
FACULTY FORUM

Providing a Realistic Course Preview to Students

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Students' expectations are likely to affect the learning, motivation, and enjoyment of their courses as well as their evaluation of instructors. Attention to the accuracy and realism of student expectations may offer benefits to instructors. I describe an approach designed to foster more realistic expectations among students. This realistic course preview (RCP), modeled after the realistic job preview concept in organizational psychology, provides current students with recommendations and information from past students. I illustrate the RCP with a research methods course as well as possible extensions and variations of the approach.

For some time, researchers have been interested in the effects of teacher expectations on student achievement (Jussim, Madon, & Chatman, 1994). Researchers have given much less attention to students' expectations about their courses and instructors. In their review of factors that affect college student achievement, Allgood, Risko, Alvarez, and Fairbanks (2000) highlighted the importance of students' ability to navigate academia and understand course expectations, arguing that increased student motivation and self-efficacy are positively related to how well students understand these expectations. In this article, I present a technique designed to foster more realistic expectations among students.

Most techniques recommended to help students adjust to college, such as apprenticeships, guided participation, concept mapping, and reading and study guides (see Allgood et al., 2000), are geared toward the organization and internalization of course material and concepts. There has been little discussion of how instructors should (or do) introduce their course content and teaching style to their students. Some researchers have examined how grade expectations relate to students' course evaluations. For example, students' evaluations depend more on how their actual grades compare to their expected grades than on the grade per se (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997). Remedios, Lieberman, and Benton (2000) found that students' enjoyment was affected more by their initial expected (or desired) grades than by their more realistic expectations formed as the semester progressed. Students whose grades surpassed their initial expectations rated the course as more enjoyable and interesting.

Little research has examined student expectations for aspects other than course grades. Rosinski and Hill (1986) collected student expectations for a medical physiology course at the beginning of the semester and then had students rate (at the end of the semester) the degree to which those expectations had been met. They found that student expectations

were quite realistic and that their expectations had been met, for the most part. They recommended collecting information on student expectations and correcting or supplementing those expectations as needed. In fact, organizational recruitment and socialization has taken a similar approach for many years. This approach is known as the realistic job preview (RJP).

Theory and research on job previews concern the information obtained by applicants during recruitment and the effects of that information on their socialization and adjustment. With an RJP, recruits receive a realistic introduction to the organization consisting of both positive and negative information about what membership will be like (Wanous, 1980). The emphasis is on matching the needs of recruits with the job and organization and, in this way, increasing subsequent satisfaction and decreasing turnover (e.g., Breugh, 1983; Meglino & DeNisi, 1987; Wanous, 1977, 1980).

Instructors can easily adapt the RJP concept to address the expectations of students for their college courses. I call this approach the realistic course preview (RCP). Following Wanous's (1980) model of organizational entry, a realistic preview of a college course can provide students with balanced and unbiased (both positive and negative) information about what the course will be like.

As with RJPs (see Breugh, 1983; Meglino & DeNisi, 1987), RCPs might lower students' inflated expectations, increase their ability to cope with the stresses of the course, lead them to perceive greater degrees of honesty from the instructor, and increase the chances that they will match their needs or goals to the course. Just as an organization needs to consider when to administer an RJP, instructors can consider when to give an RCP. For present purposes, I am assuming that the preview is part of one's course introduction and overview of the syllabus at the beginning of the semester. Instructors might also post their RCPs on their course home pages, which would give prospective students the chance to evaluate the course more accurately prior to registering for it.

An Illustration of a Realistic Course Preview

For several semesters, I have used a version of the RCP for my one-semester upper division research methods course. Our psychology majors expect this course to be very time-consuming and difficult. However, there is some variation across the instructors who teach this course (e.g., some instructors require individual projects whereas others allow small-group projects), and I am careful to explain the approach I take. I spend most of the first day discussing course requirements and the syllabus, with an emphasis on giving students a realistic picture of what will be happening. I include the actual RCP in this discussion.

The RCP consists of a list of comments from former students about their experience in my course and with me. As a supplement to the final exam, I include the following question:

Suppose two naïve psychology majors approached you and told you that they were thinking of taking *this* course from *this* instructor. Your task is to give these people a realistic preview of what they can expect (in order for them to be better prepared for the course). As a graduate of this course, what is one *positive* thing you'd tell these students and one *negative* thing you'd tell them?

Students respond to this question anonymously. Using former students' literal responses to this question (with minor grammatical editing), I have developed a table of comments that I present to new students. Table 1 is a recent version of these comments.

One advantage of including this information is that it comes from fellow students and not the instructor. Based on RJP research, students should perceive such information as more accurate, believable, and balanced than if it came from the instructor. It is analogous to a fellow worker giving a newcomer the "inside scoop" on what work will be like as opposed to getting that information from a supervisor or not getting that information at all.

Evaluations, Extensions, and Variations of the RCP Model

I evaluated the perceived effectiveness of the RCP in an upper division research methods course ($n = 10$) and two sections of an upper division online course in personality psychology ($n = 37$). In each course, students evaluated (at the end of the semester) the RCP they received at the beginning of the semester. Using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *strongly agree*), they rated how the RCP af-

Table 1. Sample Realistic Course Preview Information for a Research Methods Course

Positives
The positive parts of research are a result of confronting the negative parts. Initially, for me anyway, I was intimidated to no end. Trying to stay focused on research with the other stuff coming at me from other classes was very difficult. But, we learned to be persistent and to keep digging when you think you're so sick of your project that you could scream.
I feel that this course encouraged me that research is needed and can be fun. The process is arduous, yet seeing that people can be bettered by your data is satisfying.
I would tell them that if they had to take this course, I would take it from this instructor, because he takes small steps in doing the project and it does not overwhelm you, and it makes it easier when turning in the final project.
Negatives
It was all the long hours (doing the literature review and working on computers).
It is a pain in the rear to analyze data collected, and the whole process requires <i>lots</i> of time, work, and energy. It can also be frustrating after all that work if you don't find what you wanted or expected to find.
The negative thing is that there is a lot of outside work that has to be done and you can't afford to fall behind on your work.

Table 2. Student Evaluation of the Realistic Course Preview

Realistic Course Preview Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gave me an <i>accurate</i> idea of what this course would be like	3.77	0.96
Gave me an <i>accurate</i> idea of what this instructor would be like	3.89	0.60
Was misleading about some aspects of what this course would be like	2.06	0.79
Gave me a good idea of the kinds of stresses I'd experience in this course	3.57	0.95
Helped me to be more tolerant of the <i>negative</i> aspects of this course	3.47	0.78
Helped me to appreciate better the <i>positive</i> aspects of this course	3.70	0.66
Prepared me well for the amount of work in this course	3.68	1.10
I remembered the course preview when I encountered difficulties in this course	3.36*	1.17
Should be used in the future for this course	4.26	0.92
Realistically described the <i>positives</i> of this course	3.77	0.63
Realistically described the <i>negatives</i> of this course	3.62	0.92

Note. $N = 47$. Respondents used a 5-point (1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Using one-sample *t* tests, all means are significantly different from the scale midpoint at $p < .001$, except * $p < .05$.

ected their experiences in the course. As Table 2 indicates, all means were significantly different from the scale midpoint. Students rated the RCP as accurate, balanced, and helpful. In addition, students reported that they remembered the RCP during the course and recommended that it should be used in the future.

A major strength of the RCP model is its flexibility of implementation and revision. For example, one could get more detailed about course specifics (e.g., exams, grading, lecture style, course requirements) when preparing the RCP. If an instructor wanted to address students' expectations about grades, he or she might include normative information on grade distributions from previous semesters. In Remedios et al.'s (2000) study, over two thirds of students received a lower grade than their precourse expected grade. Depending on the course and its requirements, instructors may want to individualize their previews. To help keep my RCPs as accurate as possible, I also ask my experienced students to suggest additions or changes to the existing RCP at the end of their semester.

The evaluation data support giving students an RCP. As noted, research has found that student expectations can influence their motivation and self-efficacy as well as their evaluations of teaching effectiveness (Allgood et al., 2000; Remedios et al., 2000). Providing an RCP is a simple way to begin to establish rapport between students and instructor. Realistic previews may help to prevent unpleasant surprises for one's students, particularly in courses that require substantial independent work or hands-on applications. RCPs might also reduce disappointment about grades. For my courses, I have found this approach to be quite useful in conveying accurately to students how much work the course requires, what they are expected to do, and what they will get out of the course. My students appreciate the RCPs that I give them.

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Note

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Desirable Teaching Qualities Transcend the Nature of the Student

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Recent studies investigating the qualities that students and faculty believe are essential to quality teaching show consistency across several types of institution. This research extends the generality of these findings to a regional state university. Distinct from previous studies, we divided students into subcategories such as year in college, sex, or grade point average, and used average rank-ordered data (Study 1) or ranked Likert ratings (Study 2). Both studies used the 28 teacher characteristics from previous studies. The results were consistent across all categories of student in terms of those qualities ranked in the top 10 and are consistent with those found previously, extending the generality of earlier results.

There is enduring interest in the behaviors and personality characteristics that influence the effectiveness of college professors and their courses (e.g., McKeachie, 2002). Many em-

pirical studies simply involved students listing the characteristics believed essential to effective teaching. Using this method, Feldman (1976) found 19 dimensions he believed formed students' impression of effective teaching. Sheehan and DuPrey (1999) extended this research and concluded that although teaching effectiveness is multifaceted, five items accounted for 69% of the variance in teaching effectiveness: informative lectures, degree to which assignments measure course material well, teacher preparation, interesting lectures, and a challenging class.

More recently, Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, and Saville (2002) expanded on the standard method of having students list characteristics by including the behavioral correlates of the characteristics. Specifically, Buskist et al. surveyed two groups of undergraduate college students. The first group listed the characteristics essential to the "master teacher," resulting in 47 teaching qualities. The second produced behavioral correlates for each characteristic, resulting in a final list of 28 items. Buskist et al. surveyed undergraduate students and faculty at a Research I institution, generating a "top 10" list for each group. The top 10 items for students were, respectively, realistic expectations, knowledgeable, understanding, approachable, respectful, creative, happy (positive attitude), encourages/cares for students, flexible, and enthusiastic. Schaeffer, Epting, Zinn, and Buskist (2003) obtained similar results at a community college, as did Wann (2001) at a baccalaureate-granting college.

Many of the studies we surveyed treated the student population as a homogenous whole. That is, they did not generally differentiate between such qualities as year in college, sex, grade point average (GPA), or high school size. However, Basow (2000) asked students to describe their best and worst professor. She found that female students chose women as the best professor more often than male students, with no sex differences for the worst professors. It is possible that other categories of students perceive teachers differently in terms of the qualities perceived as important for effective teaching. For example, Levy and Peters (2002) compared first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year psychology classes and reported no differences among classes in terms of rating the professors of the best college classes. These researchers, however, did not use the methodology we employed in this study.

Our research explored whether students rank the importance of various teachers' characteristics differently based on GPA, year in college, the size of high school graduating class, level of motivation, degree to which the student perceived college was challenging, and sex of the student. In addition, this research addressed the generality of previous research (Buskist et al., 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2003; Wann, 2001) in terms of type of institution (a regional state university) and rating mechanism (ranked ordinal or Likert scale).

Study 1

Method

Participants. We surveyed 332 undergraduate students at Angelo State University from a variety of undergraduate psychology classes (228 women and 104 men with an average age of 22.52; range = 18 to 61).