Instructors' Presentation Style and Content

How instructors present themselves to students, including the teaching methods they employ, can have ethical implications. This chapter explores a variety of issues including the use of profanity, the presentation of sensitive materials, self-disclosures, biases that can enter into pedagogical content, emotional outbursts, and other examples of possibly irresponsible or inappropriate behavior displayed in the classroom by the instructor.

Case 3-1. Irritable Instructors

Students complain that Professor Bark is often petulant in class. They are actually afraid of her if she is having a particularly bad day. The department chairperson assures himself that the quality of her lectures is not being compromised by her less-than-civil demeanor. He advises students who complain to ignore her outbursts and reminds them of how fortunate they are to have an educator who is “tops in her field.”

Somewhere along a continuum instructors can create a classroom environment that is hostile and not conducive to learning. Young and inexperienced students may be especially disadvantaged by such a circumstance. Although we would need more detail about the particular incidents involving Professor Bark, the fact that a number of students have approached the chairperson indicates that the departmental leadership should not simply turn them away while suggesting they are ungrateful. That this pattern is apparently consistent differentiates it from the “bad day” experienced by Sad and Adlib. (See 19-4 and 19-5.)
Faculty members are human beings and cannot be expected to have a congenial disposition at all times. However, a consistent pattern of outbursts resulting in abusive behavior that undermines the students’ trust and self-confidence requires intervention. In the case of Professor Bark, we would advise that the department chair speak with her and, depending how the consultation goes, appropriately monitor the situation. Academic institutions are increasingly developing impaired-faculty services.

This case raises the intriguing question of whether competence and scholarly accomplishment can compensate for a weakness, in this case extreme and relatively frequent moodiness. Brilliant people with trying quirks have been tolerated in many contexts, from movie sets to research labs, because of their otherwise considerable talents. College-level faculty are traditionally selected on the basis of their command of subject matter and the potential for scholarly contribution to their discipline. However, we believe that interpersonal style and the ability to relate to students can be as important as the other qualifications required of teaching faculty.

Discussion Questions

1. Does your institution have any policies or guidelines for dealing with faculty who are cantankerous or verbally abusive toward students? How would Professor Bark be handled by your institution?

2. Do you agree that competence in one area (e.g., an outstanding, nationally recognized research publication record that brings great honor to your department and the institution) is a sufficient reason to tolerate personal traits that are not admired (e.g., excessive arrogance, angry outbursts, or regular demeaning interactions with students and colleagues)? Why or why not?

Case 3-2. Frequent Use of Profanity in Class

Professor Colorful uses profanity in his classes on a fairly regular basis. Although he never directs vulgarities toward students, a few have complained they are bothered by his cussing. Professor Colorful defends his lecture style by asserting that most students enjoy it and that it helps sustain students’ attention.

Student enjoyment, per se, is different from student comfort. It is certainly possible to provide enjoyable experiences for students while not, at the same time, making others uncomfortable. Professor Colorful seems to be assuming that because some students may be laughing or expressing approval in some form, his classroom technique is, therefore, sound or at least harmless. He also seems to be creating his assessment of the positive impact of his style without benefit of objective evidence. Shock value usually wears off over time whereas the level of offensiveness may actually increase.

We believe that the extent to which profanity in the classroom constitutes unprofessional conduct depends on several factors. One is the context in which it occurs. For example, references to taboo slang terms could be appropriate in lectures on certain subjects (e.g., human sexuality, language, or literature courses), and students taking such courses might expect such references. Profanity could also be used appropriately for illustrative purposes, for example, in direct quotations or to illustrate the emotional effect of taboo vs. nontaboo words. In such cases, however, it might be wise to gently inform students of the possibly offending terminology.

Colorful’s constant use of profanity, however, does not appear to have any discernible pedagogical justification. The regular use of taboo words in lectures does not enhance the image of the teaching profession and models a style that parents and others may not appreciate. Freedom of expression, however, is not a value that academics restrict lightly. Acceptability is probably best judged by community standards. In Colorful’s case, a 2% complaint rate might suggest that such standards are not being violated. However, because there might be a silent majority of offended noncomplainers, Colorful needs to reexamine his technique. Furthermore, Colorful should keep in mind that it takes only one student to make a major (and public) issue of behavior that many might find unbecoming in the academy. Colorful might, at the very least, be encouraged to include a specific item on the anonymous student course evaluation asking for frank feedback on his teaching style.

Colorful might want to hold discussions with other colleagues, a third party (such as the department chair), or interview students to determine their opinions. If Colorful is offending a substantial number of students, he should desist. In one survey of undergraduate students, it was discovered that most students would not appreciate teachers using profanity for its own sake, and an even higher percentage would find telling “dirty” jokes inappropriate (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, & Allen, 1993). In any case, students should know about Colorful’s lecture vocabulary repertoire at the start of the course so that those who do not welcome such exposure can drop out. If Colorful is teaching the only section of a required course, he has a stronger obligation not to give this brand of offense. Finally, college instructors are powerful role models to students even though we may not always be aware of it. We could easily argue that modeling profanity has no apparent redeeming qualities.
Discussion Questions

1. The media are increasingly liberal in the use of taboo words and share a willingness to quote directly others who use them. Should not, then, instructors feel comfortable making liberal use of offensive language? Why or why not?

2. Someone once said that the truly great comedians are those able to amuse without resorting to vulgar language. Might the same apply to the truly great educator?

3. What about the student whose contributions to class discussions are laced with considerable expletives? What should the instructor’s response be?

Case 3-3. Oral Plagiarism

Professor Copy uses the written work of others to create all of her lectures. However, she never gives the sources credit for her verbatim presentations. Students have never raised the issue because they are unaware of the origins of the lectures.

Oral plagiarism is a rarely discussed issue in the ethics literature and perhaps raises a pang of dread in most instructors. After all, we did not independently create most of the information we impart to our students. And, at some point, basic knowledge becomes part of the public domain.

When one uses common information and embroiders it in one’s own style, to credit all the sources would be cumbersome and unnecessary. Complete attributions would take up class time that could be used for more productive reasons.

However, when one uses materials verbatim beyond a fair use criterion, or presents theories and research findings in a way that would be assumed by the listener to be the original thinking or labor of the speaker, a question of ethics arises. With just a little effort and creativity, instructors can extend proper credit without using up considerable time or confusing students. For example, one might say at the beginning of the period, “Today we will be discussing multivariate statistics, and I will be adapting many of my points from the materials provided to me at a workshop I attended that was conducted by Dr. Tabachnick and Dr. Fidell.” For more specific presentations, mentioning the name of those who created the theory or scholarly work or who did the research should not take more than a few seconds. When these names will not be part of an examination, the instructor can also add, “I will not be testing you on the authors’ identities, but I do want you to recall the general findings of their work.” (See also 3-7.)

Discussion Questions

1. How do you define what is in the public domain in your field?

2. Does the level of the course make a difference? For example, is it more important to cite sources in a graduate or advanced undergraduate seminar than in an introductory survey course?

3. Does the fact that oral plagiarism is not permanent (i.e., it is uttered and then gone) mean that it is also a less severe breach of ethics than is written plagiarism?

Case 3-4. Criticism of Colleagues in Class

When a student praises the work of an instructor at another institution, Professor Jab replies, “His work is mostly crap and the rumor is that he is facing disciplinary charges for scientific misconduct.”

Critical analyses of the work of others is an important component of the socialization of academics. Criticism of a colleague’s work is not, therefore, unethical per se. However, Jab has behaved unprofessionally in front of students. Describing work of another as “crap” explains nothing, yet teaches disrespect. Furthermore, the accusation that the colleague might be facing disciplinary proceedings appears to be without substantiation. Unless such accusations are part of the public domain, Jab has no business spreading possibly false or unauthorized information in class. Even when formal accusations have been made, the colleague may later be exonerated and Jab may not have an opportunity to modify earlier remarks.

A more legitimate response to scholarship with which one disagrees is to say something like, “Not everyone sees it that way, and personally I think that the work to which you are referring is problematic because…” In other words, rather than letting students’ statements evoke displeasure or a lapse in objectivity, instructors can use such incidents as catalysts for a positive and memorable learning experience.

It may be that Jab has other problems, possibly of a personal nature, with his colleague. The classroom is not, however, an arena for personal battles. (See also 14-1 and 14-2.)
Discussion Questions

1. What if the colleague was a faculty member in Jab’s institution (or department)? Must commentary about a colleague’s work, unless complimentary, be made even more carefully than if the colleague is somewhere else?

2. How should an instructor handle the reverse situation, that is, when a student makes an extremely derogatory comment about another instructor or someone else in the instructor’s field and the instructor fully agrees with the student’s negative comments?

Case 3-5. Little White Lies to Make a Point

Professor Ceeare uncritically presents results of a study in support of a social policy position to which she adheres to her sociology classes. This work, however, has been found to be invalid by several other researchers. When asked in private about this discrepancy by a colleague, she replies that the original results represent a higher truth, validated by people’s personal experiences, that is inaccessible to the traditional logical positivist approach to research. She also replies that consciousness raising is part of a college education, and that the benefits of making students aware of the social problem illustrated by the research outweigh the distortions entailed by presenting possibly flawed research.

Ceeare’s arguments for the “experiential validity” of her view are not unethical per se. However, if that is the basis of her argument, that is all she should claim to support it. Ceeare should not present a flawed study as if it provides objective support for her view. It is unethical for her to distort another kind of evidence to make it look like something it is not.

We believe that Ceeare’s manner of handling this question does a disservice to students because “logical positivist” ideas are probably what most of them learned in research methods classes, and few of them will understand her argument that ideas that fail to achieve this kind of scientific support may nevertheless be considered valid by some people. Confusing students does not make for good teaching, and Ceeare may undermine her credibility in students’ eyes concerning other material as well.

Ceeare would be better off acknowledging that there can be different sides to a question and note the nature of evidence for each. It is more appropriate (and less confusing for students) to leave a question unsettled than to answer it on the basis of arguments that seem to undermine other foundations that students are being taught. Handling it this way allows Ceeare to be a better role model for how instructors deal with our sometimes limited understanding of complicated issues. (See also 3-6.)

Discussion Questions

1. Although Ceeare’s case is more extreme, it does raise the question of the extent to which it is proper to simplify the results of research or the content of a critique to avoid confusing students with complexities that are beyond their current level of understanding. At what point does simplification become distortion?

2. What are the ethical implications of these alternative scenarios?

a. Rather than presenting flawed research, Ceeare presents valid research, but only those studies that support her stand. She ignores equally valid research that provides contrary evidence.

b. Ceeare presents research that provides evidence in support of both sides of the question, but points out only the strengths of the research supporting her point of view, ignoring its weaknesses, and points out only the weaknesses of the other research, ignoring its strengths.

3. How does a research-based argument, as seen in this case, differ from an artistic, philosophical, religious, or other type of argument? Or does it differ? Are there common standards of validity for all fields?

Case 3-6. Twisting Facts

Professor Revision proclaims to his Twentieth Century History class that President John F. Kennedy’s assassination was the result of a conspiracy involving the Central Intelligence Agency. He dismisses students who question his certainty on this point with the retort, “You just don’t want to see the truth.”

In clear-cut examples, such as whether the Holocaust occurred, it is entirely appropriate to treat an event as historical fact without bringing up extremist claims to the contrary. Students are shortchanged and misguided, however, when one side of an important controversy is dismissed, and the other is enshrined as fact, when respected authorities consider the relevant evidence to be mixed at best.
Professor Revision may be fully convinced that his conclusion is accurate and will eventually be confirmed, but in his excitement to have students credit him with this insight he has stepped away from his role as their mentor for 20th Century History. His intellectual stance on this matter is not sufficiently circumspect and critical. Even if students prefer Revision’s self-assured style of instruction, they will not learn as much of value when given only his cut-and-dried conclusions.

Students in any field need to understand how trained professionals evaluate evidence, make inferences, and defend their interpretations in the face of relevant criticism. When a course topic is completely value-driven, such that no hard data are available, instructors must still emphasize the process of how a given discipline analyzes ideas rather than the notion that some ideas are necessarily more correct than others.

It is acceptable for Revision to conclude a thorough, objective presentation of the pertinent evidence with his own argument that belief in a conspiracy is defensible. He can add the point that such a disturbing conclusion may be difficult for many people to accept, even if there is some supportive evidence. However, he should not try to undercut students who hold a contrary position especially when they can easily muster other evidence to support a contradictory view. Revision should strive to expand students’ mastery of the process and content of his field, not to increase the number of new adherents to his particular hypothesis. This approach also makes it less awkward for instructors when new evidence comes to light that conclusively refutes their position. (See also 3-5.)

Discussion Questions

1. Suppose an instructor’s position on a major issue completely changes in light of critical new evidence. Would the instructor have any responsibilities to previous students?

2. What if a dispute is the other way around? What obligation does an instructor have to listen at any length to a student’s notion that most scholars consider indefensible or unproven?

Case 3-7. Lecturing From the Textbook

Professor Reader believes that everything her students need to know in her introductory level course is contained in the textbook. Her lectures are merely repetitions of textbook material. She asserts that beginning students benefit from repetition and that her time is freed to prepare more sophisticated material for her advanced classes.

If everything students needed to know were in textbooks, there would be no need for classes. It is our firm belief that textbooks usually do not contain everything students need to know. For example, even the newest textbooks are usually 2 or more years behind current knowledge simply because of the time it takes to write and produce them. The classroom is the place to inform students about what is current in the field. Students, especially introductory students, do not always understand what is in the textbook, so lectures can add explanations and examples. Because of the size of the knowledge base, authors of introductory textbooks often have to pick and choose what to include. Lectures can inform students about topics omitted or treated with insufficient depth. Some textbooks are written from a particular theoretical or philosophical point of view, ignoring or giving little attention opposing theories or viewpoints. Lectures can provide students with different perspectives on a topic. In fact, part of what instructors can accomplish in introductory courses is to teach students the limitations of considering only one viewpoint or approach to a topic.

Finally, all students should be accorded the same degree of the instructor’s knowledge, talents, and effort. Professor Reader willfully short-changes her lower division students. If anything, introductory students deserve special attention because of their status as novices. It is also the introductory courses from which advanced students are recruited. If they are uninspired by their introductory course, they may inappropriately label the entire discipline.

Discussion Questions

1. Are there circumstances when going over what is in the book constitutes responsible teaching? What are some examples?

2. To some degree, the question of how much time to allocate to one’s courses is one of robbing Peter to pay Paul. What criteria could one use in making a decision to spend more time and effort on one course than on another?

Case 3-8. Risky Class Presentations

Professor Carnal read an erotic poem, published in a legitimate literary journal, to his English Poetry class. Two students complained that the poem was “verbal
pornography” and that they were subjected to it without warning. They further argued that institutions of higher education should function at a level “higher than the gutter.”

Today’s diverse student population creates a dilemma for instructors who deviate from a relatively narrow, traditional pathway. And yet institutions of higher education remain as one of the few places where any idea or writing can be put forth, critically examined, debated, and accepted or rejected. This process is unfamiliar to many of today’s students who are socialized into quick and often unexamined judgments of what is right, and what is wrong. (This is not to say that all material is automatically suitable for the classroom, as we examine in 3-6 and 3-9.)

When “risk management” figures into ethical decision making, instructors may find themselves needing to become less spontaneous when it comes to controversial or sensitive material. The first step is to be in touch with the campus administration regarding the actual amount of support given to the concept of academic freedom. Given any potential dangers, we suggest that instructors protect themselves in the following ways:

1. Be able to support the premise that class lectures, activities, and materials are relevant to the course topic and goals set forth by the department and the syllabus.

2. If any material might offend or disturb some students, describe it briefly on the first day of class, thus allowing students to select themselves out by dropping the class.

3. Invite students to come in during office hours to discuss anything presented in class (and, should any take advantage of an opportunity to criticize it, allow them their say without ridicule or censure while also taking an opportunity to better explain your choices).

4. If upcoming material is likely to be problematic for some students, warn them in advance. Being “tipped off” may be all some students require to alleviate conflict. Others may choose to miss class that day. (See also 3-9, 4-4, and 4-5. See 5-11 for a case dealing with assigning risky course assignments.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Should students be responsible for the content of sensitive material on an examination?

Case 3-9. Instructors’ Personal Disclosures

Some students are offended by Professor Open’s willingness to discuss her private life in her public health services class. She has, on various occasions, described her sexual relations with her spouse, getting a tattoo (and where it is), and her menstrual cycle.

Although students enjoy anecdotes that reveal an instructor’s human side, it is a misuse of the instructor’s power to relate examples that do not assist student learning or that show disrespect for student sensibilities. We believe that the use of real-life examples to illustrate points should also have some pedagogical value, remain within the limits of propriety, and conform to normative community standards. For example, an instructor’s personal experience with jury duty would certainly enhance a presentation of the jury system.

The intimate nature of Open’s self-disclosures does not meet any of the three criteria noted earlier. Furthermore, Open’s behavior forces her captive audience into a personalized relationship with her. Thus, Open has violated ethical propriety by creating a dual-role situation that has extended beyond some students’ comfort zone. Maintaining an appropriate level of professional decorum has the benefits of establishing role boundaries for students, of enhancing respect for faculty, and of providing good role modeling. (See also 3-8.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Is telling personal stories not relevant to the class topic at hand acceptable? What might be some examples?

2. How can one draw the limits of propriety? How much does the personality style of the instructor influence those limits? Can a witty instructor’s stories be more acceptable than the same stories told by a humorless instructor?

3. How much does the class level (say, first-year students as compared to seniors or graduate students) have to do with the degree of appropriate self-revelation?
Case 3-10. Disparities in What Students Are Being Taught

When Professor Misinfo gives what some students in the class think is factually incorrect information during a lecture, the students go to Professor Expert for an opinion. Expert confirms the students' view. The students then confront Misinfo, who refutes Expert's version and defends his own statements as correct. The students are confused.

Such situations are not uncommon, given the sprawling and fast-emerging nature of many academic disciplines and the inability of any single human being to have total command of his or her own discipline. In this case, the students have, unwittingly, put two instructors in conflict with each other. It would have been better had Expert gone to Misinfo to discuss whether the two of them were approaching the evidence from the same perspective. The students might then be given an account of such a discussion.

When colleagues are genuinely collegial, getting together to sort out the differences in what they are teaching students can be a good learning experience for all concerned. Despite their conflicting theories, methods, or interpretations of fact or fiction, the class could benefit from a debate on the theoretical issues and from the model of scientists and scholars dealing constructively (or at least amicably) with differences.

If the colleagues are not friendly or passionately hold conflicting theories, the disagreement is likely to defy mediation. Moreover, it is not inconceivable that students may knowingly pit instructors against each other, most likely when a grade is in dispute.

Finally, we believe that it is appropriate for instructors to admit when they are in error. In our experience, students handle that well and do not diminish their respect for us. On the contrary, many find the humanity in such an admission refreshing.

Discussion Questions

1. What would you do if these students came to you?

2. What if, based on widely accepted and verifiable information, Misinfo is found to be passing along information of some consequence that is flat-out wrong? Must he be persuaded to change his presentations? If so, how and by whom?

Case 3-11, A & B. Teaching to Which Student Audience?

Professor Reach teaches her upper-division, undergraduate class in business law at a highly advanced level. Her textbook is often used during the second year at law schools. Her lectures are well crafted, but complicated and fast paced. Students complain they do not understand what is going on. During a meeting with the department chair, Reach strongly defended her teaching approach as the appropriate way to give the excellent students the edge they need to compete in today's marketplace or for entry into the best law schools.

Professor Rudimentary believes that every student in the room must have a full grasp of the material before moving ahead. He goes over the same material several times in lecture. He also selects a very basic textbook that the better students find unchallenging. By the end of the term, only two thirds of the book has been covered.

Most large, comprehensive postsecondary institutions present the frustrating dilemma of where to aim in terms of difficulty or sophistication level of the subject matter in heterogeneous classes. Reach and Rudimentary have both shot too far in opposite directions. Both may have the best interests of students in mind, but their solutions are worse than the problem.

We cannot keep every bright student challenged, and we cannot ensure that every mediocre student succeeds. We can attempt to offer experiences that may help those hovering at both poles get more from our classes. The highly advanced student, for example, can be given some leeway to upgrade a project if that is what the student wishes to do. A parallel independent study project may be fitting for a truly gifted student who is treading water during the regular classroom experience. Special tutoring or review sessions can be made available for slower students. (See 6-3, 6-4, 6-6, 6-12, and 6-13 for related grading issues.)

Discussion Questions

1. How do you handle this dilemma?

2. If special provisions or opportunities are made available to the best or weakest students, are instructors obliged to make the same opportunities available to all other students in the class?
3. Are there pedagogical techniques that simultaneously could enhance both the work of both mediocre and outstanding students? What might be some examples?

Case 3-12. Course Descriptions Versus Actual Course Content

Students complain that Dr. Tune's Music Appreciation 335 is very unlike the catalog description. The catalog described activities and assignments that were never incorporated into the course as it was actually taught, and the general content description was of a substantially different focus from that of the actual course.

Although courses and the instructors who teach them earn reputations that circulate widely among students, many will still select their educational experiences on the basis of the authorized course descriptions. We believe that because instructors do not always control the descriptions that appear in catalogs (or similar announcements) is not an acceptable excuse for such disparities. The students' complaint is legitimate.

Departments and individual instructors should monitor the catalog entries to ensure that the descriptions are congruent with the actual design of the course. If the description and the course design are disparate, and the instructor has a clear rationale and support for not conforming to the description, announcements should be made through as many communication channels as possible, ideally before registration, but most certainly on the first day of class.

Discussion Questions

1. Different instructors teach the same courses differently. How should this reality be reconciled with the single authorized descriptions found in the course catalog?

2. Are there special ethical considerations that apply when courses appear in a sequence? That is, when one course prepares the students for the next course, taught by a different instructor, is there an ethical responsibility to teach the first course uniformly (or nearly so)?

3. How would you get the word out to students at your institution if the course description did not match the course as you plan to teach it?

Case 3-13. Why Are You Wasting My Time?

In a seminar entitled Current Research in the Field, each student must make an in-class presentation on a topic that has been "hot" during the last 5 years. Ned Nadanew cites only work that is more than 10 years old. After several minutes, Professor Getup Sett interrupts Ned and asks for the current materials. When Ned can produce none, Sett becomes irate and storms out of the room, yelling "Why should I waste my time?" The students wait for almost 20 minutes, but finally leave when they realize that Sett is not going to return that day.

Sett’s reaction was inappropriate, no matter how bad Nadanew's work has been. We believe that regardless of the acceptability of a student’s work, a basic obligation to remain civil is required in every classroom.

Nadanew's poor performance could be used to great advantage by Sett. Discussion of responsibility, expectations in employment settings, or techniques for gathering appropriate materials are all possible topics that Sett could use to gain something positive out of Nadanew’s poor showing. Having a temper tantrum serves no good purpose. However, Sett must try not to use the circumstance to publicly derogate Nadanew. Sett can call students who perform poorly into her office for a private discussion that includes an expression of disappointment. (See also 1-3 and 2-9.)

Discussion Questions

1. Does it make a difference if Ned is the first student to present? The last? That is, is Sett's angry reaction more justifiable if many acceptable presentations were completed before Nadanew is scheduled?

2. What techniques might Sett employ to avoid such a situation from arising in the first place? That is, might Sett be largely to blame for not offering students clear guidelines? When a class requires students to use class time for presentations, does an instructor have an ethical obligation to exert extra efforts (e.g., reviewing the students' presentations beforehand) to ensure that the class learns something of value?

3. What resolution can be employed for Nadanew’s very poor performance? For instance, should Professor Sett tell Nadanew to turn the presentation into a paper, giving Nadanew a second chance? Or must Nadanew accept his earned failure?
Case 3-14, A & B. When Instructors Cut Classes

Professor Tardy is almost always between 5 and 15 minutes late to his classes. Students have adjusted to his pattern and also wander in late, often after Tardy has arrived. Colleagues have noticed his pattern and have asked Tardy about it. He replies that he sometimes gets phone calls just before class, or that he misplaced his lecture notes, or that a student appointment ran late. Some students complain because by the time Tardy arrives and straggling students enter, the session can be almost a third over.

Professor Shortchange, who teaches a late evening section, regularly dismisses classes 20 minutes before the scheduled quit time. Most students either do not mind or welcome the early departures. A colleague, however, has taken notice and is concerned that Shortchange is not fulfilling her academic obligations. Tardy is derelict in his duties. He is not providing adequate services to students. He is a poor role model. Tardy gives the message that teaching is less valuable than just about anything else that comes along, and he also suggests that the subject matter being taught is not worth full consideration. Tardy needs to understand, even if it takes a formal complaint to issue a wake-up call, that he must reorganize his priorities.

All instructors will be late to class on occasion; sometimes for good reason and sometimes not. We suggest that teaching faculty who enter the room late acknowledge their tardiness and even apologize for it, thus giving students correct messages about the expectations of professionals.

Like Professor Tardy, Shortchange is shirking her duties, depriving students of potentially important instructional material and giving the message that both she and her students have much better things to do with their evenings. Sometimes—and this may happen more often in evening classes when hours are usually blocked together—all of the material can be covered a little ahead of the allocated time. If so, the instructor could dismiss the class and stay around for the remainder of the session to confer with students. (See also 3-15. See 11-1 and 11-2 for related issues involving office hours.)

Discussion Questions

1. Are Tardy and Shortchange any more at fault than an instructor who rambles during class, telling lengthy, irrelevant stories?

2. Is “I finished the day’s lecture early” ever an acceptable answer for early dismissal? If so, how often can this reason be used?

3. Is a presentation transition that occurs a few minutes before the end of the session (i.e., there is a major shift from one topic to a new one) an acceptable reason to release the students early that day?

Case 3-15. No-Show Instructors

After the third time it happened, a student told another instructor that Professor Absent had never arrived and left the class sitting. This student was upset because, as he put it, “I have better things to do than wait for an instructor who never appears.” The other instructor was distressed by the student’s revelation and told colleagues about the incidents, including his hypothesis that Absent may be using illicit drugs.

Although instructors may not always respect the criteria that students use to define “good use of time,” no one should have to wait more than 10 minutes for an instructor who is not coming. Except in unavoidable circumstances, instructors should get information about an absence to the students in the classroom. Assuming that Absent could have called the department office each of the three times, he is showing disrespect to his students and his department. He is giving the students and his junior colleagues an appalling example of irresponsibility.

Rather than resorting to gossip, however, the other instructor should inform Absent of the students’ feelings and urge that Absent to modify his practice. If Absent’s no-show behavior continues, the matter should be brought to the attention of the department chair. (See also 3-14. See 11-1 for missing office hours.)

Discussion Questions

1. What should Absent’s colleague do if she provides Absent with feedback about his behavior and Absent tells her that his behavior is none of her business and persists in missing classes?

2. Suppose that when Absent’s colleague confronts him, he replies that the class has had an average attendance rate of less than 50% and he is simply trying to show them what it’s like to be stood up for class. He says he intends to make his point explicit at the next class session. Are there any ethical implications attending Absent’s “lesson”? 
3. If an instructor knows she will be absent on a particular day and informs her class of it in advance, need she explain the reason for her absence to them? To what extent does the reason for the absence (e.g., a professional meeting or a medical appointment) affect what she tells the class?

**Case 3-16. Dress Code for Instructors?**

Professor Sloppy teaches his classes in a sweatshirt, tattered jeans, and dirty tennis shoes. Some students think it's "cool" and others make jokes about it. Is this an ethical matter?

The learning environment is best nourished when students feel comfortable and the overall ambience allows focus on academic matters. The instructor's appearance is one of many situational variables that can have an impact on the classroom climate as well as how students focus their attention. However, as long as Professor Sloppy does not dress in a way that would offend the sensibilities of the academic community, he is not directly violating any ethical principle. Some schools have dress codes for students, faculty, or both. But, generally speaking, clothing is not an ethical matter.

Whereas latitude in acceptable faculty dress and style is usually quite broad, we do believe that most academic communities are enhanced by a professional-looking teaching faculty and administrative staff. Clean and mainstream (or reasonably close to it) attire in good repair limits distractions while teaching and communicates an image of persons who take their professional position seriously.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What might be faculty attire that could offend the sensibilities of the academic community? Body piercing? Offensive or multiple tattoos? Women who do not shave their body hair? Are cultural issues to be taken into consideration here?

2. A female instructor wears low-cut dresses that show plenty of cleavage. Another wears extremely short skirts. Are these outfits appropriate? Are there implicit standards for professional attire that differ for women and men? Are double standards acceptable?

3. Is there an expectation of good bodily hygiene on the part of faculty? What if an instructor had habitually pungent body odor, or is habitually unkempt, or wears clothes that are always dirty? Are these examples anybody's business?

4. How important is the nature of the course being taught? That is, would you make differing judgments about acceptable work clothing for philosophy, business, art, theater, and gymnastics instructors?

**Case 3-17. Requiring the Use of Technology**

Professor Tekjock relies heavily on computer technology in his classroom teaching. His syllabus is available only on his web page; he notifies his students via email of upcoming events and changes in the course schedule. His office hours are conducted online. His justification is that students must be computer literate to prepare them for employment demands. Some students complain about this system. The commuters do not have easy access to the computer labs or their computers are too outdated. Others describe themselves as computer-phobic. Still others feel that Tekjock's practices are too impersonal and that they prefer more face-to-face interactions.

Faculty members are increasingly being called upon to integrate technology into the classroom. Many universities mandate that every course syllabus includes a description of the ways in which the course will help students become more computer and multimedia literate. Some universities even require every student to own a personal computer. The expectation that students become educated about the use of technology in their discipline mirrors expectations in the workplace. In this context, Tekjock's practices seem not only justified, but also preferable.

However, Tekjock needs to consider whether his course is accessible to all students and to recognize the diversity of students' needs as he makes plans to increase their computer literacy. Problems may arise if Tekjock relies exclusively on technology in his interactions with students, especially if these practices routinely disenfranchise them. (See also 6-2.)

Some students still enter college with a very limited technology base and with great insecurity about their ability to acquire basic computer skills. With minimal effort Tekjock can desensitize his students who are computer-phobic by scheduling a class period in a computer lab. He might provide support for these students by offering help sessions on the use of email, accessing a web site, or by providing a step-by-step set of written instructions for use in computer labs.

Other students may not own or be able to afford a personal computer. Or, some may have employment schedules or family obligations that do not permit them to spend time in university computer labs before or after
class. Tekjock should provide alternatives for these students. Posting messages outside the classroom is an easy-to-implement alternative to e-mail. He may want to help commuters without adequate computer setups at home locate work stations close to home (e.g., the public library) that would enable Internet access to the course web page.

Online office hours, although a great time saver for faculty and students, do depersonalize the student–instructor relationship. Besides the fact that this practice may deny some students access, some issues are difficult to manage by an online discussion. For example, some discussions require back-and-forth input to be adequately resolved. Sensitive matters often arise that the student does not feel comfortable expressing online. In addition, rapport with students may be compromised if students perceive disinterest from an instructor who does not want to meet them face to face. (See also 3-18 and 6-2.)

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent are the level and the content of the course considerations? Are Tekjock’s practices more appropriate for senior-level courses than for an introductory level course?

2. Does Tekjock have an ethical responsibility to provide support for those students who are computer naive so that they can develop the skills needed to use technology effectively in his class?

3. Is it ethical to require assignments requiring access to technology when the institution does not support such access? For example, what about an assignment to hand in printed copies of certain web pages when a student does not have an Internet connection at home and the lab computers block downloading capabilities to prevent viruses?

Case 3-18. Reluctance to Change With the Times

Professor Standup, a senior member of the department, has had years of success using traditional teaching methods centered on classroom lectures and face-to-face interactions with students. Standup is becoming disheartened because contemporary students seem restless during his lengthy, albeit enthusiastic, lectures. Standup’s student evaluations criticize his teaching for the absence of multimedia and other new technologies (e.g., electric grade reports, use of Power Point presentations). Furthermore, Standup is disinclined to use email to communicate with students because he believes that personal conversation is the appropriate way to relate to people. Professor Standup is aware that his colleagues make considerable use of technology in the classroom, but remains convinced that he is the most effective when he does his work “the old fashioned way.”

Standup’s primary responsibility is to his students and their success in meeting the learning objectives of his course. Although he may excel as a lecturer, we believe that Standup should consider broadening his repertoire of techniques, especially if technical support is readily at hand. He need not abandon his lectures, which appear to be done with care and zest. But, perhaps he can interject an occasional display of a web page or video clips. Standup should consider the possibility that some of his material can be more effectively presented using the new teaching tools that are increasingly available.

We applaud Standup’s desire to relate directly with students. One of the main differences between distance education and the traditional institution of higher education is that students and instructors can have direct interactions. However, the technology that allows students easy access to their educators and access to their progress in the course is extremely helpful to those students.

In sum, we certainly do not view Standup as behaving unethically, but he may be depriving his students of technological benefits that he can easily learn to master. We still find colleagues who admit to an underlying technophobia that weakens their motivation to learn new teaching technologies. However, we have also found that those who have mastered them enjoy teaching them to colleagues who have not, and that most of the techniques are far easier to learn than one expects. (See also 3-17.)

Discussion Questions

1. Is there an ethical responsibility to learn new teaching technologies? If so, which ones? If not, why not?

2. An invited lecturer to our campus delivered his entire speech with scant notes. Afterwards, an audience member thanked him for giving a brilliant presentation without resorting to any bells and whistles. The rest of the audience applauded. Is the true measure of a good presentation the ability to perform without props?

3. Is it risky to develop teaching technologies to the point where live instructors are superfluous?