

7 PROVEN STEPS TO PLANNING, TEACHING, & ENGAGING YOUR STUDENTS

by Norman Eng



Every semester, I ask my students the **#1 thing they wish they could tell their professors**. Something they wouldn't tell you directly. Something you may not always recognize or appreciate. And even if you do, there's often a nuance to their responses that can remind you of their individual worth. (To see what students wrote the past couple of semesters go [here](#) and [here](#).)

Yes, sometimes their comments come across as being overly sensitive. Maybe even entitled. But other times, they sting because we know they're true. But one thing's for sure: they always get me to reflect on how to be better.

In the end, I *re-learn what it means to be empathetic and learner-centered*, which in turn influences my planning and instruction.

Here are the ten insights I'll keep in mind this term, based on students' verbatim comments:

Insight #1: "With great power comes great responsibility"*

"One thing I wish professors would better understand is that their words and actions have a farther reach and influence than they tend to think. I had a personal experience where a professor was very negative and explained that she didn't think I was capable of passing the class because I did poorly on one assignment. This situation was very discouraging for me and subconsciously her words resonated with me later turning into doubts. Without realizing, I let her words define me and felt that I was not good enough any longer. Ultimately my encounter with this professor affected my pursuit in my major. On the other hand, I've had teachers that forever left a mark on me, giving me inspiration even today because my professor was so impressionable. I think professors need to recognize how powerful their position in society is. They are responsible for being mentors as well as educators and are heavily relied on to guide our kids of the future."

"[Professors] have the power to inspire and motivate. Students have registered for your course because something about it caught their interest; it is up to you to make them realize why. The energy and attitude a professor brings into the classroom sets the tone for students. Students are now connecting the subject matter with the positive or negative vibes given off by the professor, whether or not it is intentional."

Insight #2: Each and every assignment should have a purpose

“A teacher has the huge responsibility of influencing students with their power to convey and transfer knowledge. An elementary school teacher likely feels this power more directly because it is easier to see the impact you can have on a small child and the improvements they make academically and socially because of you.

A college professor on the other hand, has a room full of emerging adults, each with their own motivations for being in that class and different expectations for it. I feel that because these intentions are not so black and white that professors sometimes lose sight of what their own purpose is. No matter what the students' specific reasons are for being in the class, the student is there viewing the professor as the expert. They want to hear what the professors uniquely bring to the classroom that is going to affect their lives. They don't want to read a PowerPoint authored by another professional, or teach themselves material for an exam after school hours.

I understand that professors must follow a certain curriculum and because of that sometimes certain topics are rushed or not taught as personally as they could be, but sending a student home to read 30-40 pages of a textbook without adding the professor's own personal twist to it defeats the purpose of even having a teacher! I go to class because I respect the knowledge of the qualified professor and hope to gain something specifically from them, and therefore I expect their teaching to be *meaningful*.”

“Sometimes I regret being a college student due to the number of assignments I have to do every week. I asked myself what I understood from those unnecessary essays. The answer was nothing. I just want to finish them to get good grades. On the other hand, some professors give many exams and quizzes saying that they did their part of teaching us in class. In fact, students do not understand what they have been taught, ending up failing the class. I believe that those

professors don't know how to teach, and they blame students for their failure."

"I wish professors only required assignments that were imperative to our learning in each subject area rather than filler assignments that are intended to keep students busy."

"As a student, I would like the professor to understand better that unclear instruction and thoughtless assignments are such a burden and only can be a burden to students. On the other hand, clear instruction and thoughtful and reasonable assignments would be something I truly need, and I do believe that they help everyone in the class. As students, we go to class and want to learn something that can prepare ourselves to be a good teacher in the future, but I have seen some professors do not even know how to teach and we [education majors are] future educators..."

Insight #3: "Nontraditional" students have unique needs

"I have a full-time job and I attend school. Sometimes it is hard to manage time when so much is on your plate. A couple of professors do not understand that and will not feel bad about failing a student. Their class will come first and do not care about what happens in your life. I was lucky to have understanding professors because last semester I got hurt and missed two weeks of class which is a big thing. I kept in contact with them and gave them Doctor's notes. Both of my professors were fine with my excuses and appreciated that I got my work done either way. Some professors would not have cared about the excuses and still failed you. If most professors would try to understand some students have a busy schedule and work with them it will take some stress of the student and they will be able to be successful students."

"[It's stressful] to juggle working to pay for [college] expenses while

remaining a full-time student. Remaining a full-time student is necessary for many to get medical insurance coverage and finish school as quickly as possible, especially for those who don't get any help from the government, like me. I wake up every morning at 6AM and don't get home till 10PM. It's exhausting and it takes a toll on my mental health and quality of work. Living home although helps me save money, adds on the familial responsibilities.

As a woman, I must find time to clean, cook, and help raise my siblings. I am the eldest of 6. Doing any reading or assignment takes three times more than average when you have a 2-year-old and 1-year-old constantly grasping your attention being hungry, tired, rambunctious, or in need of diaper changes. Moreover, wanting to get on your computer, writing over your assignments, or blasting cartoons and YouTube. I wish professors were more understanding of those students that are trying their best to do well in school, remain sane, and fulfill all their responsibilities. Extending their empathy can do a lot for a struggling student."

"Not all the students have the same responsibilities; some students have more than others. Therefore, not all the students have the same amount of time to finish their homework in a short period of time. I understand that the professor has their schedule and curriculum that they have to fulfill on time, but our only thing to do in life is not just to be a student. There is a lot of students that are single parents and may not have someone who helps them.

Like me. I am a single mother, who has to work two jobs to support my family and our needs. Also, I am a full-time student which mean that I have more classes that also require handing the homework on time. Between work and school, it not that much time that I have to share with my son and help him with school stuff and time to finish my homework in a short period of time. Also, I understand that the professors don't tell us

to do all this thing [sic], but they have to be conscious that we want to change our future and do better."

Insight #4: Focus less on WHAT you should teach and more on HOW students can better learn.

"Especially in long lectures, there should always be a point, or several points where it is time to stop and look at the class staring at you. This would allow for an interaction between the students you are lecturing and to stimulate questions to be asked. I have seen many times where professors would ask, "Are there any questions?" and immediately move on if no one raises their hand. This is due to not giving your class enough time to process information and to think of something they are not sure about. It is also good to actually gauge the expression of the room, and for anyone who looks confused or unsure about the material. This is because body language can speak for the students themselves. If this happens, it's time to take a step back and tell the information again, using layman's terms."

"One thing that I wish to suggest to professors when it comes to teaching is to make lectures interesting in the class. Some professors use PowerPoint slides or just give lectures about topic. They just explain a little bit and then move to next slide right away. Not all students have a chance to take notes or understand the lectures. For example, last semester I [took] a history course for 3 hours where the professor just talked and talked. Most of the students used to fall asleep or lost attention or skipped half of the classes. Whereas in my high school, the history teacher used to give a lot effort to make the history class interesting, such as working in groups, making up stories or poems relevant to historical events, etc. While using PowerPoint, professors should give us time to take notes and explain elaborately to students instead of just reading the slide."

“Professors engage by teaching the way they feel [most] comfortable without stopping to think, *What are things I could do differently so my material can be understood better?* There are four different ways to learn, those being visual, verbal, auditory and physical also known as kinesthetic; however professors usually only engage with one: auditory. When teaching, they talk and expect the student to understand or be able to retain the material without taking into consideration that some people have different learning methods, for instance, writing on the board some information can help them understand what is being spoken about and then the person can make connections from previous conversations and engage better.

I find [some] professors' way of teaching at times unfair because it does not allow for all students to learn to their best potential. This would be something I wished professors understood most because like other students, I am a visual learner and sometimes I cannot retain all of the information being spoken to me at a time. But if there were information at least written on the board, I believe I would understand better when confused.”

Insight #5: Don't make talking in class the sole criteria for participation.

“While there are exceptions in rare classes and cases, it's simply not okay to call on students when they don't expect it. Unfortunately, anxiety is growing, all over America, too rapidly to ignore. While it's true that everyone can get the jitters when doing things like presenting in front of larger audiences, as capable educators, we must consider that one call-out moment can seem insignificant to the educator and class, but feel unbearably uncomfortable, or even debilitating, discouraging, or shameful to the student who was called on and didn't know the answer or how to respond. Regardless of the educator's intentions, there is too sudden of an increasing rate of anxiety amongst students to ignore the

issue. Such students can end up having to carry around intense embarrassment with them for the rest of the day, for, essentially, no reason. Needless to say, anxiety is an impressively hefty medical condition, and it does not take logic into consideration.

Perhaps, the answer is to be as aware as possible of students' individual comfort levels when deciding when to call on students in class, and when to not, as educators.

Some of the students like to participate in the classroom, and some of the students like to write their thoughts out. Everyone has a different way to express out their ideas, therefore the professor should provide a variety of ways for students to participate, not just raise their hand in the class."

"One thing that a professor for my current course is allowing students to do is, if that student felt as though they had so much to say in class but was a little shy, in order to get participation they can email the professor and tell her what was interesting. So college professors, getting older doesn't mean it's easier to just "get over your fears". Students might still need a little push or understanding."

Insight #6: The age of textbooks is over

"It is a waste of time of time and money to purchase textbooks. I have been in a fair share of college classes, and about 95% of my classes required textbooks that we only used for the first week of class. In one of my classes, the Professor had copies of each chapter. He had us summarize the assigned chapter, create a poster, and present the information to the class. This is a more effective way to have us retain information from the textbook. Students can also easily refer to the information if they need to."

"Some students may wait to buy textbooks as to see if it really is

necessary...since some professors will put it on the syllabus as required but never use it in the semester or if it will be discussed during class, which will allow [students] to write down the main point of that reading."

Insight #7: Start by meeting students at their cognitive level

"It is not okay to assume every student is at the same level of understanding. There are many professors teaching intro classes using advanced jargon about the subject and expecting all the students to understand. I am not talking about 200 or 300 level classes, I am talking about introductory classes, where there is no need to use expansive vocabulary. I have taken intro classes where I had no idea what was going on because the professor was not considerate enough to use a simplified vernacular. I am not asking them to "dumb it down" or "make it easy." I am asking them to speak so that all students understand, even the ones who have no previous knowledge about the subject. They can first teach the jargon and then use it along the way but they cannot expect all the students to understand the jargon from the start."

Insight #8: Be aware of your students' mental health

"A lot of students are battling something. Through the years depression and anxiety numbers have risen. Many college students have depression and/or anxiety and may need a mental health day. We all feel the pressure to succeed, and many of us are working extremely hard to do everything that is on our plate. Professors should always pay attention to their students and notice if that student is doing their best. If a student speaks to a professor about something personal he/she is battling, the professor should try to understand. Life isn't solely about school and money. We should all be considerate of others, and their inner growth."

Insight #9: When students take notes, they are multi-

tasking

“Note-taking while [professors] lecture is a hard task to complete.

It’s hard for students to absorb and take in information while writing at the same time. Multi-tasking isn’t simple for everyone. Yet, professors expect all college students to do so. Not only during lectures, but note-taking while reviewing power point presentations is just as difficult. Most students are worried about making sure they got everything down before the professor moves on to the next slide instead of actually understanding the content behind it.”

Insight #10: Reinforce important concepts over and over; don’t just teach it once.

“[Students] don’t always get things right away. We might struggle the first few times around to remember a formula or to solve a problem, but that does not mean you are any less smart. Thankfully I have always had teachers in the math field that have understood this about their students. In the science field that has not always been the case. The thing with science is that it’s all about remembering! Remembering terms and definitions. Remembering formulas and the locations of things. I personally have always had a hard time with remembering things, but I think that there are students that just need a bit more practice before things start to sink in. I feel like professors should be a little bit more understanding of this, and slow down at times for all the students.”

Thoughts about these students’ responses? Leave comments below.

*A famous quote from [Spiderman \(2002\), the movie](#).

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