

WHAT DOES A PROFESSOR LOOK LIKE?

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I had just started my Ph.D. when I got the offer for a position as an Ecology Instructor at a nearby university. They wanted me to teach an Ecology course! This wasn't really part of my plan. I was supposed to focus on my research for several more years so that one day in the distant future I could teach my very own course. But here was my chance right now, and I accepted immediately without hesitation or any real rational thought.

Two months later, I was one week away from the first day of my teaching gig. Although I had spent days neglecting my Ph.D. and carving out the lesson plans for my course, I now found myself consumed with thoughts of how to look and act like a Professor. What is a Professor supposed to look and act like anyway? Whatever the answer, it seemed very different from who I was: a first-generation Bengali woman who just started her graduate studies, standing at an undaunting 5'2". My mind in a frenzy, I spent the next few days buying overpriced professional clothes, aimed at making me look older and more professorial. I was now out \$500.

On my first day of class, I tried to maintain a scripted, professional appearance. I spoke in a lower pitched voice, remained sedate, and presented my slides exactly as I had rehearsed. To my surprise, the students seemed to accept me as their teacher with no real suspicion. Unfortunately, none of that really seemed to matter by the end of the class. Coming into my lecture on primary productivity, I was worried about being met with irreverence, or even disrespect. It now dawned on me that something worse was occurring: my students were bored.

My goal of fitting the mold of a "Professor" shifted to the back of my mind, and I was now set on getting my students excited about our next lecture topic on secondary productivity. Walking into the next class, I lectured as myself: higher-pitched, excitable, and floating through slides unrehearsed. Although learning about secondary productivity is objectively no more exciting than primary productivity, I could tell that something magical was happening. The faces staring back at me were slightly *less* bored.

In the coming days, I stopped trying to blend into the monolith of Professors I saw around me,

and instead started integrating my own philosophy and personality into my teaching style. This was a much more natural process that drew on my past experience and sense of identity. Mainly, I wanted to cultivate an atmosphere where students weren't limited by the student-teacher power dynamics that I had disliked so much growing up. In one interaction, a student asked me after class, "Why is there always more biodiversity near the equator?" To be honest, I didn't entirely know and hypothesized that it was because it received more solar energy leading to more primary production and species richness. I followed this by stating, "I'm just theorizing, feel free to research it and tell me I'm wrong." The next class, she let me know that there were several competing hypotheses, just one of which was the one I mentioned. I realized then that welcoming students to challenge me encouraged them to think more critically about the topics that interested them, which often went beyond the scope of our course material.

Here is another example of how my past influenced my teaching style. There was one student who showed a great amount of enthusiasm in the first two weeks of class, stating that it was his favorite class of the semester. However, he mostly stopped showing up soon after. I decided not to create any negative reinforcement for him, or any other student who missed my classes. Instead, I made lecture notes available online and welcomed them when they did show up. I knew from my own turbulent undergraduate experience that sometimes life can get in the way. When I had missed classes or generally underperformed in school, it was not due to a lack of enthusiasm or interest in my field. Rather I was overwhelmed with life's other stressors. In these times, negative reinforcement only exacerbated my stress, amplified my guilt and further reduced my productivity. From these experiences, I learned that teachers should only ever be creating a positive incentive to learn. In the end, my student received a B as his final grade, and to his credit, did make it to a handful of my classes.

As a woman of color, I was distinctly aware of the need to create inclusive teaching environments for my students. I felt an additional sense of pride in being an Instructor since it allowed many of my female and people of color students to see themselves reflected in a leadership position. Although this was never explicitly stated, I knew there was an added relevance to my interactions with these students. To ensure that *all* of my students saw themselves reflected in the science that was being taught, I also invited other diverse scientists as guest lecturers, and introduced different scientific

perspectives through my lectures. There was an awesome Asian-Canadian herpetologist who taught us about turtles. I spent another lecture delving into Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. These strategies paid off, with students noting that the classroom environment was "non-hostile," "safe," and "conducive for learning."

My classroom evolved into a fun environment where lectures were interactive, students stopped me to ask questions mid-lecture, sometimes challenged my teachings, and even recommended future lecture topics. For example, they wanted to learn more about arctic ecosystems! Improved student-teacher connectedness meant that I loved going into my own class and being part of this creative energy of teaching and learning about ecology, ecosystems, and society. Oh, and the students seemed to be enjoying themselves as well.

When I finished teaching my course, and reflected on my experience and student evaluations, I realized one main thing: although the majority of current Professors have a similar look and teaching style—the kind that I don't fit nicely into—this is not necessarily the ideal. Instead, embracing our own unique identities may be well received by our students and make for an effective learning environment. Indeed, having diversity in faculty members will expose students to a variety of intellectual thought, teaching style and personal experience which together offer a breath of ideas that constitute a dynamic intellectual community.

For me, embracing my own identity meant presenting spontaneous and interactive lectures, fostering a learning environment where students were encouraged to critically think and challenge ideas, being compassionate in student interactions, and employing inclusive teaching strategies. Students showed appreciation for this teaching approach in their course evaluation, noting my "very dynamic way of teaching" and "enthusiasm, something that is severely lacking in many of the professors [here]." While this teaching style is friendlier and perhaps viewed as "soft," it did not lead to less rigorous learning outcomes. As one student noted, "She doesn't act like she's above all of her students, in that she encourages you to challenge ideas and ask questions. She is a bit of a tough marker though." Hey, I'll take it!

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