

# Teaching Tips/Notes



## Communicating Expectations

Reviewing end-of-term student evaluation comments called into question my tried and true method of one-way communication of course expectations. When a dozen students, over ten percent of one class, submitted a comment indicating instructions were not clear on one or more of the activities or products on which they were evaluated, I initially was puzzled. It is rare when I cannot answer a student's query or claim regarding unclear expectations with a quick reference to the syllabus or other written instructions. And, students have traditionally been satisfied by my reminder reference to where they can find the instructions we have previously covered.

I expect accountability of students, but I also put considerable value in the concept that if the student is not learning, the instructor is not teaching. I had to work to facilitate student-accountability for course expectations. I have long made available to students in writing my detailed expectations. I needed to make sure they were motivated to access, understand, and follow them. I have had success in doing so using three methods.

First, I spent considerable time explaining the source of my expectations in the hope understanding the purpose of an assignment, requirement or course rule will better motivate them to do their best to complete or follow it.

Second, I test students over my expectations. Students take a quiz over the contents of the course syllabus. To successfully complete the quiz, students must conduct a careful review of the key expectations and procedures of the class, both covered in detail in the syllabus. Currently, I ask detailed questions and therefore allow students to use the syllabus while taking the quiz, but one might also offer an unaided test of their understanding.

Third, I have students grade examples of the products they will submit. In one class, I require two papers, each of which comes with a specific grading rubric designed to test their ability to translate an assigned experience in the context of course material. Prior to this exercise, students not following formatting or content instructions would often explain that they did not know about or understand them. Grading a paper based on their assignment prior to submitting their own helps empower them with the knowledge and an understanding of my exacting expectations.

While some have questioned the value of the last two activities, student work has benefited from including them in my class and student frustration with the level of detailed guidance I provide has decreased. The students benefit when I ask them not only to listen to or read my expectations but to recall and translate them in the context of their application. Even in teaching, perhaps especially in teaching, leadership is stronger with two-way communication.

### Submitted by:

Cheryl J Wachenheim  
Associate Professor  
Agribusiness and Applied Economics  
North Dakota State University  
[cheryl.wachenheim@ndsu.edu](mailto:cheryl.wachenheim@ndsu.edu)