



If you put your faith in students' abilities to deliver good results even when a task is very, very hard, will your faith be rewarded?

A few weeks ago my MBA students, all 183 of them, did something that many of my academic colleagues had told me would be impossible. Within the first three weeks of a course I'm teaching on Strategy, these students—in teams of five or six—all found business clients who signed contracts agreeing to give them time, attention, information, and promised to show up on campus for a final presentation. In return, students are carrying out an assessment of the clients' competitive strategies.

Amidst their busy academic and personal life schedules, all these students found clients by themselves—despite some of their own skepticism, and that of others. I am very proud of them.

Just days before the final student contract arrived in my inbox, I was in a meeting with some administrators who asked, "If the students fail to find a client, what will you do?"

"They'll all find clients," I asserted.

"But what if they don't?"

"But they will."

"But what contingency do you have if they don't?"

"I don't have a contingency," was my 100% honest answer.

The administrators looked at me like I was a complete crazy albatross, dragging down the Ship of Education with an unrepentant belief in students.

I suppose in the farthest reaches of my mind, I knew that I have enough friends in high corporate places—some would probably adopt a team if I begged. But those ideas never surfaced to conscious attention. Not once.

I had complete faith that my students could do this. My biggest joy in teaching is seeing students do things that I've never done and that I'll never be able to do. In 25 years of teaching MBAs, my

students never fail to amaze me with what they can accomplish. But part of the reason that I get to see those moments of brilliance is that I have removed the constraints (and much of the associated "safety equipment") from my courses. I ask them unbounded questions. And I know that a few of them will come back with wild, world-changing answers.

Granted, this faith is not well placed with every student, every time. Some are scared to death; some feel pushed beyond their limits; and some just don't like it because my class doesn't look like the more traditional courses to which they have grown accustomed.

I had one student just last year, let's call her Becky, who groused and complained about my style and my assignments at every turn. Becky soured her whole team on my course. Her final rating of it was the lowest she could give: a 1 out of the possible 5.

Then, months after the course was over, I received the kindest note. Becky wrote to thank me for opening her eyes, pushing her, and giving her more belief in her own abilities. I, frankly, did not know that I had done any of those things.

For the school administrators, her 1 out of a possible 5-point rating of my course will forever be Becky's view of what she thought about my class—before she had the chance to see how it might impact her in the real world. I had taught Becky hoping beyond hope that she would learn more about the subject matter and even about herself. And eventually, she did: one more student who bolstered my trust.

If, as a teacher, you don't have this level of faith right now, there are three things you can do to boost your ability to believe:

- 1) Let them be free—just a little bit more than you would normally—and see if they don't

surprise you. Some students will inevitably do all the dysfunctional things you feared they might, but others—more students than you ever hoped—will say, do, and learn things that you could never have taught them in a more traditionally structured environment.

- 2) Then—and this is key—let all the students see what the other students were able to achieve in this faith-inspired world you've created. Those who did less with the opportunity will quickly realize it in the obvious comparison to what others were able to achieve and hopefully be inspired by it.
- 3) Finally, give really frank and honest feedback; it might be the first time some of them are really getting that. If they squandered the freedom (and the challenge), you need to say so. Oh ... and don't limit this to teacher-student feedback, make sure students give regular feedback to each other as well.

But this faith has to be a two-way street. So **students, here's what you can do** to get teachers to believe more in you:

- 1) In the interest of real learning, take on a challenge that wasn't assigned. I once saw a

group of students in statistics eschew the assigned (and easily available) US-based dataset, and instead hand-input a dataset from another country, Brazil, to make the assignment more interesting and relevant to them.

- 2) When a little leeway is given—when teachers do show faith in you—make sure you over perform. You'll be clearing the way for a future generation of students to enjoy more faith from professors than even you yourselves had.
- 3) Let your teacher know what worked and what didn't, and not just at the end of the class. As a student you are investing a significant amount of time and money in your future. If you've got a recommendation for how to make a class better, by all means, speak up!

I go into every class believing that what I am saying to students is vitally important and that they have the ability to change their thinking and their behaviors; I have to believe my students can go beyond what I anticipate. I can proudly say that every day I work with students, I see glimmers of genius. Nothing can be more fulfilling to a teacher. But it is all a matter of faith.