Bridging the “Expectation Gap” Using Student Preceptors

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Abstract: An “Expectation Gap” can exist between what teachers expect of their students and what effort students expect to and are willing to expend. In order to get students and teachers on the same learning page, this Gap needs remedied. One successful means of bridging the Gap is the use of Student Preceptors.

Class Culture – A Need to Create an Enriching Environment
I teach advanced science courses at a major university. These courses are widely viewed by students as “weed-out” courses. At the start of the semester, my class culture is a loose assemblage of students held together only by a common apprehension and palpable collective anxiety. As the instructor, I would rather that the class culture start as an enriching environment that fosters students’ capacity to utilize their very best efforts at all times, so the complexities and depth of the course content can be thoroughly explored. Students’ wants are mostly parallel to mine in that they wish to gain all the course benefits – obtaining high exam scores, mastery of the course content, strong preparation for future courses in the curriculum, and so on. However, the students’ desires to obtain these goals seem to come only at the expense of exerting the minimal effort necessary. Indeed, I find that students, now more than in the past, are wary of constraints on their time and pride themselves on their academic efficiencies (Twenge 2014). Hence, an “Expectation Gap” exists between what I expect of students and what effort students expect to and are willing to expend.¹

The “Expectation Gap”
Prior to implementing any early intervention methods in my courses, too large a percentage of the enrolled students were un-acustomed to or were unwilling to adequately prepare for such a difficult course. So, it was inevitable that poor initial exam scores occurred, which only widened and solidified the “Expectation Gap” between the students and myself. Once the poor scores for the first major exam were posted, a negotiation ensued. This negotiation was often insidious, unseen, and sometimes initiated the erosion of whatever trust that persisted in the class culture.

Struggling students appealed for changes in the course structure. They requested that I write easier exams, drop each student’s lowest exam score, implement an extra credit system, and so on. My initial inclination was to demand that students make a stronger commitment to the course content, initiate requests for students to revisit their study methods, call for a more dedicated work ethic, and so on. The class culture used to suffer by becoming stagnant or even defiant. “Blame-storming” began; instances of learned helplessness arose; and an academic détente was established. At that point, students were just as reluctant to change their study habits or revisit and assess their own metacognitive methods, as I was hesitant to change my teaching philosophy, pedagogical strategies, class structure, or scope of course content.

What Success Looks Like
Students’ real frustration seemed to arise from their growing, but unvoiced, desire to obtain proof or at least some evidence that the treacherous academic waters in this course could, in fact, be successfully navigated. This exasperation from some students manifested in increased trepidation or outright fear, and surfaced as confrontational behaviors. What students really needed was an early example of academic excellence. I’ve created the following axiom, “Students need an example of what success looks like.” The observations that led to the formation of this axiom, coupled with the fact that most students rarely listen to their instructors, except in matters related to course content, has led me to construct the role of the Preceptor.

Who are Preceptors
Preceptors are former students who have taken the same course in the immediate past semester from me and earned a score that placed them in the top ten percentile of their own peers. Preceptors often have curriculum (college majors) and career goals that coincide with those of the class population, which is somewhat homogenous in that most students aspire to enter the fields of medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, or advanced studies in the veterinary, biological, nutritional, or food sciences. For a class enrollment of 100 to 150 students, there are 3 or 4 preceptors who seat

¹ A video that further describes the “Expectation Gap” can be found at Illinois Media Space: https://mediaspace.illinois.edu/media/Bridging-the+Communication+Gap+with+Preceptors/1_ywgtz9t!
themselves throughout the classroom each in “their territory,” where they help “their students” solve problems that I present during lecture (Figure 1). My preference is to use the services of preceptors for a single semester. Afterwards, their training allows them to become leaders in other areas within our department, such as becoming student instructors for laboratory sections, discussion leaders for the other lecturers, and so on. Their last responsibility in the semester is to use their newly developed skills to recruit, interview, and select the new preceptor team for the next semester.

Why Use Preceptors

Preceptors are effective catalysts for change. Students are astute and will capitalize upon preceptors’ knowledge of where to place priorities, when to consume class resources, and my personal idiosyncrasies in lecture style and tendencies in testing methods. Most often, students listen to the advice of preceptors and disregard mine. For example, when I recommend that students start their online quiz or rewrite their lecture notes, students view these comments as merely suggestions. However, the exact same recommendations provided by preceptors are considered as valued, appreciated advice and impartial guidance. Hence, students learn from preceptors how to write and rewrite their lecture notes, create summary sheets, and use flash cards; they learn the true value of doing homework and attempting online quizzes early, and not just at the last minute before the quizzes are due. Students frequently tell me that they gain insight by observing preceptor behavior. By observing preceptors develop and diligently follow their own daily study regime and embrace a general attitude of heightened perseverance, students become aware of the expected academic norms. Ultimately, students come to the realization that they have to compete in other classes with former preceptors and then again to gain admittance into the same advanced programs for healthcare professionals. Preceptors truly are, to the dismay of some students, examples of “what excellence looks like.”

Preceptor Training

Preceptors don’t need extensive training, but they do need to function as a team and be given some direction to keep their efforts cohesive. Preceptors earn one academic credit in a specialized course in return for: (1) attending and working for 80 min at each of the 30 lectures throughout the 15-wk semester; (2) hosting 2 office hours on their own each week; (3) creating and presenting the solutions to difficult questions at content review sessions prior to each major exam; and (4) attending training sessions with me. I prepare preceptors for their duties by coaching them to make sure their interactions coincide with the service philosophy of the class. We discuss methods to enhance student engagement; the value of using intrinsic motivation; how to foster an environment that rewards tenacity, grit, and an attitude of accepting challenges; ways to identify and hone their leadership skills; and so on. Preceptors are taught to show students how they should approach problem solving. Simply providing students with an explanation of why the correct answer fits the question will not foster the diagnostic and evaluation skills necessary to promote critical thinking.

Even though preceptors know that they will receive a very strong letter of recommendation detailing their newly acquired skills and character strengths that will help them immensely in their future endeavors, they willingly commit considerable effort because of the unique experiences of practicing their leadership skills and being a part of an interconnected team. Past preceptors have often cited their participation in this system as their best academic experience in all of college.

Added Benefits to the Course

Soon after I first instituted the preceptor program, it became readily apparent that class attendance swelled and in-class participation grew; students learned how to prioritize and consume more of the class resources; exam scores markedly increased; and the class culture became a more stable and enriching environment. Not surprisingly, this preceptor program, along with a wide variety of other peer and collaborative learning strategies in a range of adaptations in varied content areas, has resulted in increases in student engagement and measured persistence towards graduation (Arendale 2017). As a bonus to me, preceptors also handle the mundane, day-to-day questions about what topics they
Bridging the “expectation gap”... should expect on exams, when office hours will be held, and when quizzes are due. Therefore, I have more freedom to handle the more pressing issues related to course administration and policies.

Conclusion
Students are not asking for anything different or additional compared to what I am looking for in a new learning or problem-solving scenario. In general, learning from the experiences of people who were faced with the same obstacles and risks to their time, effort, and/or finances is of utmost value. For example, when I am making a new, online purchase (for example, from Amazon.com), I want to first read the negative reviews from peer customers with no affiliation with the manufacturer. I value the opinion of those who were presented with the same problems, tested the boundaries of what is possible, and then made and corrected the common mistakes all before I even arrive onto the scene. Like my students, I am looking for reassurances that my assumptions for the future are valid and that my planned methods and efforts are aligned with my desired outcomes. We all want lower risk and less uncertainty in our planned strategies. For the same reason that I only listen to independent consumers who are in my similar situation prior to my purchases, students will follow preceptors’ directions before instituting any change in student behavior, attitude, study habits, and class preparation methods.

References