

Establishing Your Credibility as a New Teacher

Some new graduate teaching assistants and instructors, especially if they are teaching a course outside their primary area of study, may wonder how they can ensure that students trust their credibility. Take a minute to read the scenario below and consider how these two TA's are thinking about this issue.

Juan and Li are preparing to be TA's for Introduction to Political Theory for the first time this semester. In this course, the professor will run the large lecture classes on Mondays and Wednesdays, and the TA's will run two smaller discussion sections on Fridays. Both Juan and Li are a little nervous about how to make sure their students will trust their ability to guide their learning. As they begin to work together on their plan for the semester, they discover that they have very different ways of thinking about how to prepare for their teaching so that students will see them as credible.

Juan says, "I've started doing some research and am reading a lot of books and articles to help me get a better grounding in the field of political theory. I think this will make me feel more confident because students will see that I know what I'm talking about."

Li says, "I've focused more on making sure I understand the course readings and assignments and spent some time thinking about what's likely to be most difficult for students. I think this will make me feel more confident because students will see that I can answer their questions about the course."

Which approach do you think is more likely to help these instructors establish credibility? Let's unpack these two ways of thinking a bit more and see what the research has to say.

The relationship between credibility and expertise

Juan believes that credibility primarily comes from instructors' depth of knowledge in the discipline or field they are teaching, and he also recognizes that his own comfort level with the content matters. There is some validity to both of these claims, and this is a very common way of thinking about credibility. But when we examine these ideas more carefully, we recognize that Juan is focusing almost entirely on *his* understanding of the material he's teaching and isn't giving much thought to helping his students develop *their* understanding. This means that Juan may be able to convince his students that he knows a great deal about political theory, but he may struggle to convince them that he actually cares about their learning. This distinction matters a great deal because research suggests that instructors' credibility relies largely on the kind of learning environment they create. TA's and new instructors are more credible with their students when they create a positive learning environment by showing respect for students, showing an interest in their learning, and treating them fairly (Huston, 2009, p. 84). What happens if we consider Li's approach with this new understanding in mind?

The relationship between credibility and student learning

Li believes that credibility is based on instructors' ability to anticipate and respond to student challenges that are directly related to the course. We can see this because she is focusing not only on how she will develop *her* understanding, but she is also considering how she can help students

develop *their* understanding. This approach means that even if she can't answer every question students might ask about political theory, she will likely be able to help them navigate the course readings and assignments. Doing this kind of preparatory work will demonstrate to students that she is willing and able to help them learn. Sometimes new instructors are afraid they might lose credibility with students if they are unable to answer every question that might come up, but the research suggests that this isn't the case. The most important thing is that instructors are able to help students navigate the course and answer questions about what is expected of them.

Teaching strategies that help instructors establish credibility

Now that we've considered some principles to guide our thinking about instructor credibility, let's consider the practices you can implement in your courses that will help you act on these principles.

Carefully read everything that is assigned to students (but don't read everything else!).

While investing time in reading broadly in the field might feel productive, it doesn't necessarily prepare you to help students understand the course readings. Instead, focus your energy and attention very specifically on the material that students are responsible for understanding with an eye toward considering what they are likely to find difficult.

Show students that you care about their learning by asking them to articulate what they do and don't understand.

Short, simple writing tasks can help you learn a great deal about what students are learning and can prepare you to help you fill gaps in their understanding. Here are two examples of simple prompts to help students describe their learning:

- Minute paper: At the end of class, give students 1-2 minutes to write their response to this question: What is the most important thing you learned in today's class?
- Muddiest point: At the end of class, give students 1-2 minutes to write their response to this question: What is still most confusing or unclear for you about the work we did in today's class?

If you collect these short pieces and read them as you prepare for the next class meeting or discussion section, you will get a lot of useful information that can position you to help students. As you read, look for mention of specific course content (e.g., concepts, theories, frameworks, processes, etc.) that is challenging for students and plan additional practice with that content.

Show students that you care about their learning by asking them to reflect on their learning.

One simple way of doing this is to ask them on a regular basis (maybe once every two weeks) to do a short writing task where they respond to two questions: (1) What is happening in this class (or discussion section) that is helping you learn? (2) What is happening in this class that isn't helping your learning? This kind of reflection is a powerful learning tool for students *and* for you. Taking some time to review these responses can help you ensure that students are getting what they need from your course.

Make sure you understand the syllabus, the course readings, and the assignments or assessments.

If you are a Teaching Assistant, don't be afraid to ask the professor questions to help you make sense of the course. Understanding why the course was designed the way it was and what the expectations are prepares you to support students as they do their work. This understanding also

prepares you to respond to questions that come up as they are working on assignments, which is a very important way of showing your concern for their learning.

Use a simple strategy for responding to difficult questions.

If you find yourself getting a little anxious when students ask questions that you can't answer right away, it can be tempting to rush through that moment and move on. It is more helpful for students, though, if you slow down in these those moments so that you can really help them make sense of their questions. Psychologist and faculty developer Therese Huston recommends this three-part strategy for responding to challenging questions:

- Step 1: Clarify. Rephrase the question and make sure that you understand what the student is actually asking. You might say something like, “I think what I hear you asking is [restate/rephrase question]. Is that right?” or “Can you tell me a little more so I can make sure I understand your question?”
- Step 2: Acknowledge. Demonstrate respect by recognizing that the student has asked a good question. You might say something like, “That is an interesting question” or “I hadn't really thought of that!”
- Step 3: Answer. If, after steps 1 and 2, you realize that you have a reasonable answer to the question, you can offer it now. If you still don't know, one response that both honors a difficult question and preserves your credibility is to say this: “Hmm...that question requires a little research, so I'm going to see what I can find out before our next class. I invite all of you to do some investigating, too, and we can compare!” Just make sure you do follow up in the next class meeting. (Huston, 2009, pp. 121-128)

Treat students with basic respect as people and as learners.

Teachers are often surprised to learn that one of the behaviors most likely to diminish credibility is showing up late to class. This is because students may feel disrespected if an instructor doesn't appear to value their time. Similarly, students become frustrated when teachers don't remind them about upcoming due dates because that may signal that the instructor doesn't care about their success in the course. Think about how you like to be treated, and extend those same courtesies to your students: showing them respect will build your credibility.

Resources about instructor credibility

Harrington, C. and Thomas, M. (2018). *Designing a motivational syllabus: Creating a learning path for student engagement*. Stylus.

Huston, T. (2009). *Teaching what you don't know*. Harvard University Press.

If you would like to learn more about establishing credibility and building a positive relationship with your students, [request a consultation](#) with ITLAL.