

A Key to Success: Knowing and Communicating Our Expectations to Students

by Jeff Bradbury, Cerritos Community College

"Teacher, I got a B+ on this assignment. What did I need to do to get an A?"

"Well, it's just not A work!"

"Teacher, what is 'A work?'"

"I just know it when I see it...Like Cindy over there, she does A work."

I remember this conversation with one of my own science teachers in school. When I was a secondary mentor teacher, I heard it come out of the mouths of a few first year teachers. I must be honest and say, as a teacher, I have often asked myself, "What is A work?"

Expectations. I think they are the key to the success or failure of a science teacher. Many times when students turn in substandard work, our interpretation is that their effort or motivation was substandard. Often, though, the students just did not know what was really expected of them.

This is just as true of college students. I often ask my chemistry students to write a conclusion or answer some written questions about an experiment. Initially, I just assumed that they would write a paragraph with an introductory sentence, make a thesis statement, use evidence and have a concluding sentence. Of course, they would use good diction and formal vocabulary! I was shocked the first time I collected and read their papers. I then explained to them how I expected them to complete their work.

They said: "You mean you want us to write like we do for an English class?"

"Yes, like that. And for science we add a few more things..."

"Why didn't you tell us that before?"

Sometimes, we as teachers have to help our students connect the dots. (That was meant to be an understatement!) I have found that once I communicated realistic expectations, in appropriate detail, many of the students performed exceptionally well. Some even exceeded my expectations.

Having been a mentor teacher, I have had the opportunity to observe many successful teachers. One thing that is common to all of them is that when they tell students to work in groups, or go into the lab, they clearly have told the students what to do, how to behave, how to be safe, how to appropriately communicate with each other and how to use their time wisely. These teachers rarely have class discipline problems.

So knowing and communicating expectations is important to managing a class and helping students succeed:

- We must know what quality work is. (Admittedly not an easy task.)

- We must clearly communicate these expectations to our students.

Here are some tips to knowing and communicating our expectations:

- Save copies of past student work (with permission) to show as a demonstration of what quality is.
- Write down a few descriptions of what made the best work so good.
- Many teachers use rubrics. These are delineations of excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory work based on several criteria for a particular assignment. Why not hand out the rubrics to students in advance of the assignment?
- When students are given an in-class assignment, such as performing an experiment or working in groups, it is important to describe and model the behavior that we expect to see in our students. After all, your expectations for how to work in groups or how to complete quality work may be different from those of other teachers on campus.

If students know what is expected of them, they feel like they have more control over their success in learning. When students know exactly how a teacher expects them to behave, communicate, perform and work, the teacher is more successful at managing the classroom with fewer discipline problems.

When I was a first year teacher, I was given three periods of "Physical Science." You know the class. These are the students no one expected to graduate. Naïve as I was, I actually had the audacity to give them homework. The day after the first homework assignment, I went to each student individually to collect it. I questioned those that did not complete the assignment. "Why didn't you do the work?" Several of them looked at me with a strange expression and said... "Nobody here at this school actually expects us to do the work, except you."