

Question 7:
What are some ways in which instructors can bolster their credibility in the classroom?

“The establishment of credibility with one’s students I believe starts the first day of class. Whether my students are 14 or 40, in high school or college, they really need to believe that their teacher knows far more about the subject matter than they do. When I begin a class, I first introduce myself and tell the students about my background in speech/communication. Shortly after that I pass out lined note cards and ask the students to write their names on the top line followed by their e-mail or phone contact numbers.

In the basic oral communication or public speaking course I then ask them to write on the card a few sentences as to why they signed up for this class--was it a requirement, a recommendation from a friend or family member or a skill personally desired? I point out that regardless of why, they have actually started the class and accepted the challenge, so I next ask each to write what he or she wants to get out of this course. I ask them above all ‘to be honest about what you write.’ I say, you may write things like: ‘I hate the whole idea and hope I just pass.’ ‘I want to be able to run for a student government office and not be scared to death.’ ‘I think it will help me on my job.’ ‘I don’t want to be embarrassed or scared when speaking in front of a group.’ Almost nobody says, ‘I want to polish my speaking skills.’

I collect the cards and tell the students that I will not identify the writers, but I want them to know what others have written. Then I read the statements about what they each hope to gain. In my many years of teaching such a beginning class, the comments have been much the same. Each student will recognize his/her own comments, and will note the universality of comments regarding personal fears given by almost all of them. If I find that any one of them feels this will be a waste of time, I tell him/her to be sure to see me after class, and we will discuss if the individual is skilled enough for a more advanced communication class.

Then I tell the whole class that there are a few basics they must accept. The most important one is that I am the expert here, and that public speaking is not the same as just talking. I tell them ‘I am an EXPERT in this area....not all areas.’ I usually say something like, ‘While driving down the road, if you see me parked along the side looking down under the open hood on my car, please stop if you can help me. I know nothing about the mechanics of automobiles, and I will appreciate your help.’ Then I tell them if they conscientiously do every required assignment as directed by me, I will guarantee that they will be successful. If they decide they know better and prepare assignments in a different manner, I will guarantee nothing.

In more than thirty-eight years of teaching, I haven’t lost a student yet.”

Natalie Weber, Homestead High School (Cupertino, CA)
2014 Marcella E. Oberle Award for Outstanding Teaching in Grades K-12

“Credibility in the classroom is important, and is often more easily lost than gained. When I first started teaching, I bought a tweed blazer with leather patches; as a younger teacher, I worried that I would not be taken seriously unless I looked and acted the part: formal and decisive in most every situation. However, as all teachers discover, today’s young adults prioritize authenticity in their interactions. Be authentic in the classroom, and students will respond with attention. Part of authenticity also includes not creating a false façade about personality or lifestyle. If you don’t know the answer to the question or haven’t settled on an opinion, let the students know--and then start a conversation where you demonstrate a critical approach to the topic at hand. If you don’t feel ‘cool,’ embrace it--when else in history have obsessions with things like Harry Potter and Pokemon been considered an interpersonal asset?”

Jonathan M. Bowman, University of San Diego
2014 Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching in Higher Education

“My initial answer to this question focused on my years of active involvement in both ECA and NCA, and how what I learn from these organizations is invaluable to my teaching. When I return from conventions and share new ideas with them, my enthusiasm can be infectious. Not only do I look credible, I remind them that there are always opportunities to learn and grow.

And then I considered how in class I discuss the various professional activities that I engage in; mediation in the courts, presenting for community groups, leadership roles that I take on, textbook reviews . . . all of these remind them that I am firmly in touch with the discipline and that the application of communication studies in the ‘real world’ happens every day.

But then a colleague pointed out that what has always been most important to me is practicing what I preach. Modeling effective communication skills, illustrating the value of these principles, showing up at work and in my community and being a genuine good steward of communication. That’s what makes me credible in and out of the classroom.”

Nancy Willets, Cape Cod Community College
2014 Michael and Suzanne Osborn Community College Outstanding Educator Award

“Probably the best way to bolster your credibility is not to worry about your credibility. Students can ‘read’ insecure teachers the first time they meet them. Okay, so you’re still worried. What can you do? First, if you’re close in age to your students, dress more formally and keep some distance. Second, remember you are on stage both inside and outside the classroom. You really don’t want your students to encounter you at awkward moments. Third, demonstrate your credibility by your depth of knowledge. Have fascinating and relevant examples. Reference (without overdoing it) the research you draw from for your lectures. Don’t get too theoretical or research driven. Talk about the research without going into minor details. Give students the headlines and the so-what of the research. Fourth, stop trying to impress people with titles. Stop acting like you know everything. Don’t hold grudges. Be open to discovering things from your students.

And, finally come to like and enjoy your students. They are generally smart, engaging people who want to learn.”

John A. Daly, University of Texas
2002 Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching in Higher Education

“As communication educators, we know that credibility can be based on one’s educational background, experiences, personality or trustworthiness. I don’t think one needs to demonstrate their credibility by listing their publications or their achievements in the field. I believe that one’s credibility in the classroom comes simply from someone’s ability to be well-prepared for each class, engage students, be respectful of students and their opinions and to be someone they can trust—someone who they know has their best interest at heart, who wants to be there with them and who will help them every step of the way.”

Sara Chudnovsky Weintraub, Regis College
2014 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award

“Students typically perceive their instructors as having expertise, but you can totally blow this by being unorganized and inarticulate. Leading class in an organized and clear fashion will convince students you *earned* your PhD and you know what you’re talking about.

Trustworthiness and caring are where most instructors fall short in students’ eyes. It takes more than honesty to be perceived as trustworthy. You have to do what you promise. You have to be accountable and demonstrate integrity. You have to do the right thing even when it’s hard and unpleasant. Fairness and just grading practices are important. Establish clear guidelines and use grading rubrics to insure that all students are held to the same standards. Students will accept high standards if they perceive fairness.

Caring may be the most important element of teacher credibility. If students perceive you as only caring about yourself, they won’t trust you and will have little motivation to cooperate with you. To communicate caring, listen to what students say. Be responsive. Being responsive does not mean agreeing or being easy. It means seeking understanding. If a student makes a request, seeking understanding may or may not influence your answer, but you will have demonstrated caring and concern, which will go a long way in building your credibility. Take every opportunity to show students that you care about their learning. This is your reason for being there.”

Ann Bainbridge Frymier, Miami University
2007 ECA Donald H. Ecroyd & Caroline Drummond Ecroyd Teaching Excellence Award
