The Seditious Class

Donelson R. Forsyth

University of Richmond, dforsyth@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/jepson-faculty-publications

Part of the Higher Education and Teaching Commons, and the Social Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jepson School of Leadership Studies articles, book chapters and other publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.
The Seditious Class

I never saw it coming. My students and I had just shared a splendid semester-long educational experience. I had deftly mixed original readings, engaging class discussions, illuminating lectures, and thoughtful assessments with a community-based project that gave students the opportunity to apply course concepts in a real-world setting. Or had I? You would think that, after some 30 years of opening packets of students' evaluations at the semester's end (and now, downloading them from the University's evil evaluation website), that the thrill would be gone—no more disappointment, elation, or surprise.

Not so.
My course was a required one, populated with students who picked the section and not the professor, and so I had grown used to evaluations in the low 4s on the so-typical 5-point scale. But I was not expecting the sting of an evaluation that was so far below the comfortable teaching plateau to which I had grown accustomed. Not a 4.2, but a 3.2. And a set of critical comments about my overall worth expressed with far more eloquence than their exam essays suggested was possible. Circuitous, operose, apodictic, importunate, and unremittingly opaque; where had they suddenly acquired this level of proficiency with invectives?

I did just what my studies of attributional egocentrism following performance feedback said I would do: I muttered hateful things about them, methodically shifting all blame to them and away from me (e.g., Forsyth & McMillan, 1981). Then, once my bruised ego was fortified, I looked a little more closely at the course and its constituents. My investigations revealed that this was no ordinary case of unrealized expectations, but rather that far rarer academic train wreck: The dreaded SEDITIOUS CLASS. Unbeknownst to me our faculty-student relationship had been, in actuality, a faculty versus students relationship.

I decided to completely intellectualize the experience by carrying out an epidemiological analysis of the phenomenon itself. With the blessing of the University ethics review board, I sought out others willing to share their experiences with "lost classes." For each one, the defining feature of their seditious class was a significant drop in ratings as measured by student evaluations. Unlike those professors whose students are routinely tepid in their praise, these professors reported enjoying success in the evaluation
sphere, making the substantial decline, of a point or more, unprecedented. Those who routinely received scores of 3.8 to 4.5 received, for example, scores of 2.5-3.0, along with strident, critical, hostile written commentary.

Some, like me, were completely surprised by their evaluations, but others realized that the class had gone south long before the teaching evaluations were in hand. Indeed, three different types of seditious classes could be distinguished among the 22 cases.

- **The Shock**: The professor never saw it coming, and was blindsided by the student evaluations or the post-semester call of an administrator.

- **The Muddle**: The professor realized that one or more students had issues with the course that went beyond the normal kinds of complaints about assignments, readings, and grading. He or she often took steps to resolve the impasse, and in some cases believed that the intervention had been successful. The evaluations, however, suggested otherwise.

- **The Crisis**: The students openly and publicly challenged the instructor, often citing a lack of competence, bias, and coercive, unfair practices. The conflict ebbed and flowed for a significant portion of the semester and the professor could not win back the class. In the most severe crises parents, administrators, and colleagues were drawn into the conflict.

The second signal of sedition beyond a psychologically significant drop in evaluations was a tendency for the students, in the written comments, to harp on the same issues and themes. It is not unusual to read complaints about the difficulty of the tests, the time the class was offered, or challenge of certain assignments, but in many cases students’ written comments converged oddly on the same points. A noticeable proportion would use the same phrase, such as “patronizing attitude,” “inadequate structure,” or, in one case, “her irritating whistle,” suggestive of a conspiratorial gripe session where opinions converged.

The seditious classes were a mixed lot; some, like mine, were required classes, but others were electives; some classes were graduate-level, and some undergraduate classes; some were taught online, but many others were traditional, face-to-face classes taught using methods that, in the past, had proven themselves effective. Nearly all, however, were challenging courses—or, at least ones that the students felt were challenging. There were no rebellions in crip courses. Students did not rise up, in collective protest, against the teacher who
gives out easy As and Bs, begging for more readings. The cry of “foul” was more likely heard in demanding courses, particularly when these courses stood out against a background of other courses with reduced learning and studying demands. The students often complained of violations of procedural justice, such as excessive demands, insufficient structure, or unfair tests, but always distributive justice concerns lurked in the background: students wanted better grades, or less work, or both.

There were no rebellions in crip courses. Students did not rise up, in collective protest, against the teacher who gives out easy As and Bs, begging for more readings.

The classes were also relatively small ones; only one rebellion occurred in a class larger than 50 students. In many cases, the setting promoted closer connections among the students and professors, who reported using a less formal, more egalitarian style of instruction. In a third of the cases, too, the interpersonal intensity of the class was ratcheted up through the use of group projects that increased the extent to which students communicated actively with one another.

These preconditions only created a readiness for sedition. What pushed most classes beyond readiness into full revolt was the presence of a ringleader in the class who served to galvanize the group into active rebellion. Ringleaders were of many stripes; some were grade conscious high-achievers angry over the prospect of a blight on their academic record. Others were stressed by work commitments or family concerns and their coping strategy: coerce the professor into reducing the course’s demands. But ringleaders, in general, were the critical ingredient for transforming a cranky class into a seditious one.

Many of the professors groped for a single cause—a precipitating event—that would explain the downturn in the quality of their relations with their students. Several recalled a question in class that they handled indelicately, allowing their aggravation leak when a student was puzzled by an issue that the class had been examining for half of the semester. Others described a requirement that students challenged as too difficult or demanding, and a shift in the class’s esprit de corps when the students’ complaints were ineffectual. In many cases, the dispute involved a positive, pedagogically progressive aspect of the class. One professor offered students a bonus point if they posted comments early to the online discussion board; another required students submit a sample of their term paper so he could provide them
with detailed feedback on their writing (that was me, actually). Students responded negatively to these practices, which they viewed as unusual and unwarranted intrusions. Other professors, however, remained baffled; even as they replayed the course in their mind, searching for the cause of the problem, they could find no smoking gun that shifted the course from success to failure—in students’ eyes, at least.

How did the professors—some seasoned instructors, some relative newcomers to the profession—react to the experience of a seditious class? When asked to describe their emotions, they used such words as worried, angry, distressed, and upset frequently. Lost, alarmed, stressed, negative, and defensive also made the list. One wrote, “I felt horrible. I worried, had self-doubt, was self-conscious in the classroom, etc. for some time. I lost sleep, had bad dreams, worried about my position, hesitated to joke with my students.” Another wrote “I felt betrayed because to my face my students were pleasant and appreciative and many of them were faking this.” One simply stated: “I was really angry over how rude they were.”

Many extracted a lesson or two from the experience. As committed professionals, they reviewed their practices and policies and made changes that they hoped would make sedition less likely: they tweaked their syllabus, spent a bit more time explaining their rationale for an atypical educational strategy, or dropped a particularly noisome assignment. Many, too, said the experience reminded them to not overlook the importance of group dynamics. Teachers and learners are embedded within groups, departments, organizations, and communities and so teaching and learning are not only individualistic processes, but group-level processes. Teaching, because it is an interpersonal activity, does not always unfold as one might prefer, or even anticipate. One ignores the power of these group dynamics at their own peril.

The seditious class is a rarity; like lightning, it rarely strikes the same place twice.
Overall, however, the most commonly offered recommendation was more attitude than action: Remain optimistic, they advised, and remember that one difficult class should not outweigh the gratifications of dozens of successful ones. The seditious class is a rarity; like lightning, it rarely strikes the same place twice. If you have been there, and done that, chances are you’ll never return for a second time.

Still, as the semester’s end looms, even though I am now armed with my new found understanding of seditious classes, will I visit the teaching evaluation website with a devil-may-care lightheartedness? Doubtful.

**Reference**