

4-26-2012

The Seditious Class

Donelson R. Forsyth

University of Richmond, dforsyth@richmond.edu

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Recommended Citation

Forsyth, Donelson R. "The Seditious Class." *Society of Personality and Social Psychology Connections* (blog), April 26, 2012.
<https://spsptalks.wordpress.com/2012/04/26/the-seditious-class/>.

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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.

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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

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

Forsyth, D. R., & McMillan, J. (1981). Attributions, affect, and expectations: A test of Weiner's three-dimensional model. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 73*, 393-401.