Recognizing Student Fear: The Elephant in the Classroom

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Understanding fear, its causes, and its impact on students can be important for educators who seek ways to help students manage their fears. This paper explores common types of student fears such as performance-based anxiety, fear of failure, fear of being laughed at, and cultural components of fear that impact learning. The cognitive, emotional, and physiological components of fear are also investigated, including its role in memory deficits and key functions of the central nervous system that may be short-circuited when students are overwhelmed by feelings of fear. Specific strategies for educators are provided to help students manage fear-based behaviors and achieve emotional balance and academic success in the classroom. These strategies include educating oneself and students about fear, creating a nurturing environment for students, taking advantage of campus resources, being proactive about communicating with students outside of the classroom, and incorporating active learning strategies.

Keywords: anxiety, classroom environment, fear, gelotophobia, higher education, student fears, student learning, teaching

What do these scenarios have in common?

- As an icebreaker, you ask your students to introduce themselves by sharing what they did over the break. After a few promptings, the class comes alive with story-telling and laughter. As things quiet down, you notice a young female student who has not contributed. She seems smiling and relaxed, so you ask, "How about you? How was your break?" The life seems to drain from her face and she begins to speak: "I, uh, went out of state to, uh, see..." then her voice fails, she abruptly stops talking, and looks down.

- He strolls in late, sits at the back of the room, rarely participates, and when he does, it's usually a deprecating or irrelevant remark. When you succeed in getting a good discussion going, he seems to be sabotaging your efforts by engaging in side conversations with those in the back of the room, disrupting the discussion with their laughter.

- She's really earnest and sweet. She shows up for every class, on time, and is competent at participating. But she hasn't handed in any assignments. You conference with her, and after what seems to be a very productive session, and exuding confidence and gratitude, she promises to stay on track. But nothing happens and ultimately she fails simply because she handed in little, if any, work.

What's going on with these students? Are they struggling with cultural differences or personal crises? Learning disabled? Academically underprepared? Rude? Lazy? Maybe, but not necessarily. They may be afraid, so consumed with anxiety—for a variety of reasons—that their very cognitive processes are short-circuiting, making it virtually impossible to participate, concentrate, read, study, or pass an exam. They can be prepared and willing, but when ordinary, human fear and anxiety overtake them, their disengagement and ensuing academic failure may become almost certain.

Fears are a normal part of growing up. They develop from the moment a child first experiences a danger he or she cannot fully understand or control (Craske, Hermans, and Vansteenkoven 2006). As we grow older, we develop resources to combat our fears; as young people, we learn to accept and even challenge them through society-sanctioned activities such as playing sports or joining theater groups. Healthy development indicates that we have learned how to recognize and manage our fears. However, from time to time, fears can sneak up and seem to control us, and for some, various types of fear become chronic and even debilitating. These include such common fears as the fear of public speaking,
as well as panic-induced and phobia-based fears such as the fear of heights, and the fear of flying (American Psychiatric Association 1994).

But seemingly ordinary, everyday fear can also become debilitating. Fear isn’t just a matter of sweaty palms and rapid heart rate. It impacts our cognitive processes—how we perceive our environment, how we remember things, whether we can focus and pay attention, how well we plan and then execute that plan, and how well we problem-solve (LeDoux 1996; Cassady 2004). It can contribute to a general sense of danger, as when one fears that bad things are bound to happen, and its effects on learning and academic performance can be profound (Owens et al. 2012; Warr and Downing 2000; Keogh et al. 2004). So when it enters a classroom and sits there like an invisible elephant, crushing the breath out of a student’s self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement, an educator needs to be prepared to act.

But first, a few words about the connection between fear and anxiety. Cummings (1995, 185) defines anxiety as “a state of apprehension, tension, or uneasiness that occurs in anticipation of internal or external danger,” an example of which is walking through an unfamiliar alley and feeling uneasy despite the absence of external danger. In contrast, fear can be described as “the emotional state that exists when a source of threat is precise and well-known.” (Yager and Gitlin 1995, 659) and in the aforementioned scenario, this might include a stranger running towards you in an aggressive manner. Whereas the situation involving anxiety suggests imagined danger, the fear-based situation involves direct peril. Though fear and anxiety are thought to vary by degrees on a continuum of threat-based stimuli (Craske et al. 2006, 4), the responses to them are often similar, and the perception of threat is real. That is, whether in the grips of a fear or anxiety response, we seldom ask, is this imagined or real? We are simply afraid. Therefore, the terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Fear can be displayed in numerous ways by students in the classroom. One common fear response is described in the opening paragraph in which the student seems almost paralyzed by fear when talking in class. This response may induce physiological reactions such as blushing or sweating in addition to difficulty speaking. Some acting out behaviors may also be indicative of fear as when a student attempts to divert attention from the anxiety-provoking stimulus (e.g., discussion on test preparation) by engaging in avoidance mechanisms such as excessive talking or conversing with other students at inappropriate times, acting silly, or repeatedly asking off-topic questions of the instructor. Additionally, procrastination and repeated absence from class can both originate as fear-based responses. Procrastinating students who come to class unprepared may sit quietly and avoid engaging in class discussions for fear of showing their ignorance of the topic at hand. They may fall consistently behind in turning in their work and may become almost routinely absent as a way to avoid participation in class.

Fears can be learned from direct occurrences of threats or indirectly as a result of observing others who experience threatening incidents (Vytal 2007). Though the outcomes of the two learned processes may differ (e.g., watching a friend being ridiculed in a classroom as opposed to experiencing the same humiliation firsthand), the resulting fear response may ultimately be the same. A person who observed but successfully avoided risky situations may thus demonstrate fearful reactions identical to those exhibited by someone who has borne the brunt of class ridicule. With this in mind, it may be helpful to look more closely at the specific ways that fear is experienced in the classroom.

The Experience of Fear

It is important to realize that behaviors that appear uniform from student to student, such as anxious glances or nervous twitches, may have vastly different meanings depending on the person experiencing them. For many, the classroom represents a platform for academic success or a means to building relationships with others and where a professor is seen as a potential source of guidance and mentorship. But for others, a professor may be seen as a distant, unforgiving, and judgmental figure (Cox 2009) and a classroom an emotional minefield. Each student holds a mental template of classroom environments made up of incidents both positive and negative from earlier occurrences in school and other life experiences, and brings into the classroom the resultant fears. Individuals with disabilities, past traumas, or unique historical backgrounds (e.g., being poor but attending an affluent school) may experience fears that are deep-seated and fraught with painful memories. Culture also can play an important role in a person’s ability to cope with fear, especially when the learning process takes place in a markedly different environment than the one in which the student was raised. In particular, students who are first-generation Americans or the first in their families to attend college—or both—typically experience extremely high levels of classroom anxiety that often negatively impact their success (Cox 2009; Salend 2011). Additionally, graduate students (Onwuegbuzie 2000) and even professors (McCrickerd 2012; Finian 1987) may experience fears associated with academic challenges.

Though not an exhaustive list, a few of the more common types of classroom-based fears are described below.

One of the most universal ways that fear occurs in students is through the perceived threat of failure. Students may become so preoccupied with academically letting themselves or others down that they actually strive to avoid failure in situations involving achievements (such as not showing up for a test), instead of intentionally pursuing successful outcomes (by studying and taking the test) (Berger and Freund 2012). Failure-avoidant students may experience test anxiety, or “perceived arousal, reported worry, self-denigrating thoughts, tension, and reports of somatic symptoms in exams or similar evaluative situations” (Zeidner, as cited in Damer...
and Melendres 2011, 164). They may fail to complete readings, procrastinate in preparing assignments, or simply not turn them in, and, as a result, may fall further and further behind their classmates. Such actions obviously are detrimental to their learning and will hinder their ability to acquire important skills needed for the discipline they are pursuing (Zimmerman and Kitsantas 1997).

Because the classroom often represents to many students a competitive environment to achieve high grades rather than the locus of their personal quest for knowledge and skills mastery, some students may “choke” as they compare themselves to others. Their attention is divided between attempting to understand course-based information and worrying that their skills will not match up to the abilities of others, which may cause them to feel anxious, confused, and even overwhelmed. Brown (as referenced in Lehrer 2010) refers to this as the Superstar Effect and notes that in such settings, “when people are forced to compete against a peer who seems far superior, they often don’t rise to the challenge. Instead, they give up” (Lehrer 2010, para. 2). A student who falls into this category may not fear failure per se, but rather fear the threat of being outperformed by others who are perceived to be more academically gifted.

Many students exhibit shyness in the classroom, especially during the first few weeks of the course. Persistently shy behaviors, which may be indicated by keeping one’s head down, reluctance to engage in class discussions, or sitting at the back of the room or near the exit, may signal to the professor that the student is experiencing fear at some level. Some of the more reserved students may actually fear being laughed at, which is a condition known as gelotophobia (Samson et al. 2011). Unable to view laughter’s positive characteristics (e.g., community-building, tension-relieving), such students perceive classroom laughter as threatening and shame-inducing and may demonstrate such nervous behaviors as fidgeting and looking down when humorous comments are made by students or the professor. They often appear overly quiet, and are unable to engage in even minimal discussions. A teacher who assumes that laughter is the best medicine may actually be contributing to the fear-based responses of some students suffering from gelotophobia.

Cultural factors may play an integral role in the fear-based behaviors of foreign students studying in Western institutions. This concept is sometimes referred to as fear of “foreignness” (Steed 2011); students may feel confused about the complexity of the English language and the dynamics of American classrooms while possibly holding on to feelings of anxiety from their own educational history. They also may fear the opinions of and interactions with students born in the United States who, due to their upbringing and/or lack of multicultural training, may exhibit biases and prejudices against foreigners (Sue et al. 2010), or simply misunderstand their behavior. When students remain quiet and refrain from participating, some professors may interpret their silence as a sign that these students are taking time to become more familiar with new settings, but in actuality, these pupils may be experiencing emotional challenges on a much deeper level.

Because of their familiarity with collegiate settings, it could be assumed that graduate students experience less fear than their undergraduate counterparts. However, the opposite may be true. Onwuegbuzie (2000) asserts that grad students are actually more prone to procrastinate than undergrads when writing papers, studying for exams, and submitting research proposals. He notes that this is due to the prevalence of perfectionism among graduate students which makes them “highly susceptible to negative affective states” (Onwuegbuzie 2000, 104), and suggests a causal connection between procrastination and perfectionism which may be motivated by a fear of failure. Long-term projects such as writing dissertations may thus cause perfectionistic students to avoid writing and conducting assigned research studies, ultimately leading to additional stress, delayed output, or even course withdrawal.

Even professors are not immune to experiencing fear. According to McCrickerd (2012), teachers experience fears in regard to perceived poor performance in the classroom, receiving negative feedback, tenure denial, and believing they have reached the limits of their talents. They may actually be “unlikely to want to improve upon teaching since attempts to improve may lead to feelings of failure. . .” (McCrickerd 2012, 59). In the classroom, such fear-based behaviors may result in a status quo approach in which teachers refrain from challenging students to excel. Ironically, the 2007–2008 HERI Research Brief Report (DeAngelo et al. 2009) indicates that teachers identify “self-imposed high expectations” as the most significant cause of stress, the result of which may ultimately lead to excessive worrying and even physical exhaustion (Fimian 1987). If this is true, the degree of expectations teachers impose on themselves may directly impact the amount of fear they experience.

Cognitive and Biological Components of Fear

Although students may experience fear in the classroom for different reasons and in different ways, the cognitive and physiological fear-based processes that occur in the central nervous system are more similar in nature. A student who feels extreme unease caused by the fear of being laughed at may thus be experiencing the same mental and biological consequences as the highly anxious student who is worried about passing a midterm exam. When we, as educators, recognize, understand these fear behaviors, and empathize with the internal processes that underlie them, we can take steps to make the student feel more confident (and less fearful) in the classroom. Some of these steps will be discussed later.

On a cognitive level, highly fearful students possess a heightened sense of danger (Davey 2006) that may lead them to interpret normal situations in a very suspicious manner, as when an innocuous gesture made by one person is taken as a hostile threat by another. When presented with a typical
Discussion prompt from the professor (for example, “Let’s have a discussion based on this week’s reading assignment”), instead of mentally preparing comments, these students may fear that they will be singled out or that their responses will be automatically discounted or rejected. Memory also may be impacted (Coles, Turk, and Heimberg 2007). Instead of being able to focus on the material to be read and studied, fear- or anxiety-driven students may become overly worried about how their participation or their abilities are being judged. In turn they create memories not of the class material but of their own apprehensive feelings, thus inhibiting their understanding of that class material. So, though they prepared beforehand, the students are unable to recall salient elements of the assigned material when classroom discussion occurs, perhaps never having really learned the material at all.

Cognitive processing can also be viewed in terms of fixed and growth mindsets. According to Dweck (2006, 6), individuals with fixed mindsets believe that they possess a “certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character,” which limits their capacity to learn new information. When students with fixed mindsets make low grades on tests, they may react with fear-based self-talk. They may internalize blame (“I knew it. This proves I’m a failure”) or fault others (“The professor really had it in for me”) without being able to realistically assess the situation (“I did not receive the grade I wanted on this test. I will incorporate new study strategies for the next one.”) Fixed mindsets can cause students to fear situations in which they feel challenged beyond their abilities. As such, they may avoid opportunities for academic improvement based on the faulty belief that failure awaits them if they try. Growth mindsets, on the other hand, allow students to learn from their mistakes and are discussed later in this paper.

From a biological standpoint, a typical fear response involves an intricate interaction among the neural pathways of the brain (Perry 1999). The amygdala, an almond-shaped structure located in the brain’s medial temporal lobe, plays a vital role in the processing of emotions, including the fear response. When alerted to a fear-based stimulus, the amygdala signals the hypothalamus, important in maintaining sensory balance, and then the hippocampus, which is integral to memory formation and organization. From there, the signal is sent to the prefrontal cortex, which oversees executive planning and other cognitive processes needed for learning; it also mediates sensory overload, and thus provides a calming effect to the fear-generating stimulus. Normally, the signal diminishes in intensity, returns to the amygdala, and the student, though still fearful, may be able to “pull it together.” Under normal circumstances, feelings of fear will subside over time and students become more comfortable with the structural routines of the course by engaging more fully in classroom activities.

For some students, however, fear-based responses continue to occur even beyond the normal period of initial adjustment to course dynamics. When this happens, brain functions may shift ominously to accommodate the continuous threats perceived by the student. Structurally, in this case, fear-based responses will still trigger the amygdala and hypothalamus, but will bypass both the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, which creates an overly anxious mental state (Perry 1999). A student experiencing test anxiety may thus appear flustered and ruminate on potential failure as this process occurs. Because the hippocampus is not alerted, the brain loses its ability to differentiate between fearful and harmless memories. Additionally, since the prefrontal cortex also is bypassed, the brain is unable to return the body to a calmer and more productive state, ultimately derailing the student’s attempts to study for the test and understand important course-based concepts (LeDoux 1999; Zull 2002). Continued fear-based reactions will likely overload the central nervous system, resulting in a snowballing effect of undue stress, and its resultant negative effects on learning.

Our brains play an integral role in maintaining biological, cognitive, and emotional functioning. Students who suffer persistent levels of fear are actually experiencing a high degree of overload in the form of threat-based signals occurring in the central nervous system. Although it may not be possible to physically change intricate brain structures, there are ways an instructor can help to promote students’ confidence, increase their mental availability to better analyze and synthesize course material, and reduce fear-based behaviors. By doing so, we may even help the students on the road to achieving their academic goals.

Strategies for Educators

There’s an old joke: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. The joke assumes that seemingly insurmountable problems can be resolved if broken down into parts. To many educators, helping highly fearful students successfully gain the upper hand on their emotions may appear challenging. Yet finding solutions and breaking them down into parts may result in breakthrough for the students who need it most. There are eight key ingredients to tackling this issue.

1. Educate yourself about fear and its impact on students

As Parker Palmer writes in The Courage to Teach, “the way we diagnose our students’ condition will determine the kind of remedy we offer (1998, 41). He recalled the “Student from Hell,” a “universal archetype” and one similar if not identical to the fear-infected student this article discusses. After an hour of striving unsuccessfully to positively engage this student during class, Palmer left, consumed with feelings of “self-pity, fraudulence, and rage.” Later that night he was chauffeured to the airport by that same student and during the drive and up until the time his plane departed, he talked with him, learning of the student’s difficult life and the challenges he faced in his desire to complete college. “We talked until it was time for my plane to take off,” Palmer wrote, “and for
a while afterward we corresponded. I do not know whether I helped him—but I know he helped me. He helped me understand that the silent and seemingly sullen students in our classrooms are not brain-dead; they are full of fear" (Palmer 1998, 44).

Fear is a complex emotion and can take different shapes and forms in a classroom setting. Although it is not possible to recognize each cause, diagnosis, or symptom that correlates to fear-based behaviors, it is possible to understand the significance of these fears in a way that could be beneficial to students. This starts with reframing our interpretations of pertinent student behaviors, such as:

- excessive tardiness or sporadic attendance
- good class attendance, but missed assignments
- acting out behaviors—excessive talking, silliness, derogatory or sarcastic comments
- little or no participation, even when asked to respond
- a “deer-in-the-headlights” appearance or other expressions of nonresponsiveness
- continuous complaints of illness or not feeling well
- missed conferences or lack of follow-through after conference
- nervousness, lack of eye contact, blushing and flushing, sweating, other signs of agitation
- complaints that assignments are confusing or that they weren’t told what to do (though they were reminded more than once)

Understanding how students experience fear (e.g., through gelotophobia, cultural factors), what this may entail on a cognitive and biological level, and how it may ultimately impact their learning, we can become more sensitized to problematic behaviors and work towards making students feel more comfortable and confident. In so doing, we may actually be empowering ourselves to overcome our own fears of change or of “reaching the limit” of our gifts and talents as instructors (McCrickerd 2012, p. 57). We thus create a sense of safety in the classroom (Golden 2013) that may initially challenge our status quo thinking, yet can ultimately result in reduced fears among our students.

2. Recognize that some student fears may be associated with factors outside the classroom

It is important to discriminate between fears that occur inside and outside of the classroom. Students who fail to turn in papers on time, miss classes, avoid discussions, or sleep during lessons may actually be wrestling with a number of challenges that originate outside of the institutions they attend. These individuals may be holding down multiple jobs, facing family challenges, or even spending excessive amounts of time driving to and from school; all of which may exacerbate fear-based responses. In addition, nearly 50 percent of today’s college students are the first generation in their families to attend college (Choy, as referenced in Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke 2011, 21). This group in particular has external challenges that can create debilitating stress and anxiety that may ultimately lead to academic failure; they may lack the “cultural capital” to deal with the stress and anxiety of pursuing a college education (Mehta et al. 2011).

In recent studies focusing on sleep patterns of college students, it was found that 27% of the 1,845 students surveyed in lab-based experiments were at risk for sleep disorders (Gaultney 2010), and as much as half of the 4,513 online survey participants surveyed “reported having trouble staying awake while driving, eating meals, or engaging in social activities” (Orzech, Salafsky, and Hamilton 2011, 616). Thus, some ostensibly nervous or withdrawn behaviors may be more indicative of sleep hygiene problems than anxiety. Other studies found that weak time management skills correlated with higher levels of academic stress (Macan et al. 1990), and that students who played video games (Burgess, Stermer and Burgess 2012, N = 671) reported a greater likelihood of avoiding homework than non-gamers, ultimately resulting in lack of preparedness for classes. While not necessarily caused by fear, any of these factors may contribute to stress-based responses in the classroom.

Students diagnosed with Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, or other clinical syndromes, may exhibit fear-like symptoms unique to their disorders (e.g., an individual suffering from mild depression experiences distress due to his inability to concentrate during a crucial class assignment). In their study of college students with ADHD, Advokat, Lane and Luo (2011, 656) found that many participants strongly believed they were “worse off than other students at planning and completing assignments and avoiding distractions,” and such beliefs may have contributed to increased anxiety in the classroom. With this in mind, it is important not to make hasty assumptions about the roots of these fears. Creating a dialogue with the student who appears distressed or fearful can represent an important first step in addressing problem behaviors.

3. Educate your students about the anxiety they may be experiencing and provide guidance in learning to manage it

In order to manage or reduce their anxiety, students often need to be made aware of their fear responses and be given techniques for managing them. A number of studies have shown that instructional intervention can diminish student fears and improve academic performance (Youngblood, 1991; Kennedy and Doepeke 1999; Dykeman 2011; Perry 2004; Podell et al. 2010; Vitasari et al. 2010).

Students, especially freshman, often have a low tolerance for confusion, ambiguity, and making mistakes (Cox 2009; Owen and Sweeney 2002). This low tolerance may grow their anxiety (“How come I don’t understand this? Why did I get it wrong? I must be too stupid to learn it.”) There often exists a disconnect between their emotional responses and
their cognitive abilities to manage them. For example, as the 
body responds first to stressors—feeling faint, perspiring, 
stomach churning—the students interpret such symptoms as 
ilness; they then think, “I was too sick to do well on the 
test,” unaware that anxiety itself can make them feel unwell. 
They may be uninformed about how much control they can 
have over these responses and uniformed of the techniques 
that can be used to reduce stress and anxiety: they can, in 
fact, perform some simple techniques to calm themselves 
and feel better. In an experiment with 20 college math stu-
dents, researchers employed a 10-minute pre-test expressive 
writing intervention and saw test scores for the expressive 
writing group significantly improve over the control group: 
“Control participants choked under pressure, showing a 12% 
accuracy drop from pretest to posttest, whereas students who 
expressed their thoughts before the high-pressure test showed 
a significant 5% math accuracy improvement from pretest to 
posttest” (Ramirez and Beilock 2011, 212 ).

By helping students identify potential fear-based behav-
iors, we are implementing our own informal “early alert sys-
tem” and tapping into an important ingredient for classroom 
success. Spending a few minutes helping students “see the 
elephant” of anxiety and offering and even demonstrating a 
few anxiety-management techniques will be class time well 
spent in building a stronger sense of self-efficacy in your stu-
dents. Demonstrating such simple techniques as breathing 
exercises, guided imagery, expressive writing, or stretching 
or relaxation methods can help students reduce anxiety and be 
more cognitively available to learn. It is also important to stay 
attentive to anxiety levels throughout the semester and re-
spend appropriately. (For more information on techniques to 
help students reduce stress, visit http://stress.about.com/od/ 
studentstress/ss/college_stress.htm)

As mentioned earlier, students think in terms of fixed and 
growth mindsets (Dweck 2006). Instructors can encourage 
students to challenge their fears of being incapable of learn-
ing beyond a fixed level of knowledge. By confronting this 
rigid pattern of thinking, professors help students incorpo-
rate a growth mindset in which they have the potential to 
achieve academic success. Dweck argues that basic qualities 
can be cultivated, new skills acquired, and that “everyone can 
change and grow through application and experience” (7). 
For example, if a student experiences self-defeating thoughts 
about his low grade on a term paper, the instructor can en-
courage him to identify problem areas, seek available help 
(e.g., attend a writing workshop), and plan more carefully for 
future assignments. Instead of feeling anxious and helpless, 
the student is thus empowered to find solutions that promote 
self-efficacy.

**4. Create a nurturing environment for your students**

Providing a nurturing environment and positive attitude to 
all students can promote trust and positively impact students 
who are prone to fearfulness. Miglietti and Strange (1998,
15) conducted a study of 156 college students focusing on 
teaching style preferences most effective for their learning. 
Results indicated that factors such as “learner-centered activ-
ities, personalized instruction, relating learning to students’ 
experiences, assessing student needs, climate building, en-
couraging student participation in the learning process, and 
maintaining flexibility” were deemed most important in cre-
ating a positive and stress-free classroom.

A nurturing environment can also promote cultural sen-
tivity and discourage prejudicial or stereotyping behaviors 
by students. Because many cultures depend on a variety of 
visual cues during relational interactions, becoming aware of 
and responding to the nonverbal communication of students 
can also be a key factor in engendering a safe environment 
within the classroom. Being sensitive and respectful to these 
cues and nonverbal communication demonstrates inclusive-
ness essential to learner-centered teaching. As Gabriel (2008, 
83) comments, “When students know that we value their di-
verse backgrounds and ethnic heritages, they will feel wel-
come in our class, and this feeling is important for sharing 
and working together.”

Different classroom strategies for instruction can be help-
ful. For example, professors can encourage dialogue about 
a particular issue by first asking students to engage in small 
group discussions before leading into a general class discus-
sion. Studies involving the use of groups in college settings 
(e.g., Bilics and Lerch 2001) have highlighted the impor-
tance of group collaboration, and in small group settings, 
more fearful students may feel empowered to voice their 
opinions without having to share them in front of the entire 
class. Taking a few moments to allow students to journal 
about their fears or to self-talk positive messages can help 
reduce anxiety, quiet the amygdala, and increase cognitive 
presence (Ramirez and Beilock 2011). The use of humor has 
been shown to reduce student anxiety as well (Berk 2000).

In promoting a nurturing environment, it may be helpful 
to consider student learning needs on an individual basis. The 
Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework 
for educators to address the needs of diverse learners by “sug-
gestig flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments” 
(Center for Applied Special Technology 2011, 4). There are 
three UDL Principles that may be beneficial for students who 
experience excessive fear in the classroom: (1) provide mul-
tiple means of representation, (2) provide multiple means of 
action and expression, and (3) provide multiple means of en-
gagement. Utilizing the third UDL principle with a student 
who is both fearful and impulsive, for example, a profes-
sor might suggest that the student jot down ideas instead of 
blunting them out. At specific time intervals (e.g., after every 
fifth PowerPoint slide), the student would ask questions or 
propose ideas based on the lecture material. This simple, yet 
well-planned intervention could help students manage their 
fear-based responses.

Be aware that sometimes students may perceive in-
struction activities other than the standard lecture as no
instruction (Cox 2009). Particularly at the freshman level, students’ expectations are largely shaped by their previous educational experiences, and when the instructor uses other types of teaching activities, the students may feel nothing valuable is happening. Instructors should also bear in mind that departing from the syllabus with unscheduled activities or impromptu or vague or open-ended assignments may increase student anxiety and may negatively impact those with a low tolerance for ambiguity (DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler 2003). Explaining to students the purpose of your activity and what you expect them to get out of it as well as assessing their responses to what is being said and done in the classroom may help alleviate their stress and increase learning (Terry, as cited in Gray and Madison 2007).

Students feel nurtured and included when they feel they have an equal chance of earning a good grade, and that instructors are fair and gracious in their evaluations. Providing a numerous and varied assignments to earn credit as well as using a “criterion” grading system (as opposed to “norm-referenced” grading; i.e., grading on the curve) “works well with learner-centered teaching” and helps reduce “debilitating evaluation anxiety” (Weimer, as cited in Gabriel 2008). Well-organized and clearly articulated assignments and exams that offer some choice in completion can also be effective in encouraging self-efficacy and reducing anxieties (Salend 2011).

5. Be proactive in communicating with your students outside the classroom both as a group and individually

Weaver and Qi (2005, 587) concluded that “faculty-student interaction outside the classroom helps students learn professionalism, view criticism in a constructive way, and enhance students’ confidence in the classroom,” which is “critical for explaining class participation.” Utilizing email and other forms of communication with your students to clarify assignments or to offer general comments or words of encouragement (e.g. “I just wanted to send a quick note to all of you to let you know. . . .”) can help to ease student fears about potential failure (Jaasma and Koper 1999). Often if one student takes the time to ask you a question after class, there is a good possibility that at least a few others had the same concern, and without singling out that student, a general email addressing the concern may also reassure others in the class. Correspondences of this nature demonstrate to students that their instructor is caring and willing to go the extra mile for them.

Though many instructors repeatedly invite their students to talk with them after class to stop by their offices, many students may feel intimidated or confused (“what will I say?”) and or too embarrassed (“he/she will think I’m too stupid for college”) to take up the offer (Cox 2009; Chung and Hsu 2006). Sending encouraging notes or taking students aside at break time or before or after class can help reassure them as well as provide opportunities to model anxiety management. One thing is clear from recent research on student self-efficacy and engagement: Positive instructor intervention is key (Hong, Shull, Haefner 2011). Personal relationships between students and instructors can create inroads of trust in the classroom. Although not always practical to contact every student, particularly in a large class, reaching out individually when merited can be a powerful and proactive gesture in establishing empathic relationships with students who may be struggling in class. Such gestures can go a long way in smoothing the academic road and reducing students’ fears, whether those fears are based on competition, culture, superstar effect, or other factors.

6. Provide icebreakers and other activities to reduce stress and anxiety and repeat as needed in the semester. Do them in a way that takes the emphasis off individual achievement

When the first day of class comes, instructors can also promote positive communication through icebreaker activities—while doing double duty to address stress and anxiety (Sciutto 1995; Anderson, McGuire, and Cory 2011). Initial class meetings also set the tone for constructive and learning-filled semesters. Yet icebreakers often showcase student abilities to be articulate and integrate information, and even with prompts as seemingly harmless as, “Tell me what you did over the summer,” students may become overanxious. Many may cherish the opportunity to share their exploits with fellow classmates, but some may feel put on the spot and fear exposing themselves or being compared to others. As an alternative, provide students with an icebreaker in which they can share as much or little information as they wish. (Make sure to offer a time limit to avert long-winded presentations.) As with the previous point, ask students to work in pairs or small groups before speaking to the whole class. This provides a chance to engage in a less risky icebreaking activity while promoting more intimate dialogue. Discussions of this caliber can also take place between instructor and student. Nonverbal icebreakers (e.g., stretching exercises) may also be beneficial in maintaining alertness and interest in class material. Finally, note that icebreakers can occur throughout the semester in order to introduce a new topic, to re-energize discussion, or ease tension at specific times during the course (Chlup and Collins 2010).

Stress and anxiety levels also go down when students feel they have regular opportunities to provide feedback on what they learning—or not—in the classroom. Interweaving “formative assessment” exercises with instruction can help students feel more in control and less alien, and thus less anxious. Gabriel (2008) illustrates the “Write-Pair-Share” activity (93) and Hester’s “Meta-Cognitive Moment” assessment technique (95), reporting that Hester concluded that “her students seem more confident and have less test anxiety” (96). (For an explanation of these and others, Gabriel
has referred instructors to *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by Angelo and Cross 1993.)

**7. Incorporate active learning strategies into your normal teaching routine in order to promote a stress-free environment**

According to Light and Micari (as referenced in Golden 2013), active learning takes place when students feel safe and supported by instructors and fellow classmates. Group activities are emphasized because they provide a collaborative feel that often is missing in a normal classroom environment. Peer facilitators can be trained to offer help and provide a more “democratic” feel in which the instructor is not seen as the sole source of classroom wisdom. For example, students are “assigned a particular problem or question to research in groups, and develop a short presentation and share with the class either live or online through a blog or wiki.” The authors add that this approach is successful with minority and marginalized populations and may result in “reducing [students’] anxiety as well as improving their confidence, motivation and ... assisting them in taking deeper approaches to their study” (as quoted in Golden 2013, para. 8).

Learning communities, or “classroom communities [that] treat the classroom as the locus of community-building by featuring cooperative learning techniques and group process learning activities as integrating pedagogical approaches” (Lenning and Ebbers, as cited in Zhao and Kuh 2004, 116), have been shown to increase student engagement and persistence. Pastors (2006) surveyed 200 Northeastern University students participating in learning communities at the beginning of the semester and at the end. The survey results indicated higher (“strongly agree”) response rates in all categories for those students in learning communities compared to those who were not. Items included “coping with test anxiety,” “dealing with stress,” “making classes more relaxed,” and “feeling more confident in giving a presentation” (p. 7). In a study of 82 students examining the relationship of the active learning strategy of collaborative testing and quality of interaction, Pandey and Kapitanoff (2011, 163) concluded that “Students with higher levels of test anxiety were most likely to benefit from collaborative testing and to experience the greatest text anxiety reduction.”

**8. Be aware of campus resources to help students**

Many universities and colleges have formalized early alert systems to help identify at-risk students and provide them with academic assistance and support services. Other interventions include “success coaches,” “success workshops,” “success skills programs,” and learning enrichment services providing tutoring and mentoring. Most universities and colleges also have counseling services and support groups for various needs, and some offer discipline-specific academic services, such as for math, statistics, or physics. More and more universities also are providing support to help instruc-

tors create the kind of classroom that will be conducive to students getting the assistance they need to be academically successful, including assistance with stress management through test anxiety workshops. Some universities have offered workshops and one-unit courses for reducing stress and anxiety, and several studies have demonstrated their efficacy (Sciutto 1995; Finkelstein et al. 2007; Bresó, Schaufeli, and Salanova 2011). Noticing early which students may be getting into trouble and discretely guiding them to these resources may help them stay enrolled and ultimately become successful in meeting their academic goals. Tracking down the availability and contact persons for these resources may seem complicated, but often the straightest line to information about these resources is the department chair’s office.

**Conclusion**

In every classroom and throughout any given semester, students experience a variety of emotions specific to academia, namely, eagerness to learn, anticipation of the unknown, test-taking dread, and relief when the course is over. Yet a handful of students experience more problematic emotions that hamper their ability to learn. Burdened by fear resulting from real or perceived dangers within classroom, they must manage these fears while simultaneously attempting to comprehend course-related content. Knowing this, instructors have the opportunity to intervene to help students in crucial ways as they educate themselves about the nature of fear, practice empathy, and provide communication tools both inside and outside the classroom that can go a long way in reducing fears and boosting confidence. Research has shown that when instructors practice even the simplest interventions to help reduce classroom anxieties, student engagement and performance has been shown to improve. Though the problems that students face may seem elephantine in scope, solutions can be found that promote academic success—one bite at a time.

**REFERENCES**


