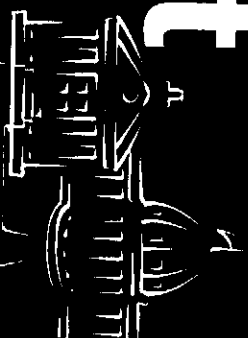


# Assessment

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# Update

Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education

## The Presentation of the Student Role in Everyday Classroom Life: An Assessment

Jonathan I. Marx, Jennifer Crew Solomon, Bradley G. Tripp

**A**S A TEACHER FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS, I HAVE OCCASIONALLY YEARNED FOR the ability to freeze-frame the faces of students in a classroom and then read each student's mind, as if the pupil's thoughts were a cartoon caption. During lectures, professors see a vast array of facial expressions, varying from what appears to be outright disdain to intense engagement. My professional colleagues often swap stories with a common punch line: "If students only knew how they appear to us." Teachers express frustration that many in the "millennial generation" do not even feign interest and that college students are increasingly lacking impression management skills.

As a department chair, I daily hear anecdotal reports of boorish student behavior and deteriorating classroom decorum. In recent years, nearly all of my colleagues have felt the necessity to explicitly state behavioral expectations in their syllabi. These behaviors include the most basic classroom manners, ranging from cell phone use to leaving class early. In addition, the university Teaching and Learning Center regularly sponsors a seminar on writing the ironclad syllabus in order to reinforce the significance of proper classroom behavior. Many professors wonder aloud about how our best graduates will fare in their careers when they have no apparent awareness of the many ways in which their behavior and nonverbal communication affect others. My faculty members have also pondered whether we are doing a disservice to our department and the university if we allow such unaware and inconsiderate students to be our representatives outside the university upon graduation.

While we could be accused of overreacting to a "bogus trend," we concluded that our students may not be aware of how they appear to others (or at least to instructors) and that, even if the problem is not getting worse, it may be useful for our majors to have a clearer understanding of how they appear to others. A more sensitive and accurate capacity for self-perception could assist them in obtaining and maintaining employment. The effort would also be consistent with our departmental goal of developing skills leading to successful careers.

Accordingly we developed a mechanism that assesses the congruence between our majors' self-perceptions and the impressions they give to others. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1973) might describe our efforts as an assessment of the impression management skills of students. We provide preliminary findings and advocate for other colleges to pilot such a program.

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# The Presentation of the Student Role in Everyday Classroom Life: An Assessment

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Since our department has access to a classroom equipped with remote control recording equipment (video and audio), the department could draw upon the following assets to advance the initiative: an existing curriculum in which to embed the project, technological resources to support the plan, and a departmental culture that values assessment. Although these are not sufficient conditions to guarantee success, they are likely necessary.

## Project Goals

The primary goal of this project was to offer our majors a glimpse of how they appear to others. We wanted the students to view themselves, but we also wanted them to gain perspective on how others perceive their symbolic displays of affect. It is important to note that we do not tape the students who are leading the presentations. We focus instead on those who are audience members. Our classroom experiences and a broader theoretical framework have shaped this approach. We concur with social commentators such as Frank Furedi (2009), who argues that antiauthoritarianism generally and anti-intellectualism specifically contribute to a diminished status for teachers in western societies. Although it may be something of an exaggeration, it is almost as if in a classroom certain students are watching the instructor on television, thinking that the instructor, David Letterman-like, cannot see them. Many students appear oblivious to, or immune from, the teacher's impressions of them. Many in the millennial generation may be developing their ability for self-regulation through experiences with technologies such as television, cell phones, community game playing, e-mail, and texting (Bauerlein, 2009), where they view, but are not viewed themselves. Thus, they may have

lost touch with what they communicate visually. At the department level, our goal was to determine the degree of incongruence between our majors' self-perceptions and the perceptions of others and how work, family, and school experiences are related to their impression-management skills.

## Procedure

A group of department faculty met to outline the assessment processes, develop measurement instruments, and submit internal review board protocols.<sup>1</sup> In consultation with the instructor of the senior seminar, the committee agreed to anchor the assessment in that course.

Four elements defined the project:

1. Building on the normal senior seminar expectations, the class would evaluate the student presenters in terms of certain outcomes (i.e., organization, content, creativity). We added a single item that asked students to rate their reactions to the presentation along a five-point continuum from *very engaged* to *bored*.

2. During the semester, using a hidden video camera controlled from a remote location, we videotaped all members of class while they viewed student presentations. Although the students were aware, through the informed consent process, that they would be videotaped during the semester, they did not know the particular class or moment they would be taped. Typically, they were taped for only a few minutes.

3. During the semester, the students completed a short survey of less than

25 questions designed to evaluate their interactions with other people at school, home, and work in order to reveal whether the incongruence in self-perception versus the perceptions of others correlated with interaction patterns in other social contexts. (The survey is available from the authors upon request.)

4. We edited the videos (see step 2) into short clips and posted them on a protected website. We then invited the class members to watch the videos and asked them to indicate the response, ranging from *very engaged* to *bored* on a five-point scale that described each student's (including their own) overall reaction to the presentation, based on facial expressions and body language. The students were also asked to identify students' affect (i.e., anticipation, disappointment, confusion, excitement, frustration, nervous, and relaxed) based on facial expressions and body language.

Our procedures allowed us to make a variety of comparisons: whether the majors' original ratings of their affect matched how they actually appeared to themselves (when they viewed their own behavioral cues in step 4); whether the respondents perceived themselves as the rest of the class perceived them (congruence or incongruence) at the time of the original presentation and after they actually saw themselves; and whether we could also compare levels of congruence in terms of school performance measures and interactions with family, friends, and coworkers. Congruence could be either positive, where a student overrates how he or she appears relative to the group, or negative, where the stu-

dent underestimates how he or she appears relative to the group.

### Preliminary Results and Future Directions

Our class size was small, so we are limited in what we can definitively conclude at this point. We offer a few insights to illustrate the promise of this type of project and to entice others to undertake similar projects. We also want to highlight how feedback from the original pilot has informed our most recent iteration of the project and hope readers who are interested in undertaking a similar project will learn from our missteps.

Our most important outcome was that students found the process eye-opening. We also learned in our dialogue with participants that certain modifications would make the project more useful to the students, including helping students synthesize the findings in order to maximize their utility. In future iterations, we plan to arrange student meetings with a faculty member to review the findings. We also learned from the students that some participants were fearful that their original self-assessments (step 1) would affect their grade or the grades of the presenters, even though we had assured them otherwise. Therefore, we made the following modifications: First, we clearly noted on the assessment sheet that their responses would not affect their grades or the presenters' grades. Second, besides the original question that asked the students to circle the response that best de-

scribed their reaction to the presentation, we also asked them for the response that best described the reaction that they believe they conveyed (e.g., facial expressions and body language) to the presenter. It is our hope that these changes will give us the comfort level and honest answers that we really wanted from the students. That said, the pilot study indicated significant variations among students' levels of congruence, in both positive and negative terms. Our preliminary results indicated that students who overestimated their own appearance of interest relative to the perceptions of others (negative incongruence group) had lower grade point averages, had been more likely to drop/retake courses, and were more likely to state the need to fake interest in the details of friends' lives than were students who had congruence or positive congruence (underestimation of how interested they appeared). Students with negative incongruence were also more likely than others to report having had misunderstandings with coworkers.

Another concept worthy of future attention is what we call "ambiguous projection of the student role." We discovered that some students presented wide variability (larger standard deviation) in the perceptions of others; in other words, people have a hard time "reading" these individuals' behavioral clues in a consistent manner. These students also appear to have lower grade point averages than other students.

Overall, we found ample evidence to continue our assessment project. It ap-

pears that students who lack impression-management skills may be more likely to have problems at school and work. We hope our assessment efforts will prompt others to begin exploring this issue. ■

### Note

1. The project was submitted to our university's institutional review board for consideration and received approval. The participating students signed informed consent forms and were given the option of not having their findings included in public presentations (even in aggregated form).

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