

Teaching Statement

Evan Ott

Fear is a major stumbling block to students. Fear of failure. Fear of looking foolish. Fear of mathematics. Fear seeps in and disrupts student learning trajectories in deep and powerful ways. It causes students to doubt their own abilities which leads to imposter syndrome. It causes students to isolate themselves, refusing help when they need it most. It causes undue stress and anxiety, affecting students' ability to study effectively. In short, fear saps student growth potential. As a teacher, my response is to work diligently to help students confront and overcome fear. When students are acting out of fear, it is my experience that they tend to stay locked in the lowest levels of learning objectives, focused solely on memorization of specific problems and specific solutions, missing the beauty and wonder of higher-level education. My goal, then, is to create a learning environment where students feel "safe enough" to begin confronting their fears. With fears allayed, students can focus on applying what they've learned, recognizing connections between disciplines and generating new questions that may in fact be open problems. Put more simply, they can simultaneously cultivate curiosity and mastery in the subject.

Patience. Patience and kindness comprise the main themes by which I aim to combat fear in the classroom setting. Patience bears an onslaught of questions, does not fear recapitulating introductory or remedial skills, and gives space to many mistakes before finding the right approach. In my role as a teaching assistant, I frequently see two types of students who need a patient presence: students afraid of poor grades and students afraid of making a mistake. Students who show rampant concern for grades tend to approach my office hours with a long list of questions relating to specific problems. By taking all questions in turn and taking the time to refer back to existing material, I've seen student fears become more subdued, and they become stronger students by the end of the course.

Students afraid of making a mistake tend to require a more direct approach during class in my experience. In problem solving sessions, they are the students who seem to stare at the page, making no progress, and upon gentle prompting will say, "I don't know what to do" or "I don't know where to start." Here, the patient approach takes the time to ask the student questions about what was confusing so far, or what they know about the problem. Patience short-circuits the cycle of trying the same ideas mentally over and over and allows for the student to start constructing the beginnings of an answer. Once again, I've seen students end the semester much more strongly by providing the time and attention needed to get over the initial hurdles to solving a problem. Two of my students encapsulated my patient approach thusly, "He could always answer my questions and was receptive to them no matter how many there were," and, "I also really like how he lets us attempt a bit and then give lil [sic] hints here and there till we're headed in the right direction."

As I move into a primary instructor role for a large course, I recognize that some of my typical approaches are not scalable – they require more time than I have to offer in order to approach every student the way I would with the few who attended my office hours as a teaching assistant. As such, my focus is on constructing more sustainable systems that manage the needs of most students, allowing me to direct specific

focus to students who need the most help. In particular, tools like Piazza are invaluable. Many questions in an introductory course can be answered accurately by fellow students (which helps those students refine their own understanding) or teaching assistants, which permits me the time to be patient with students with deeper problems. Additionally, I'm experimenting with adding shorter, appointment-based office hours to allow me to focus on a single student and have them know I have specific time for them.

Kindness. In a similar vein, kindness is needed for students who are afraid of ridicule, judgment, or rejection. I have been exceptionally privileged to only have rare brushes with harsh or judgmental authority figures, but I know many students are not so fortunate – unfortunately, some areas of UT seem to have a reputation for harsh, exacting teaching assistants in particular. A student of mine from Fall 2019 described their feelings, “Evan has been a big help within the course and never made me feel intimidated or belittled me when I asked questions. I wish more of the TAs were like him!” Refraining from judging students for falling behind, asking off-the-wall questions, or repeated mistakes again relieves the pressure and allows the student the freedom to try, to ask, and to learn. Students are under enough stress as it is just to learn the material; to further punish them by responding negatively to a request for help is nothing short of cruel, but is all too common. Even simple changes – such as my own high school statistics teacher’s practice of grading in purple (not red) ink – can be enough of a small gesture of kindness to alleviate some element of fear of ridicule to again allow students to redirect their efforts to the material or to grander learning objectives.

A kind approach also emphasizes the value of the individual, and seeks to understand students beyond the limits of being one pupil among many. Recognizing students, making allowances where possible, or at least expressing an understanding of difficulties is a goad that wards off fear before it materializes. Establishing an environment where a student feels known and respected aids students to resist adversities, knowing they have support. In an unkind environment, students have no need to communicate to instructors about external factors they may be facing, for fear of retaliation or even for fear of being dismissed outright. A spring 2020 student wrote, “Evan clearly cares about the well-being of his students. For me personally, he went above and beyond to accommodate me when I got super sick and helped me make sure my course grade was not negatively impacted.” An unkind approach responds to a sick student by asking for proof and providing minimal opportunities for make-up work. A kind approach allows some benefit of the doubt, works with the student to develop a plan to get back on track, and offers support and compassion. Sure, students may try to take advantage of kindness, but – assuming no major breach of academic integrity takes place – if the students use that extra element of flexibility to actually learn the material and grow as a learner, I would rather that than an inflexible, harsh, cold environment that snuffs out any hope of the student choosing a better path. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a simple student comment reflected my approach well, “[Evan] understands the needs of every individual.”

A student from summer 2019 left me some glowing feedback that I think showcases much of what I try to do for my students:

“Really prepared, organized, and on top of It. Patient and would explain course material and confusing test questions after exams really well. Always going from group to group during Lab, helping everybody. Very attentive and responsive. SUPER helpful for the class project. I would always feel like at the end of Class, there would be a really long Line to talk to Him but He just managed [to] get everyone taken care of in a fast, efficient manner but not like "hurried". I just feel like He played a significant role in this being a good course and I feel like I would [have] felt the impact of a bad T.A. (or Not as Good T.A.) in a summer course as short and fast as this one.”