

Checklist of assumptions that can impact motivation, learning and performance

Source: Carnegie Mellon, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence
<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/learningenvironment.html>

Author: DiPietro, Michele

© 2007, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, Carnegie Mellon

As humans, we all operate under a set of assumptions which help us deal with the complexity of life, and the classroom setting is no exception. Some of the assumptions we hold are more conscious than others and some turn out to hold true more often than others. Nevertheless, it is often productive to uncover and question our assumptions, because they can have a large impact on the way we interact with our students, and hence, on their learning. Here is a set of questions to help us reflect on our assumptions. The list is not exhaustive, and is organized in broad categories.

Assumptions about Experience/Knowledge

All too often we unconsciously assume other people have our same frame of references and we speak as if everybody is familiar with them. We might not realize that the terms we use, or the examples we choose, do not speak as powerfully to other people, which makes our explanations less meaningful. Some students might also feel marginalized by our language. Here are some examples of questions we might ask ourselves.

- Do I expect my students to share my cultural and political perspectives?
- Do I expect most students to come from "comfortable" backgrounds?
- Do I expect most students to share my historical, popular culture, religious or literary references?
- Do I expect most students to come from traditional families?
- Do I fail to recognize that members of the dominant group have benefited from the privileges that come from membership in that group?
- Do I expect most students of color to come from lower income families or have weaker academic preparation?
- Do I expect minority students to be first-generation college students?
- Do I expect African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, or other students of color to be all alike within their group?

Assumptions about Ability

This set of assumptions pertains to our expectations about students. Instructor's expectations are powerful determinants of motivation and performance, because students tend to conform to the expectations placed upon them, or instructors might inadvertently discount information that is contrary to their expectations. These phenomena are amply documented in theory and research about Internalized Expectations, Self-Efficacy, Stereotype threat, Pygmalion complex, and Confirmation Bias. Here are some examples of questions we might ask ourselves.

- Do I expect minority students to need extra help?
- Do I imagine that Latinos or Blacks will express their opinion in non-academic language?
- Do I expect that Asian students will do better than most other students, especially in math?

- Do I expect women in scientific fields to struggle more?
- Do I expect students from certain majors to have weaker intellectual skills?
- Do I assume international students have less language skills?
- Do I link certain individual characteristics with levels of intelligence and ability (e.g., political or religious beliefs, tattoos and piercings, athletic or Greek system membership)?

Assumptions about identity and viewpoint

Some aspects of our identity are readily visible, others are invisible, and others yet are deceiving. It is easy to focus only on the visible aspects, but this might alienate some students who don't see themselves represented in your language, or in the course curriculum. Students who feel marginalized in a course are likely to experience a decrease in their intrinsic motivation to learn the material. Here are some examples of questions we might ask ourselves.

- Do I treat students as if they are all heterosexual?
- Do I treat students as if they are all Christian?
- Do I think all students look like the gender or race they identify as?
- Do I think I can tell which students have physical or mental/learning disabilities?
- Do I think I can tell the political affiliation of my students?
- Do I think all students can easily in groups out of class?

Assumptions influencing attributions

When faced with certain events in the classroom (a student's question, a request for an extension, a suspicious paper) we make attributions about what explains that event, and we react accordingly. A lot of our attributions are colored by assumptions, therefore it is worth to reflect on them. Here are some examples of questions we might ask ourselves.

- Do I ascribe confident-sounding (tentative) language to intellectual strength (weakness)?
- Do I link less-than-fluent English skills (speaking and writing) to weaker preparation?
- Do I believe that certain cultural communication styles (e.g., those that never seem to get to the point or take a position) betray a low level of preparedness or confidence?
- Do I assume that students who don't participate in discussions have not done the readings?
- Am I inclined to believe that "good" students requesting an extension probably have a good reason, whereas "bad" students doing the same are just lazy?

References

Allport, G. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bandura, A. (1997) *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.

Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University (videotape) *Race in the Classroom: The Multiplicity of Experiences*. Anker Publishing.

Nickerson, R. (1998) Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2 (2), 175-220.

Rosenthal, R. and Jacobson, L (1992). *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development*. Irvington Publishers: New York, 1992.

Steele, C (1997) A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance. *American Psychologist*, 52 (6), 613-629.

Weiner, B. (1986) *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag.