The Seditious Class

Education is as much an interpersonal process. But what happens when these social processes transform a once tranquil classroom into a seditious one—rife with resistance, anger, and hostility?

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Teaching is a decidedly social activity. Students and teachers communicate regularly and richly with one another, sharing information, opinions, evaluations, and insights, but also creating social connections that will help them relate to one another. But, as with any relationship, the bonds that join teacher and student can become strained.

Teachers and students have their own idiosyncratic interests, motivations, outlooks, and preferences, and as they interact with one another, their diverse preferences and inclinations can pull them in different directions. In most cases, these interpersonal tensions vibrate at such low interpersonal frequencies that they go unnoticed, but in others, they can increase until the once tranquil class is transformed into a seditious one marked by hostility, disengagement, and even collective resistance.

What can cause a class to go so wrong? Teachers who have experienced the travails of a class that rejected all their well-intentioned attempts to resolve conflicts and reestablish more positive teacher-student relationships offer insights into the factors that set the stage for conflict and ways to reestablish a more civil and psychologically safe classroom.
The Lost Class

What transforms a relationally positive class into one where students challenge their teacher's authority, competence, and even character? Seeking answers, and with the blessing of the local research review board, I queried colleagues in an online community of educators: Have you ever experienced a "lost class"—one where students responded with startling negativity and in ways that were inconsistent with your previous student evaluations?

I discovered I was not alone: 22 professors—averaging 49 years of age and 15 years or so of teaching experience—replied. For each, the defining feature of their seditious class was a precipitous drop in student ratings collected at the semester’s end. Unlike professors who routinely hear more tepid praise, these teachers reported previous success in the evaluation 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 to 3.0, along with strident, critical, hostile commentary.

The second signal of sedition beyond a psychologically significant drop in evaluations was a tendency for the students, in their written comments, to harp on the same issues and themes. It is not unusual to read complaints about the difficulty of the tests, or the challenge of certain assignments, but in these cases students’ written comments converged oddly on the same points. A noticeable proportion would use the same phrase, such as "patronizing attitude,"

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > WHEN MY CLASS WENT WRONG...

I never saw it coming. My students and I had just shared a splendid educational experience in which I had deftly mixed readings, discussions, lectures, and assessments with a community-based project that gave students the opportunity to apply course concepts in a real-world setting. Or so I thought? My course was a required one, and I had grown accustomed to student evaluations in the low 4s on the typical 5-point scale. So I was not expecting the sting of a far lower score and a set of critical comments about my overall worth expressed with more eloquence than my students’ papers suggested was possible. It turns out I was not just a bad teacher, but the worst teacher they had ever had. In response, I did just what my own studies of reactions following performance feedback said I would do: I muttered hateful things about the students, methodically shifting all blame to them and away from me. Then, once my bruised ego was fortified, I looked a little more closely at the course and realized that this was no ordinary case of unrealized expectations. It was that far rarer academic train wreck: the dreaded SEDITIOUS CLASS. Unbeknownst to me, our faculty-student relationship had been, in actuality, a me-versus-them relationship. My class had gone wrong without me realizing it.
"inadequate structure," or in one case, "her irritating whistle," suggestive of conspiratorial gripe sessions where opinions converged and mutiny was broached.

**The Shock, the Muddle, and the Mob**

The seditious classes were of three types: the shock, the muddle, and the mob. Some professors were completely surprised by their evaluations, while others had realized the class had gone south.

**THE SHOCK:** These professors were blindsided by their end-of-term student evaluations or the call of an administrator. Like me, they had not picked up on any signals of discontent. One teacher wrote, "I felt betrayed because to my face my students were pleasant and appreciative and many of them were faking this."

**THE MUDDLE:** These professors realized that one or more students had issues with the course that went beyond the normal complaints about assignments, readings, and grading. They often took steps to resolve the impasse, and in some cases believed the intervention had been successful. The end-of-the-term evaluations suggested otherwise.

**THE MOB:** In what some professors described as a "pack attack" or "mobbing," the students openly 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 Seeds of Sedition**

The seditious classes were a mixed lot. Some were required, others not; some grad-level, others undergraduate; a few were taught online, but most were traditional, face-to-face classes taught with methods proven effective. Nearly all were challenging courses—or at least students felt they were. There were no rebellions in easy courses. Students did not rise up in collective protest against the professor who gave out easy A's to beg for more readings. The cry of "foul" was more likely in demanding courses, particularly when these courses stood out against a backdrop of less demanding ones. 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 backdrop: students wanted better grades, or less work, or both.

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, more interpersonally meaningful connections among the students and professors, who reported using a less formal, more egalitarian style of instruction. Many professors lectured, but most also encouraged interaction through discussion, commentary, and an open, back-and-forth style of communication. They were not sages on the stage but more approachable, and more vulnerable, guides on the side. Also, in a third of the cases, the interpersonal intensity of the class was ratcheted up through the use of group and team projects that increased active communication among students.

**The Ringleader Effect**

Many of the professors groped for a single cause—a precipitating event—that would explain the downturn in relations with their students. Several recalled a question in class that they handled indelicately, allowing their exasperation to show when a student was puzzled by an issue that the class had been examining for half of the term. 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 a surprisingly large number of cases, the dispute often involved a positive, pedagogically progressive aspect of the class. One professor offered students a bonus point if they...
posted comments early to an online discussion board; another required students to submit a sample of their term paper so he could provide detailed feedback. Students responded negatively to these practices, which they viewed as unusual and unwarranted intrusions.

These preconditions were only that: qualities that created a readiness for sedition. What pushed most classes into full revolt was the presence of a ringleader who galvanized the group into active rebellion. Ringleaders were of many stripes; some were grade-conscious, high-achievers who were angry over the prospect of a blight on their record. Others were stressed by work commitments or family concerns, and their coping strategy was to coerce the professor into reducing her demands. In one class, the ringleaders were a romantic couple who ignored the professor’s repeated requests to stop disrupting class with their verbal and nonverbal affront for one another. In most cases, the ringleader was the critical ingredient in transforming a cranky class into a seditious one. Showing, in some cases, guerrilla-style leadership skills, the ringleaders expanded their coalition until a substantial proportion of the class was drawn into the fray. In time, the most effective ringleaders split the class into three factions: active complainers, relatively reticent supporters of the professor, and those students who were so irritated by conflict that their interest in the class waned.

**Consequences**

In only a few cases did the seditious class result in any type of professional harm, such as a loss of respect within the department or negative sanctions by administrators. But the personal consequences were substantial, and several professors considered the seditious class to be the most upsetting experience of their careers.

When asked to describe their emotions, these professors frequently used such words as worried, angry, distressed, and upset. Lost, alarmed, stressed, negative, and defensive also made the list.

However most extracted a lesson or two from the experience. Many reviewed their practices and policies and made changes that they hoped would make sedition less likely. They tweaked their syllabus, dropped a particularly noisome assignment, or spent more time explaining the rationale for their instructional methods. Overall 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. It can offer us the opportunity to grow as teachers.

**REFERENCES**


**ISSUES TO CONSIDER**

**PREVENTING SEDITION**

 Aren't instructional skill and solid preparation enough? Must professors win students' hearts as well as their minds?

- College teaching isn't a popularity contest, but students learn more when the professor establishes good rapport. As much research has noted, it is easier to teach people when you connect with them at an interpersonal level.
- Studies of master teachers suggest the very best college professors are both technically skilled and socially skilled. They rarely say negative things about students' capabilities and interests, lose their tempers, or display other signs of defensiveness, or act in dismissive ways when students ask questions. They foster positive emotions rather than negative ones (e.g., Buskist & Keeley, 2014; Lowman, 1995).
- College teaching is ideally a collaborative process, where faculty and students pursue shared goals, but in many cases, professors' and students' goals are incompatible. We can mitigate these disparities through preregistration advising, clarifying the rationale for the course's purposes, and even adding goals that align more with students' interests. Students are more interested in course materials and their performance improves when they can identify the goals they are seeking (Forsyth & McMillan, 1991).
- The social connection between teacher and student also enriches the experience for professor. At the same time, a turbulent classroom climate and critical student ratings can result in substantial reductions in morale, motivation, and job satisfaction (Forsyth, 2016).
- This analysis of seditious classes suggests that the class's reaction was unfair, because each professor who responded (possibly a biased sample, of course) was a competent, respectful instructor. However, because of the class's negative collective dynamics, the student ratings of instruction were not valid and should have been discounted in each professor's annual review.
- Are seditious classes on the rise, as generational shifts in entitlement and self-focus erode the level in civility college classrooms? Only time will tell.

"THE RINGLEADER WAS THE CRITICAL INGREDIENT IN TRANSFORMING A CRANKY CLASS INTO A SEDITIOUS ONE."