taken to improve the successful completion of remedial coursework. We need to better understand which instructional strategies and approaches help students learn in these courses, because if students don’t succeed here, in all likelihood they will not complete a two-year degree or certificate, and they will not transfer to a four-year institution.

The Course Syllabus: Contract, Culture, and Compass

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In the courses we teach, the syllabus serves several purposes. First, it represents a contract between instructor and students. Second, it helps to establish the culture of a class, whether the course is held online or in a traditional classroom. Third, it offers a compass to guide students toward achievement of the course’s learning objectives.

Contract

Make the elements of student success transparent. Articulate expectations, but do not “waive your discretion.”

Like a contract, a syllabus both establishes and manages expectations for you and your students. Each expectation should be identified, defined, and communicated. Consequences for actions like submitting assignments late should be addressed, with room saved for discretion. A comprehensive, detailed syllabus eliminates the element of surprise that leads to student frustration, but it should not rid you of your power to make reasonable decisions. For example, using words and phrases such as “may” or “up to and including” in grading policies will allow you to apply standards sensibly.

The syllabus also establishes timelines. Weekly schedules that include required reading, assignments, quizzes, and tests support students’ preparation. Starting each class session with a review of the week’s schedule shifts students’ focus to the task at hand and offers the instructor another opportunity to manage expectations.

Present the syllabus as a contract during the first class session. Invest class time to carefully review it, and ensure that students understand what is expected of them. Consider having students sign the syllabus to underscore the responsibilities it spells out for them. Offer students an incentive for thoroughly reviewing the course syllabus by giving a “syllabus quiz” early in the semester for bonus points on a future exam.

Culture

Create the kind of learning experience you want students to have.

In every course, the teacher and students form a learning community. The syllabus provides an opportunity to build a “classroom culture” by identifying core values, establishing norms, and explaining standards of conduct.

State the norms of conduct you expect students to follow in class. Consider including a “civility policy” that requires, for example, students to turn off cell phones in class and respect others’ opinions. Describe the “core values” of the class and how they are reflected in the course’s requirements and expectations (e.g., teamwork, respect, honesty, truth). Include an “academic honesty policy” that addresses such issues as plagiarism, with clearly communicated rules and expectations and the consequences of violation.

Consider what your syllabus explicitly or implicitly communicates about you as a teacher. For example, do you encourage students to email you questions or visit during your office hours? What classroom activities have you planned, and are they mentioned in the class schedule?

Through your syllabus, you are conducting an initial conversation with your students. Address the individual student in the syllabus. In describing expectations, use the second person: “You are expected to be prepared to participate in each class” versus “Students are expected to be prepared to participate in each class.” Communicating directly with students in the syllabus underscores that they have the power and responsibility to meet course expectations. Put yourself in it. Using the first person rather than the third person (e.g., “I” instead of “the instructor”) as you explain your office hours, availability, etc., subtly communicates your enthusiasm and commitment to students’ learning—cornerstones of a healthy classroom culture.

Compas

Align your course requirements to student learning outcomes.

Before leaving on a trip, knowing your destination is essential to plotting out your route. The syllabus should provide a clear path to the end goal: the course’s student learning outcomes. Setting the learning outcomes first keeps your students focused on the destination and helps you determine how to guide them there. Each activity, reading, assignment, and formative assessment should clearly assist students on their path toward the learning outcomes. Given the limited class time in a semester, assess each planned activity with this question: does it provide students with a learning experience that will move them closer to the expected learning outcome? If not, then you should consider eliminating that activity. If you choose to do the activity anyway, define its purpose, such as building community in class.

The summative assessment offered by the final exam allows students to show you how well they met the learning goals of the class. Formative assessments like regular quizzes help you determine whether the route to the goals might need to be reconsidered or changed. The summative exam is a road map of the course: can you trace back to specific activities, readings, and assignments in the course and see how they lead to the final destination? Formative activities keep you and the students on track and allow you both to monitor progress toward the learning goals.

Knowing where you want to end up allows you to plan how you will get there. This information is invaluable to both you and your students. Put it in your course syllabus and you’ll be getting the semester off to a strong start.

Note: Parts of this article first appeared in a CSU, Northridge blog, “Ideas for Faculty.”
Concept Maps: Can They Be Used to Measure Learning?

Concept maps are defined variously. In this study, they are described as “tools that allow students to articulate knowledge by drawing or outlining core concepts and showing links between ideas.” (p. 2) Many teachers use concept maps because they fit the visual orientation of learners. They are used as a way of summing up and organizing what’s been presented. They are used in groups as students jointly explore how ideas relate and are interconnected. But concept maps are not often used on exams or in other summative activities. In fact, many college teachers might have a hard time imagining how these maps could be used to measure what students have learned.

In the study referenced below, they were used to measure learning. The course was a capstone, two-semester, green engineering design course with interdisciplinary content. The authors point out that concept maps are especially appropriate in interdisciplinary courses where much of the learning involves making connections between and among different fields of knowledge. However, that interdisciplinarity makes concept map scoring, which needs to be done if the maps are going to be used to assess learning, challenging. Those teaching interdisciplinary courses often have different professional backgrounds; they may operate using different assumptions and organize knowledge from different epistemic frameworks. In this case, could a diverse group of engineering faculty reach consensus when it came to scoring the maps?

Answering that question was one of the goals of this study. The class in question was small—only 10 students. The students prepared two concept maps: one completed at the beginning of the course and one at its end. They were introduced to concept maps in class by a faculty member not associated with the research. They were also given a handout that described how to create a concept map. The concept maps were not part of the grade for the course. They were used in this research project.

After the course was completed, the faculty members who taught the course scored each of the 20 maps. They did not know which student had completed which map or whether the map was one done at the beginning of the course or at the end. They scored the maps individually using a rubric developed for the project. The rubric identified three main areas for assessment: the comprehensiveness of the concept map, its organization, and its correctness. After scoring the maps individually, the faculty then discussed each map together and reached a consensus score. This diverse faculty group was able to agree on scores for the maps.

Was the learning that occurred in the course represented on the concept maps? “A comparison of pre and post concept maps of students in a green engineering design course clearly illustrates the ways in which this interdisciplinary design experience increased both the number of topics students were able to associate with green engineering (as measured by comprehensiveness and correctness) and the number of connections they were able to make among those topics (as measured by organization). Importantly, the maps also captured variations in student learning, showing little or no gain for some students, as would be expected in any course.”

This study was undertaken independent of the actual assessment measures used in the course, and the faculty members who taught the course were doubtful whether concept maps actually promoted learning or could be used to measure it. After scoring the maps and discussing them, attitudes had changed. There “was an increased interest in how concept maps could be used to further student learning in all of the various programs with which these faculty were affiliated. There were even statements related to using concept maps in their own classes. Thus, over two hours, the scorers evolved from being skeptical about concept maps to wanting to learn more about them and use them as a teaching and assessment tool.” (p. 19) Whatever appeared on those maps, it was convincing.


#99—Do not show frustration. Your only mission is to serve. Be patient. It is not easy.

Balancing the demands of research and scholarship, service to the institution, and teaching is difficult for all of us. Fortunately, various information technologies make it easy for us to stay in contact with and be available to students.

Students (like customers) can be terribly frustrating, but we should work not to show that frustration. We are guides and mentors. Teaching takes patience, and some days it isn’t always easy to find, but we still have a responsibility to look for it.

Buschel’s complete list might delight, amuse, annoy, frustrate, or insult you. I’m hoping that these adaptations will encourage you to reflect on how students are treated in your classroom. New terms and semesters are great times to begin anew. We need to make sure that the ways we treat students reflect the highest professional standards. That way we know we’ve done our part to make their learning experiences rich and satisfying.
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I am standing in the door of my office at the end of the semester, looking at the piles of paper stacked on the desk, on the filing cabinets, and on the floor. I realize that I need to make some changes to support an e-learning environment and be more ecologically responsible. With student learning outcomes in mind, I try to envision what this new learning space would look like and what it would mean for me and my students.

A few weeks after this personal reflection, I decided to make a commitment to a paperless classroom that uses more e-learning concepts and e-naturally friendly strategies. This article describes the changes I’ve made and how they support learning outcomes and course goals.

e-learning

The emphasis now is on learning spaces that encourage both faculty and students to use networked mobile devices such as iPods, laptops, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and cell phones to engage with course content. Taking these factors into consideration, I explored the advantages and challenges of using Web 2.0 tools and an online portal for the integration of e-learning for an undergraduate nursing course. This national nursing portal is a personalized Web-based resource that helps students and nurses manage their careers, connect with colleagues, and access current and relevant literature to support their professional practice. The Web 2.0 tools support collaborative and cooperative learning for students as they develop their required assignments. I also decided to use public online sites within the university’s site where students can post their wikis, podcasts, vodcasts, or photovoice projects. I spend time making students aware of privacy issues and the need to meticulously credit those references and resources they are using in their research.

e-naturally friendly

Environmentally friendly classrooms are those classrooms where educators try to minimize harm to the natural world. I made a decision to eliminate (or at least significantly reduce) course handouts, required texts, paper submissions from students, and paper-marking tools. Although I had previously moved to a blended approach to my courses, this decision still meant considerable change. In the past, I had required text reading or handed out articles for students to read. My classes continue to get larger, which leads to more paper being used during a semester. Now my students access the required sources for the course through the national nursing portal. It offers students a choice of materials, including e-texts, research-based documents, videos, and podcasts.

I next thought about my course assignments and how I could make them environmentally friendly. Students now submit their formal papers through an online home page. I mark and return the assignments to students via their university email addresses. I have developed an electronic marking guide that I complete for each student and return with the student’s paper as individual feedback. I post all announcements for the student group on a weekly basis on the home page.

Assessment and evaluation

I work with students throughout the semester, helping them to design assignments that are of interest to them and will help to prepare them for their professional responsibilities. At the end of the course, I have students assess the assignments by commenting on the strengths and limitations of those learning experiences. For example, how did they approach the assignment? What suggestions would they make to improve it? What technology tools were helpful to them in completing and posting the results of their assignment? I continue to ask myself this question: do paperless teaching and learning spaces produce a significant difference in learning outcomes for the students in my courses? I believe these changes do a better job of engaging my students, but I have not yet collected data that would document changes in learning outcomes.

I am standing in the door of my office at the end of the semester, looking at the small box of jump drives on the desk. I see no piles of paper on the desk or floor or filing cabinet. The changes I have made to transition to paperless learning spaces support student learning, reduce paper consumption, and use technology to develop assignments. Keeping student learning outcomes in mind, I try to envision the next steps that I will take to enhance the teaching and learning spaces that the students and I work in and what this will look like for the students in the next semester.

Qualities of Successful Teaching

The quest to identify the ingredients, components, and qualities of effective instruction has been a long one. Starting in the 1930s, researchers sought to identify the common characteristics of good teachers. Since then, virtually everybody who might have an opinion has been asked, surveyed, or interviewed. Students have been asked at the beginning, middle, and end of their college careers. Alumni have been asked years after graduating. And end of their college careers. Alumni have been asked at the beginning, middle, and end of their college careers. Colleagues within departments and across them have been asked, as have administrators, from local department heads to college presidents. So many studies have been done that there are studies of the studies.

Despite this large database, researchers continue to explore this issue and, surprisingly, find new groups to ask and new ways to analyze the results. Even more amazing is how much overlap and consistency there is across these many studies, and the study we’re about to highlight here is no exception. It is unique. The researchers studied a group of 35 faculty members who had received a Presidential Teaching Award at a public university in the Midwest. To be considered for the award, teachers had to write a 1,500-word essay describing their teaching philosophies and teaching goals. Using a qualitative methodology (hermeneutics), researchers analyzed these statements with the goal of identifying the factors that made these teachers successful. The researchers found four categories of comments characteristic of all these award-winning teachers.

Presence—“The term presence for this study is defined as a deeper level of awareness that allows thoughts, feelings, and actions to be known, developed, and harmonized within. Presence is also the essence of a relationship and of interpersonal communication.” (p. 13) Illustrating this particular category were comments in the essays indicating how important it is for teachers to get to know their students. “The classroom should not be a sea of faceless forms,” writes one teacher. (p. 13) Another frequent theme in this category related to the importance of caring for students. “By caring for my students, I mean that I am genuinely interested in my students’ learning and understanding the course material, and in making a significant contribution to the success of their careers.” (p. 14)

Promotion of Learning—These teachers also wrote of the importance of student learning and their roles in promoting it. They held their students and themselves to high standards, seeing students’ work as preparation for lifelong learning. “Mere possession of scientific knowledge without the ability to apply it is of limited value in nursing practice,” wrote one nurse educator. (p. 14) Equally important was their shared view that promoting learning goes beyond content acquisition. Education is also about personal development, and teachers have a role in promoting that kind of learning as well.

Teachers as learners—These exemplary teachers described themselves as learners, each making it a priority to keep their teaching current. These teachers valued opportunities to revise course content, to teach new courses, and to work on degree-program curricula.

Enthusiasm—“Effective teaching presupposes a command of the material and facility in communicating it with clarity, grace, fairness, and humor. But...