

Setting Positive Class Expectations through Shared Language, Civil Practices, and Clear Directions

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Instructors seek to create meaningful learning experiences for their students, and through student evaluations and self-reflection, teaching practices can be improved. While feedback from student evaluations at the end of a term can help to improve the experience, there are many proactive tactics instructors can use to create a positive and beneficial learning experience for students. The first step is to evaluate teaching practices and to create and revise courses as needed to reflect the constantly evolving challenges of teaching at a university. Given how content delivery is evolving, instructors need to reflect on how they can create a positive environment that provides structure and support for all students. This article discusses a few ways to improve teaching, including setting up clear expectations for communication and performance, providing clear directions and rubrics, engaging and communicating with students, building a safe community for learning, and providing substantive feedback. While the main goal is to increase student learning, another possible outcome of creating a safe and open space is more positive end of the term evaluations.

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Amy Carney and Kat Ringenbach

1. Stephen Darwin, "What Contemporary Work Are Student Ratings Actually Doing in Higher Education?" *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 54 (September 2017): 13–21; and Trinidad Beleche, David Fairris, and Mindy Marks, "Do Course Evaluations Truly Reflect Student Learning? Evidence from an Objectively Graded Post-test," *Economics of Education Review* 31, no. 5 (October 2012): 709–19.

2. Kerry Chávez and Kristina M. W. Mitchell, "Exploring Bias in Student Evaluations: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity," *Political Science and Politics* 53, no. 2 (April 2020): 270–74; Rebecca J. Kreitzer and Jennie Sweet-Cushman, "Evaluating Student Evaluations of Teaching: A Review of Measurement and Equity Bias in SETs and Recommendations for Ethical Reform," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 20, no. 1 (March 2022): 73–84; and Sophie Adams, Sheree Bekker, Yanan Fan, Tess Gordon, Laura J. Shepherd, Eve Slavich, and David Walters, "Gender Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching: 'Punish[ing] Those Who Fail To Do Their Gender Right,'" *Higher Education* 83, no. 4 (April 2022): 787–807.

3. Bob Uttl, Carmela A. White, and Daniela Wong Gonzalez, "Meta-Analysis of Faculty's Teaching Effectiveness: Student Evaluation of Teaching Ratings and Student Learning Are Not Related," *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 54 (September 2017): 22–42.

4. William C. Lubawy, "Evaluating Teaching Using a Best Practices Model," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 67, no. 3 (January 2003): 1–3.

Best professor ever! Super enthusiastic!

Awful professor—the university should fire her.

I took this class to fulfill a gen ed requirement, but I really enjoyed it. I'm glad I took it.

This class was a complete waste of time. I loved history until I took this course.

We've all been there. The semester has just ended, and our student evaluations are now available. As the cursor hovers over the file, the question comes to mind: what have our students written this time? There will undoubtedly be plenty of positive comments—there always are—but there will be negative ones too. In fact, as highlighted above, the comments from two students in the same class can be directly opposite. Even though there will be more positive comments, it's the negative ones that stick. They're the comments we remember weeks, months, and even years later. Sometimes the negative comments are honest and fair critiques; the concerns raised by the students are legitimate and lead to beneficial changes in future classes. Other times the students' words are seemingly nothing more than spiteful rants that serve no purpose other than to be hurtful.

Whether positive or negative, this feedback is valuable. It is a form of communication with our students, albeit limited because it is usually one-sided and comes at the end of the semester. These are not the only limitations of formal student evaluations. They have become a proxy for teaching quality and student learning.¹ They also tend to be biased based on gender, race, and/or ethnicity.² And, as psychologists Bob Uttl, Carmela A. White, and Daniela Wong Gonzalez point out, there is often the assumption, which lacks scientific evidence, that faculty who are rated more highly are those who have students who learn more in their classes.³ Acknowledging these limitations are important. At the same time, it is also important to review our students' comments. It is equally important to ask ourselves: what is a productive approach to finding valuable feedback from student evaluations? And most important, once we have identified useful feedback, how can we best use the students' responses to reflect on our teaching practices and to revise our courses?

The purpose of this article is to provide some preliminary answers to these questions. Pharmacological scientist William C. Lubawy recommends creating a list of best practices in teaching, including instructor characteristics and course management.⁴ With his recommendations in mind, we'd like to continue the conversation begun at the 2022 H-Net Teaching Conference in how to create clear and positive class expectations. We believe that a proactive approach to designing a class that addresses the needs and relevant feedback of students can create a positive connection with our students, improve our teaching practices, and allow us to maintain rigor, all of which will hopefully translate into future positive course



Suggestions for how to reflect on evaluations is also a recurring theme in teaching blogs: for example, see Cedar Riener, "How I Read My Student Evaluations," *University of Virginia Center for Teaching Excellence*, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://cte.virginia.edu/resources/how-i-read-my-student-evaluations>; Isis Artze-Vega, "Cruel Student Comments: Seven Ways to Soothe the Sting," *Faculty Focus*, December 8, 2014, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/cruel-student-comments-seven-ways-soothe-sting/>; and Maryellen Weimer, "What to Do about Those Negative Comments on Course Evaluations," *Faculty Focus*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/negative-comments-on-course-evaluations/>.

5. Jamie L. Wagner, Kathryn J. Smith, Chris Johnson, Michelle L. Hilaire, and Melissa S. Medina, "Best Practices in Syllabus Design," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 86, no. 9 (November 2022): 1–6.

6. Michael S. Palmer, Lindsay B. Wheeler, and Itiya Aneece, "Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 46, no. 4 (2016): 36–47.

evaluations.

Course Requirements

I'm not a psych major, but I learned so many things in this class that will benefit me for the rest of my life.

I was a straight A student, but I'm not anymore thanks to this horrible instructor.

Syllabus/Course Policies

First impressions matter. A smile combined with a positive attitude and just a little bit of enthusiasm are certainly valuable qualities to help lay a solid foundation for the semester. They also provide a good approach to segue into the first task of every first day: reviewing the syllabus. It is important for students to understand our expectations before the course begins. We often have the temptation to create a multiple-page document that gets expanded every year. However, the longer the document, the less likely students will actually read it and remember everything in it.⁵ The syllabus also sets the tone for the semester. In a face-to-face environment, an instructor can go over the syllabus, immediately answer questions, and frequently remind students that they will review segments of the syllabus again throughout the semester. Yet an introduction to all of these segments—lectures, readings, papers, discussions, and other assignments—is a lot to take in on the first day (times multiple classes for both them and us). Our tone and body language in this initial interaction with each class can lessen any potential negativity and anxiety. These first moments together are crucial.

In an online environment, establishing this initial relationship is more difficult to do. Therefore, phrasing policies in a positive manner is especially important so that the syllabus does not become a "what not to do" document.⁶ For example, instead of saying, "Don't write like you are texting friends," state, "Use professional and academic language in all your writing." It is easier to inform students what they need to do, instead of leaving them to try to figure out a replacement for what not to do. Whether online or in-person, instructors can have students sign a document acknowledging that they have read the syllabus and course policies; also, if points are assigned, it is much more likely that students will do so. Another method is to create a scavenger hunt quiz that can be taken multiple times so that students get familiar with the course requirements. This introduction to class expectations sets the stage for the semester; positive and direct information helps students connect to the class and to the instructor.

Engagement Standards

Engagement varies in face-to-face environments, blended classrooms, and fully online classes. Often class policies have criteria about the quantity of engagement or they focus on limiting multitasking. Instead of telling students not to multitask, we should explain how our brains are really dysfunctional when multitasking, which limits learning. This information takes the focus away from the instructor being dictatorial and puts it on learning and the responsibility of the learner. Students are also provided with important information on how learning can be enhanced by focusing on one task at a time.



7. Lara Schwartz and Daniel Ritter,
"Civil Discourse in the Classroom,"
*American Association of
University Professors* (Winter
2019): <https://www.aaup.org/article/civil-discourse-classroom#Y40RbGDMI2w>.

The most crucial factor in engagement is the principle of respect, which sets up a positive learning environment as well as a connection to the instructor. Lack of civility often emerges when individuals are unwilling to set aside a unidimensional view of the world to experience other points of view and to consider other people's experiences. Professors are expected to have meaningful conversations, while creating trust in a world that is divided, and must still worry about student evaluations.⁷ However, it is possible for faculty members to navigate difficult conversations with integrity and rigor. One way to create trust is to establish a civil discourse practice. Instructors can have a civility statement in the syllabus or elsewhere in the course material, or they can have the students collaborate and create one as a class (see appendix A for a sample civility statement). The statement could include such components as having intellectual humility, being aware of one's own biases, being open to challenging personal beliefs, asking questions for clarification, approaching conversations with empathy and kindness, thinking independently, letting go of flawed learning, not snapping to judgment, and using reliable sources to seek different points of view. Encouraging civil discourse is also an important tool in allowing students who are not ordinarily "seen" in a class to make connections with fellow students as well as with faculty, which can help them feel included. In addition, encouraging civil discourse creates an environment where the expectation is for the instructor to be respected, which may help to avoid negative evaluations that are not constructive. The instructor should also be a role model in how to provide constructive feedback throughout conversations, allowing the instructor to demonstrate how to critique and comment in respectful ways. It also shows students that the instructor is respectful of them and should in turn be given the same level of respect.

What the Teacher Will Provide

When I was sick and needed an extension on an assignment, the professor was understanding. I really appreciated her concern for me.

The rules for this class are unreasonable. The professor is punitive for the littlest things.

The professor gave great feedback and was so supportive.

I did the assignment, but I could never get a good grade because she's so picky about grammar. This is not an English class.

It is important for instructors to set expectations for what they will provide to students. For example, instructors should have a policy about office hours or a policy about when they will connect with students in an online class. Students should be aware of when instructors will respond to emails. By having this information listed in the syllabus and perhaps also on the home page of the course's online platform, students are provided with realistic expectations of how they can connect with their instructor outside of class and when they may get a response from their instructor. In a world of instant gratification, students need to have clear communication about limits. Instructors need to be seen as human beings who have lives outside of teaching and who are not expected to be on call 24/7.

8. Kat L. Ringenbach and R. P. Wilson. "Dimensions of Feedback: Faculty and Student Perspectives of Best Practices" (poster presented at the Annual Lilly West Conference on College and University Teaching, Newport Beach, CA, February 2016).

Another important component is to establish expectations for grading and assessment. This includes clear instructions for assignments, substantive feedback on submitted work, and reasonable policies about late submissions.

Clear Instructions

There are different philosophies on giving a lot of detail in instructions and rubrics. The key is to consider how learning can be supported. If we have a clear idea of what we want, why would we not share our expectations? By sharing these expectations, our focus is on supporting our students and guiding their learning in specific ways. Students need to know why an assignment is important and how it will enhance their learning. Assignment instructions can concisely convey this information.

Students highly appreciate having detailed instructions and rubrics.⁸ For example, the parameters for a paper should state the expected word count or page length as well as other formatting requirements. Submission requirements—paper copy, digital copy, or both—should be included. The instructions should also detail expectations for sources. Is the paper a short summation of an idea covered in a lecture? Is the student supposed to analyze an assigned reading? Or is this a research paper, and if so, what are the source requirements? Are online sources permissible, and if not, do the instructions clarify which library sources and databases are the best options based on the subject of the course? On a related note, in the assignment parameters and/or the in-class overview of them, students should be directed to useful resources at the university. Reference librarians are amazing resources. Inviting one to present an overview of library resources tailored to the assignment is a great use of a class period, especially in introductory general education courses. Librarians likewise have or can create guidelines to post on the course website that are course or even assignment specific. In addition to librarians, many universities have academic centers that employ writing tutors. Informing students about the value of proofing a complete rough draft of their paper with a tutor is a valuable use of space in the assignment instructions. Instructors should even consider, especially in introductory courses, requiring a tutor appointment as part of the assignment (see appendix B for a sample paper assignment).

If we are encouraging students to use critical thinking in our assignments, then it is important to provide them reasoning for those assignments. Such reasons could be linking assignments to course learning objectives or other reasons why each assignment is important. One outcome of providing this information is that students are less likely to describe assignments in student evaluations as "busy work." Here is an example of an explanation about the importance of discussion boards from one of our classes:

The discussion boards are not busy work but are designed for you to critically evaluate and apply course content. It is a place for you to expand on what you have learned from reading the text, to applying the content, finding examples, expanding on the content, and much more. You are expected to use critical thinking skills. This is a place where you can learn from not only your instructor, but from your classmates as well.

Note that this message sets the tone for the discussion board and emphasizes how learning is important (see appendix C for a sample discussion board assignment).

9. Ann Poulus and Mary Jane Mahony, "Effectiveness of Feedback: The Students' Perspective," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 33, no. 2 (April 2008): 143–54.
10. Ringenbach and Wilson, "Dimensions of Feedback."
11. Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke, *Assessment, Learning, and Employability* (London: Society for Research into Higher Education, 2003).
12. Therese M. Kuhs, Robert L. Johnson, Susan A. Arguso, and Diane M. Monrad, *Put to the Test: Tools and Techniques for Classroom Assessment* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).
13. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005), 13–34.

Helpful Feedback

Part of demonstrating how learning is important comes on the other end of the assignment when graded work is returned. From the perspective of students, feedback should be more than a numeric grade or general comments, such as "good job." Students want to understand why they earned a grade, and they want the feedback to be personalized.⁹ In addition, students—especially those who are early in their academic career—want feedback to be motivational. They want constructive and helpful feedback, information on what they did well, details to improve, alternative perspectives, and ways to apply feedback to future work.¹⁰ Quality feedback is a critical component in aiding students to meet the class learning expectations. Each piece of feedback provides a scaffolded approach to learning that teaches students to self-regulate and encourages them to be lifelong learners. High-quality feedback closes the gap between desired performance and current performance. Positive feedback builds on a student's strengths that they can leverage in future assignments and classes, and it builds confidence. In addition, students do not want to be compared to others.

Feedback should be equitable, meaning that there should be feedback that meets the student's learning level. In other words, students who are at a lower level should not be compared in a negative way to higher-level students, especially as students do not want to be compared to others.¹¹ Balanced feedback is an important part of quality teaching. When we get into grading mode, we are often focused on how to help our students improve without giving them credit and positive comments about what they did well. Creating a positive sandwich of what was done well, followed by suggestions for improvement, and then finishing with a positive statement can generate positive feelings and connections to the instructor.

For some instructors, part of providing their students with honest, timely, and balanced feedback that enables them to work toward improvement is using a rubric. Rubrics and checklists are powerful assessment tools, especially for assignments that are subjective in nature.¹² Instructors select the evaluative criteria and students are provided explicit guidelines on how to meet the course learning objectives or how to meet the requirements of the assignment. A detailed rubric provides levels of proficiency in meeting the objectives, which gives students objective information for a subjective assignment. Students may perceive a rubric as being fairer because every student is being judged on the same criteria. The rubric should be provided prior to the assignment being due to enhance student learning (see appendix D for a sample outline of final grades).

One concept when considering whether or not to use a rubric is backward design. Coined by curriculum designers Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, backward design refers to determining the learning goals first and then developing the assignments and rubrics before creating the course content.¹³ This approach means that the learning environment is based on end goals rather than the use of a textbook to design and drive learning. Instructors can determine what is most important for their students to learn and then can scaffold learning throughout the term. A rubric with detailed descriptors would be one element of this scaffold.

Finally, instructors can also teach students how to use rubrics in their own learning. One suggestion is to have students use rubrics as part of a self-review process. This method teaches

14. Carolyn Kuimelis, "The Deadline Dilemma: When It Comes to Course Requirements, How Much Flexibility Is Too Much?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-deadline-dilemma/>.
15. Edward R. Montalvo, "Viewing Late Work through an Equity Lens," *Edutopia*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/viewing-late-work-through-equity-lens/>.
16. Janice Carello and Lisa D. Butler, "Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-Informed Educational Practice," *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 35, no. 3 (2015): 263.

students to look for specifics when assessing their own work. Another suggestion is for students to evaluate a peer's paper using a rubric and then have a discussion about why they scored the paper in the manner they did.

Late Policies

There are different philosophies about accepting late work. Some instructors believe in a zero-tolerance policy. This approach, while often seen as training students to be responsible in future employment, can also hurt students who are already struggling with other life issues. Students may be turning in work late for a multitude of reasons, including anxiety, depression, underdeveloped executive functions, competing life functions, or a lack of resources. Recently there have been discussions that penalizing students for late work may be an equity issue.¹⁴ So what can instructors do? Some instructors recommend a "one late assignment policy," where students can ask for an extension prior to the assignment being due with no penalties. Even without a specific policy, instructors should be open to allowing a student to submit an assignment late if the student has communicated with the instructor in a timely manner. In the first student comment at the beginning of this section, the flexibility of the instructor changed the entire learning experience for the student. Such flexibility represents an opportunity for us as instructors to show compassion to our students and to allow our students to recognize that we understand that emergencies happen and that they have lives outside of the learning environment.

English instructor Edward R. Montalvo tracked the reasons why his students were turning assignments in late. He believes that task completion is something that needs to be taught and modeled rather than penalized. The classroom is a place to practice regulating and being able to meet deadlines. In addition, he wrote that students come from many different environments with traumatic experiences, which can affect their cognitive development. Even a simple due date is a stressor that can affect how individuals regulate their emotions and cognitions. Using trauma-informed practices allows instructors to implement positive equity-based practices to support students. Trauma-informed teaching focuses on the integration of learning with the physical and emotional trauma that students may have that hurts their ability to engage in the learning process. Psychologists Janice Carello and Lisa D. Butler report that over two-thirds of college students have been exposed to some type of trauma.¹⁶ Recognizing that students may need help to cope with life experiences may not seem like the role of instructors, especially those who are not psychologists. Yet having a basic understanding of our students' needs and their background aids in their learning process. Creating a classroom with trust and kindness may lead to students viewing the instructor in a more positive manner, which is a win-win because students learn and instructors have better evaluations in the long run.

Student Learning Expectations

The class was challenging. The professor kept pushing me to excel.

The workload for this class is insane. This professor clearly doesn't understand that we have important classes and don't have time for all of her useless assignments.

17. Anya Kamenetz, "What If Students Could Fire Their Professors?" *NPR*, April 26, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/04/26/401953167/what-if-students-could-fire-their-professors>.

18. Peter Shea, Chun Sau Li, and Alexandra Pickett, "A Study of Teaching Presence and Student Sense of Learning Community in Fully Online and Web-Enhanced College Courses," *Internet and Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2006): 176.

19. Anna Sfard, "On Two Metaphors for Learning and the Dangers of Choosing Just One," *Educational Researcher* 27, no. 2 (March 1998): 4–13.

Businesses ask customers to complete satisfaction surveys about their perceptions of the service they received. Higher education does this by asking students about their experience in the classroom. However, there is a qualitative difference between businesses that provide products and service to customers and higher education. Students are not just receivers in a customer experience, but are also an integral part of their own learning experience. The amount of time and effort they put into the class drives the overall experience. Education reporter Anya Kamenetz writes, "And therein lies the paradox. Yes, students are paying, often handsomely, for their degree. But they're not exactly customers, either. They're participants in an experience—one that is meant to be challenging, even grueling."¹⁷

One of the biggest challenges instructors have is that students have unrealistic expectations about the role of the teacher. Students often forget that they themselves are a critical part of the learning process. They may believe that instructors did not teach them anything. Yet our role as teachers is not to pour information into our students' heads. Learning can be messy and difficult at times, and it is important to set up an environment where our students know that they are the most important component of the learning environment. Learning centers on the student rather than the instructor. That does not mean, however, that the instructor is not an integral part of the learning community.

Scholars Peter Shea, Chun Sau Li, and Alexandra Pickett note that students learn best in an environment that is "learner-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered."¹⁸ In a learner-centered environment, instructors encourage students to take active roles in their own learning, aiding them to focus on their strengths, goals, interests, and passions. This encouragement is related to providing positive feedback. The instructor focuses on strengths to emphasize the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities that can be applied in the students' academic learning and future employment. Learner-centered instruction asks students to focus on critical thinking, while examining and challenging their own thought processes. A social and cognitive community focuses on building learning environments that are safe and structured, where students can pursue and share knowledge. The instructor can model encouraging behavior, while also modeling strong critical thinking and being able to critique, and not criticize. For example, the instructor can identify areas of disagreement and ask students to respond; point out consensus; encourage, acknowledge, or reinforce student contributions; set a climate for learning; prompt students to respond; and assess the efficacy of the discussion. Shea, Li, and Pickett say that successful learning communities come from the collaborative work of instructors and students.

Although the article by mathematics educator Anna Sfard is twenty-five years old, the ideals of creating learning-community models, whether in physical classrooms or online, are still relevant today.¹⁹ Students should be encouraged to share ideas and perspectives they hold to be educationally worthwhile and interesting, even if they may be controversial or provocative. Students should actively confront what they do not know and strive to understand varying points of view. Shared educational goals, social support, collaboration, and trust create a quality learning environment. Note that there is an emphasis on "participation," where students are not just empty vessels to be filled. Crucially, they contribute not just to their own learning, but to the learning of their classmates too. This perspective challenges egocentric and sociocentric thinking. The instructor needs to be highly interactive in the course to encourage social learning.

20. Anthony G. Picciano, "Beyond Student Perceptions: Issues of Interaction, Presence, and Performance in an Online Class," *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 6, no. 1 (August 2002): 21–40.

21. Rob Kelly, "Five Things Online Students Want from Faculty," *Faculty Focus*, May 30, 2014, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/online-students-want-from-faculty/>.

By creating a warm and inviting environment, students become connected to the course content, their classmates, and the instructor.

Communication

The professor really enjoys learning with us. It's fun to try and stump her with questions, and when we do, she always looks up the answers for us.

The first time a student asks a stupid question, the professor should say that's a stupid question and tell the class that she will not answer stupid questions.

There are multiple avenues of communication for an instructor in a classroom. Between saying "hello" when first walking into the room and wishing the students a good day at the end of class, a significant amount of formal and informal communication transpires. Most is verbal—lectures, questions, discussions—but body language is crucial too. This communication is then supplemented by one-on-one conversations before and after class, during office hours and appointments, in Zoom meetings, and through email. The dynamics of an asynchronous online class are different, but establishing solid lines of communication with students are no less important. Educator Anthony G. Picciano says that there are many ways to be present in an online class, including telepresence.²⁰ Educator Rob Kelly suggests that students need to know the professor is a breathing human being.²¹ Telepresence refers to using technology to help students to feel connected, and there are many ways instructors can connect to students. They can send emails, create announcements and messages, use Slack or some other messaging program, text students, and volunteer to have phone or Zoom meetings with students. It is important to note that these methods of communication are also helpful outside of face-to-face class meetings.

Kelly also addresses what online students want from their instructors. These include a quick response time, instructor presence, reminders, easy-to-access course design, and fun, interesting discussion threads. Kelly suggests sending out reminders when things are due. He also suggests forecasts, where students are reminded of work to be done in the next two weeks. This can be done in the announcement section of the class, which is then automatically emailed to students. These methods to create a teaching presence nurtures an environment where students teach and learn from each other. Again, these are also best practices in traditional education.

Educators Liam Rourke, Terry Anderson, D. Randy Garrison, and Walter Archer state that teaching includes three important components that involve the student: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.²² In their model, cognitive presence is the student's interaction with content and social presence is interaction with other students. Teaching presence is the interaction with the instructor, which is an important part of communication. Many students complain that their online instructors barely engage in discussions and take too long to get back to them via email. In other words, students do not believe the instructors are involved cognitively or socially. Social and cognitive presence are also an integral part of a quality class, not just for students but for instructors as well. Students value what instructors bring to the classroom, no matter the modality. Student evaluations are an important way for instructors to understand what students value from their instructors and courses.

22. Liam Rourke, Terry Anderson, D. Randy Garrison, and Walter Archer, "Assessing Social Presence in Asynchronous Text-Based Computer Conferencing," *Journal of Distance Education* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 68.

23. Go to <https://networks.h-net.org/h-teach>.

Summary

Ultimately, we as instructors set the tone for our students' learning. We must not only communicate our expectations, but also model them. We must constantly review our teaching practices and reflect on how we can be highly engaged instructors who create an environment for student learning and success. Students see our presence when we build a community of learners by interacting with them, communicating frequently and openly with them, providing them with clear and concise guidelines for the course, and giving them feedback that elevates and enables them to grow. While these practices are not a guarantee for better course evaluations, they do provide a more structured environment where students feel connected and seen.

As noted in the introduction, this article developed out of our presentation at the 2022 H-Net Teaching Conference. We hope that our brief reflections here on in-person and online teaching have added to this discussion. We now invite you—our readers—to continue this conversation on H-Teach.²³ An ongoing, robust dialogue about best teaching practices—as well as how and where student evaluations have a place in those practices—would be beneficial to all of us as we navigate the complexities and constantly evolving challenges of trying to be good instructors who create meaningful learning experiences each term in every class.

Appendix A

Civility Statement

Civil discourse involves listening politely to others, remaining objective, behaving peacefully, being nonjudgmental, and being willing to compromise. Civility and critical thinking are closely linked in academic settings. As critical thinkers, we need to be aware of our own egocentric and sociocentric biases in order to be open to learning about other perspectives.

Civil behavior includes showing respect toward other people, causing others to feel valued, and contributing to mutual respect, effective communication, and team collaboration.

Lack of civility often emerges when individuals are unwilling to set aside a unidimensional view of the world to look at other points of view and consider other people's experiences. As a critical thinker who engages in civil behavior, we must embrace the following:

1. Have humility and do not assume we know everything about everyone.
2. Be aware of our own biases as we listen to others, with the goal of being open-minded and nonjudgmental.
3. Be willing to challenge our own beliefs and persevere when it is difficult to change our worldviews.
4. Be willing to ask questions for clarification when we do not understand another's point of view and listen respectfully to the responses.
5. Approach any situation with kindness and empathy and realize we may not truly understand what another person has experienced.
6. Be willing to think independently and let go of prior learning that may be flawed to gain more understanding.
7. Use reliable sources to seek out views different from our own.

The University of Massachusetts Global includes an entire spectrum of skin colors, ethnic groups, beliefs, languages, and cultures. In an educational organization, people hold varying views, and we believe that diversity is an inherent strength. Compromise and diversity are a hallmark of a university that engages in civil discourse and critical thinking.

Appendix B

Early Modern Europe Paper

(This assignment is provided to students in the syllabus)

There were many events that shaped the development of early modern European history. With this notion as a premise, you are required to write a paper that answers all of the following questions: *What is the defining moment in the history of early modern Europe? What are at least three events that inspired (and/or resulted from) this defining moment? Who are at least two significant figures that contributed to (and/or benefited from) this moment? What is the overall significance of this defining moment?*

When choosing a topic, there are three key points to keep in mind:

1. For the purposes of this paper, early modern Europe is defined as **1500–1815**. Your defining moment **must** come from this time frame. However, your supporting events and significant figures may come from before or after this time frame.
2. You must be **specific** when choosing a defining moment; for example, the French Revolution is too broad to choose as the moment, but the Storming of the Bastille is an acceptable choice.
3. As this is a European history course, the primary focus of your paper must be a **kingdom or country in Europe**. However, when choosing related events and significant figures, you do not have to limit yourself to Europe. If non-European events or people are relevant to supporting your thesis, you may include them in your paper. You also do not have to limit yourself to people, events, and ideas covered in class; in fact, I **highly encourage** you to find a topic that we have not covered in class.

Once you have chosen a topic, there are two components of this assignment to complete.

The first component is **an outline and a bibliography**.

The outline must describe the defining moment in 1–2 sentences as well as list the three events and two people.

The bibliography must have at least **five separate sources**. These must be printed sources from the library or academic periodicals found in the library's scholarly databases (<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/erie.html>). **Online sources are not acceptable for this assignment.** (Journal databases and digital books found on the PSU library website do not count as online sources. Also, it is highly advisable that you use academic articles and books and do not limit your research to encyclopedia articles.) **In addition** to these five sources, you may also use any document assigned in class as a supplemental source. You may choose to cite using either Chicago Style or MLA. Additional information on citation and grading and writing guidelines are available in Canvas in the module "Writing/Paper Guidelines." You can also find information about citation at Purdue OWL (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html) as well as the Penn State libraries (<https://guides.libraries.psu.edu/CitationStyles>).

A paper copy of the **outline and bibliography** is due at the start of class on **Friday, February 24**. You must also **submit a digital copy to Turnitin** (<https://www.turnitin.com/>) by 9:05 a.m. on Friday, February 24. Our



class id is ##### and the enrollment key is #####. After you have submitted your paper to Turnitin, **you will receive a receipt**; it is in your best interest to **keep a copy of this receipt** as it is proof of your digital submission. Also: please **submit the assignment as one Word document**.

The second component is the paper.

The paper must be between **6 and 8 pages long**, answer all of the questions listed above, use at least five sources, be written in third person, be double spaced, be set in an appropriate font (Times New Roman 12), and have 1-inch margins. Please note: **the six-page minimum means at least six full pages of text**.

All **quoted and paraphrased material must be cited**, although quotes from your sources should be used **sparingly**. Any information taken from class notes can be considered common knowledge and does not need to be cited. Either Chicago style or MLA is acceptable. You must also include a bibliography with the paper.

As part of this assignment, you are **required to make an appointment with a Writing Tutor in the Learning Resource Center** (<https://behrend.psu.edu/Academics/academic-services/lrc/tutoring>) to review **a complete rough draft and bibliography**. This appointment must be completed **no later than Friday, March 31**. On the tutor log that you will fill out during your session, there is an option for you to "send my professor a copy of this form." You must select "yes" and write in my name as otherwise I will not have a record of your visit with the tutor. **Please note**: if you submit an incomplete draft to the tutor, if you do not remain with the tutor during the appointment, or if the appointment is past the deadline, then you will lose 10 points from the paper. If you fail to review a draft with a tutor, then you will lose 20 points from the paper.

A paper copy of the **final draft of the paper** is due at the start of class on **Monday, April 3**. You also need to **submit a digital copy to Turnitin by 9:05 a.m.** Just submit one Word document with both the paper and bibliography; you do not need to submit the outline again. Again, after you have submitted your paper to Turnitin, **you will receive a receipt**; it is in your best interest to **keep a copy of this receipt** as it is proof of your digital submission.

Your paper will primarily be graded on three criteria: one, the clarity and conciseness of your writing; two, the proper use of the sources in your paper; and three, the ability to answer the questions noted above.

If you have any questions about the assignment, the visit to the Learning Resource Center, the in-class submissions, or the online submissions, feel free to visit me during my office hours or send me an email before either part of the assignment is due. I am also happy to review your ideas and drafts during my office hours or by appointment.

Grading Guidelines

(This document is provided to students in the course's online platform in a section with 5 other documents about writing, editing, and citation.)

Although there is no grading rubric for this class, these questions will give you a general idea of what I look for when I grade your paper. In particular, I focus on the quality of your research, your argument, and your writing (questions 6, 7, 8).

1. Was a hard copy of the paper submitted in class on time?
2. Was a digital copy of the paper submitted online on time?
3. Does the paper meet the appropriate page count and was it properly formatted?
4. Was a bibliography included and were all of the resources properly cited?
5. Were all paraphrased and quoted references properly cited within the paper?
6. How well were the sources used to support the argument made in the paper?
7. What was the overall quality of the argument made in the paper?
8. What was the overall quality of the writing and grammar?

Appendix C

Discussion Rubric (2-Week Format)

Philosophy for the Discussion Thread:

The discussion board in your class is a critical learning assignment. It is the expectation that anything you write and create is your own work that has been created solely for the purpose of this class.

This is a place where you can learn from not only your instructor but your classmates as well. It is expected that you spend at least five hours a week in a learning environment (whether it is in a fully online class or a blended class). This does not include reading a textbook, taking quizzes, or doing assignments. Therefore, the discussion boards are a critical element for meeting the hour requirements, whether you are taking an online or a blended class.

The discussion boards are not busy work but are designed for you to critically evaluate and apply course content. It is a place for you to expand on what you have learned from reading the text, to applying the content, finding examples, expanding on the content, and much more. You are expected to use critical thinking skills. **It is critical to note that you may not just copy blocks of information from a website, even if you do cite it. One of the purposes of the discussion board is to work on your writing skills. It is important that you paraphrase what you have read.**

In the two-week format, you are required to engage in a discussion thread in both weeks. The initial post must be done in the first week. You cannot enter the discussion after the two-week time period has ended and get points. Essentially you would be entering an empty classroom because all your classmates have moved on to the next week.

Initial Post:

You are provided choices on the topics you have researched for the week and different ways to share the information as part of the assignment. When posting, put the name of the topic in your subject line. Attach your work to the post and then write a summary of a minimum of 200 words that tells your classmates what will be included in your attached document. You are expected to cite reputable sources, which may include readings in the course. Be sure to cite your sources in APA format. The initial post should be done by 11:59 p.m. on Saturday of the first week in which the discussion is assigned.

Responding to Your Classmates:

You are also required to respond to three of your classmates on topics that are different from the one you selected. Your responses should be a minimum of 200 words and you must cite sources in all your posts. Words such as “thank you for your post” or “this is interesting” and your reference list will not count toward the minimum words. All posts must be completed by 11:59 p.m. on Sunday of the second week. Note that responses to classmates who have posted

on a similar topic will not count. The goal is for you to learn more about different topics, so be sure to select threads that are not the same as the topic in your initial post. Note that responses that meet minimum requirements may not receive all points; you must demonstrate critical thinking and must add something new to the conversation. Remember that the goal is to have an intellectual discourse. Therefore, a response in which you tell a colleague you like his or her idea without going into any detail is not acceptable. It is not enough to just ask questions, without building on the information. What were your thoughts when you thought of the question? If you have a question, you may want to share that you had a question and what you found when you did research to answer it yourself. It is always important to relate your responses back to the content of the course.

Here are some ideas in how you can respond to your classmates:

- Build on something your colleague posted.
- Explain why and how you see things differently. Cite research to support your view.
- Ask a probing or clarifying question that causes others to critically evaluate what was being said. Do not just ask for additional information. Explain why you are asking the question. What made you want to ask the question?
- Share an insight you had after reading your colleague's posting.
- Offer another opinion and support it with research.
- Validate an idea with your own experience (not all your responses should be about your own experience).
- Expand on your colleague's posting by adding new information.
- Ask for evidence that supports the posting or find other evidence to support or contradict an idea or theory.
- Play the devil's advocate to someone's post (but let them know you are doing so and use correct netiquette).

Use critical thinking standards to evaluate what your classmates have to say. It is important to note that this is an academic discussion, not a chat room. Remember to be respectful to your classmates. You do not have to agree, but you do need to be respectful and address the idea, not the person. For example, if I hate chocolate ice cream, I would state my reasons why I do not like it. I would not call my classmates names or discount their opinion about chocolate ice cream because I do not like it.

Writing Style:

The discussion board is an academic forum. It is expected that the writing meets academic standards. You should proofread all your posts. In addition, you should not write as if you are texting. For example, the word "I" should always be capitalized. The words "you are" should be

spelled out and “ur” should never be used. You are expected to cite your sources within the text of your post. It is not acceptable to just cut and paste blocks of information from a website. It is important to use your own words. If you plagiarize, you will automatically fail the discussion board for the week. You should not use more than one quotation in your post and it should be no more than 25 percent of your post. The goal is for you to paraphrase the work of other researchers.

General Requirements:

The discussion board is designed for you to have an intellectual conversation with your classmates. Therefore, to get the full benefit from the discussion, it is recommended that you engage multiples times each week and take the time to read each thread. If all of you were to wait until the last minute to engage in the discussion, you would not get the full benefit of learning from each other, having time to reflect on what others are saying, having time to do additional research, and so on. Although you are required to engage four times, you are welcome and encouraged to engage more. It is also a great idea for you to go back into your initial thread and answer any questions that your classmates or instructor have posed; this also contributes to your learning.

Earning Points:

Please refer to the rubric below. This will be followed when grading your discussion. Note that the discussion is not designed for you to get an automatic 100 percent if you have not shown in-depth responses that show at least some of the following critical thinking skills: clarity (clear and concise writing), accuracy (free from errors and distortions), precision (exact level of detail), depth (showing relationships to other things), breadth (showing more than one viewpoint), relevance (relating to the content learned), logic (no contradictions in your argument), and significance (what is important). Just counting words is not enough for you to earn the full value.

Note that if you plagiarize, you will receive a zero on the discussion board. You will also be reported to the university for plagiarism.

Missing the Minimum Number of Responses:

Note that the rubric only applies if you have responded a minimum of four times. If you do not engage four times, your instructor may take off up to 20 points for not responding to classmates and up to 30 points for the initial post. This is the rubric that will be used to grade your responses:

Criteria	Outstanding	Average	Poor	Missing
Initial Post Summary	<p>4.5–5.0 points</p> <p>Initial post clearly and concisely summarizes the topic that has been selected, as well as how the information is presented.</p> <p>The summary is 200 to 300 words in length.</p> <p>There are no grammatical/spelling errors.</p>	<p>3.5–4.4 points</p> <p>Initial post somewhat clearly and concisely summarizes the topic that has been selected, as well as how the information is presented.</p> <p>The summary is 150 to 199 words in length.</p> <p>There are a few grammatical/spelling errors.</p>	<p>1.0–3.4 points</p> <p>Initial post summary lacks clarity about the topic that has been selected, as well as how the information is presented.</p> <p>The summary is 1 to 149 words in length.</p> <p>Writing has multiple grammatical/spelling errors.</p>	<p>0 points</p> <p>No summary has been provided.</p>
Topic Assignment	<p>25–30 points</p> <p>Meets all the criteria for the attachment to the initial post, including length, content, etc.</p> <p>Topic assignment is clearly and concisely presented, adding new information beyond content presented in the course.</p> <p>Topic assignment is professionally presented or displayed.</p>	<p>20–24 points</p> <p>Meets most of the criteria for the attachment to the initial post, including length, content, etc.</p> <p>Topic assignment is somewhat clearly and concisely presented, adding mostly new information beyond the content in the course.</p> <p>Topic assignment is somewhat professionally presented or displayed.</p>	<p>1–19 points</p> <p>Meets a portion of the criteria for the attachment to the initial post, including length, content, etc.</p> <p>Topic assignment lacks clarity and provides little new information beyond what is presented in the course.</p> <p>Topic assignment needs improvement in how it is presented or displayed.</p>	<p>0 points</p> <p>No attachment on a topic has been provided.</p>
References	<p>4.5–5.0 points</p> <p>Provides a list of references in correct APA format. Sources provided are from reputable sources.</p>	<p>3.5–4.4 points</p> <p>Provides a list of references in APA format but has a few errors. Sources provided are somewhat reputable.</p>	<p>1.0–3.4 points</p> <p>Provides a list of references in APA format but has multiple errors and/or sources are not all reputable.</p>	<p>0 points</p> <p>Does not provide a list of references used.</p>

Criteria	Outstanding	Average	Poor	Missing
Quality of Responses	<p>14–15 points</p> <p>Responds to other students in a highly articulate and meaningful way using critical thinking guidelines and expands on the information presented by peers.</p> <p>Responds with a minimum of 200 words per reply.</p> <p>Cites outside sources to support all responses.</p> <p>Responds to posts that are not on the same topic as initial post.</p>	<p>12–13 points</p> <p>Responds to others in a somewhat articulate and meaningful way and usually expands on information presented by peers. One or more of the responses lacks depth or critical thinking.</p> <p>Responds with 150–199 words per reply.</p> <p>Provides outside sources for at least 2 responses to classmates to support views.</p> <p>Most responses are on different topic of initial post.</p>	<p>1–11 points</p> <p>Does not respond to others in a well thought out way and does not expand on information presented by peers. Responses lack depth, are shallow, and/or show limited critical thinking.</p> <p>Responds with fewer than 150 words.</p> <p>Does not cite outside sources to support responses to peers.</p> <p>Most responses are not on different topic of initial post.</p>	<p>0 points</p> <p>Does not respond to any classmates.</p>
Writing Style	<p>4.5–5.0 points</p> <p>Uses proper grammar and spelling 90–100% of the time. Writing is academic in nature.</p> <p>At least 90% of post is in own words.</p>	<p>3.5–4.4 points</p> <p>Uses proper grammar and spelling 70–89% of the time. Writing is generally academic in nature, with an occasional error.</p> <p>At least 85% of post is in own words.</p>	<p>2.5–3.4 points</p> <p>Uses proper grammar and spelling less than 70% of the time. Writing is non-academic in nature (i.e., writes with social media shortcuts).</p> <p>Less than 80% of post is in own words.</p>	<p>0 points</p> <p>Writing is not in own words and/or has responses where quotations make up over 50% of the posts.</p>

Appendix D

A: Excellent

Honor grade indicating excellent work. Earned as a result of a combination of most or all of the following as outlined by the instructor in the course syllabus and/or other course documents: superior examination scores, consistently accurate and prompt completion of all assignments, ability to deal resourcefully with abstract ideas, superior mastery of pertinent skills, demonstration of excellent critical thinking skills and analysis of course material on assignments and in class discussions, and excellent attendance.

B: Superior

Honor grade indicating superior, above average work. Earned as a result of a combination of some or all of the following as outlined by the instructor in the course syllabus and/or other course documents: high examination scores, accurate and prompt completion of all assignments, ability to deal well with abstract ideas, mastery of pertinent skills, demonstration of above average critical thinking skills and analysis of course material on assignments and in class discussions, and excellent attendance.

C: Average

Standard college grade indicating successful performance. Earned as a result of a combination of some or all of the following as outlined by the instructor in the course syllabus and/or other course documents: satisfactory examination scores, generally accurate and prompt completion of assignments, ability to deal with abstract ideas, fair mastery of pertinent skills, demonstration of average critical thinking skills and analysis of course material on assignments and in class discussions, and regular attendance.

D: Substandard but receiving credit

Substandard grade indicating the student has met only minimum requirements. Earned as a result of some or all of the following as outlined by the instructor in the course syllabus and/or other course documents: low examination scores; generally inaccurate, incomplete, late, and/or missing assignments; inadequate grasp of abstract ideas; barely acceptable mastery of pertinent skills; little demonstration of critical thinking skills or analysis of course material on assignments and in class discussions; and irregular attendance.

F: Failure

Non-passing grade indicating failure to meet minimum requirements. Earned as a result of some or all of the following as outlined by the instructor in the course syllabus and/or other course documents: non-passing examination scores; mostly inaccurate, incomplete, or late assignments; failure to cope with abstract ideas; inadequate mastery of pertinent skills; no demonstration of critical thinking skills or analysis of course material on assignments and in class discussions; and repeated absence from class.

AUTHOR BIO

Amy Carney is an associate professor of history at Pennsylvania State University, the Behrend College. She teaches classes on modern European history, including courses on both World Wars, Fascism and National Socialism, and the Holocaust. Her research, including her 2018 book *Marriage and Fatherhood in the Nazi SS*, focuses on family life in Nazi Germany.

Kat Ringenbach is a professor of psychology at University of Massachusetts Global, where she has taught for twenty-nine years, including traditional face-to-face, blended, and asynchronous online formats. She has presented on a variety of topics, including job performance, critical thinking, best teaching practices, student success, assessment, interdisciplinary approaches to teaching, work-life balance, interracial mentoring, substantive feedback, and quality teaching. She is one of the authors for UMass Global's innovative Competency Based Education Program, focusing on multidisciplinary approaches to understanding the human experience and human behavior, as well as critical and creative thinking.

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