



Commentaries

Ensemble Class: Reframing Student Evaluations of Teaching Through a Narrative Approach

Britt Threatt¹ and Stacey Lawrence²

¹ English, Sewanee, The University Of The South

² Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, Brown University

Abstract

In this commentary, we put narrative theory in conversation with teaching strategies to suggest an intervention to reduce bias in student evaluations of teaching (SETs). SETs are often sites of student bias and frustration that disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) faculty. Through a teaching framework we term “the Ensemble Class,” BIPOC faculty and faculty developers can help students think more complexly about courses, their presence as learners, and professors’ roles, resulting in reviews less likely to be impacted by implicit bias. The Ensemble Class integrates a narrative approach with evidence-based practices to offer a dynamic framework for understanding the classroom as a nexus of stories that can either compete with or complement the ultimate goal of learning. In doing so, we hope to offer a model of teaching that shifts the trajectory of students’ teaching evaluations.

Keywords: BIPOC faculty, ensemble, narrative theory, student evaluations of teaching, tenure, and promotion

Faculty and students are at odds. It is a story heard across American higher education and one that often adheres to common Western story structures: hero narratives. Each party fancies itself the hero of their story while the other is cast as the archenemy. In this commentary, we put narrative theory in conversation with teaching strategies to suggest the Ensemble Class, a framework designed to reduce bias in student evaluations of teaching (SETs).

SETs are, in effect, students’ stories of how they *felt* about the learning process, which is another way of saying the evaluations are retellings of students’ felt sense of heroism or tragic defeat. Each student sees themselves as the hero who deserves to conquer all; the evaluations are therefore representations of their reaction to the course content, assignments, grades, and the instructor as obstacles—or even monsters to be slain, in their hero narrative—depending on how challenging or aberrant the student found these elements in their journey towards their goals. The determination of aberrance is where bias usually enters. While this is not every student’s perception of faculty, research shows Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) faculty typically receive lower SET scores, which may be influenced by a number of factors: students’ background, course grade, and/or possible biases about the faculty member’s race, gender, physical attributes, language background, and other personal attributes (Chávez & Mitchell, 2020; Curran,

Britt Threatt; Stacey Lawrence

The authors have no competing interests to declare. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stacey Lawrence, stacey_lawrence@brown.edu

2020; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022; Radchenko, 2020). In addition, BIPOC faculty also encounter greater challenges in receiving student respect, another metric of SETs. Because of the outsized role SETs often play in tenure and promotion decisions, BIPOC faculty subsequently face an additional barrier to attaining tenure. SETs, then, can undermine BIPOC faculty's competence and cause anxiety about how students' negative biases may manifest both in class and in evaluations (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2017; Matthew, 2016; Niemann et al., 2020; Pittman, 2021). These are the *faculty's* obstacles, their monsters. From the faculty perspective, *they* are the hero and deserve to conquer all—earning the spoils of strong SETs and, subsequently, tenure. While the hero narrative is a familiar way to view the story of the semester, it fosters a combative relationship between students and faculty where one must be the hero and anyone else must be a villain.

Our proposed alternative to the hero narrative is an Ensemble Cast, in which a group of central, interconnected characters contribute to the narrative, instead of a single protagonist (Brody, 2018). This teaching approach equips BIPOC faculty to debunk the individualistic impulse of hero narratives by offering a cooperative classroom paradigm. The Ensemble Class integrates a narrative approach with reflective, evidence-based practices to offer a dynamic framework for understanding the classroom as a nexus of stories that can either compete with or complement the ultimate goal of learning. Through the Ensemble Class, students' stories are anchored in the transformative process of learning. Using the traditional three-act story structure, this framework offers professors and educational developers' insight into the high-stakes periods of the semester when students' stories are most likely to be hijacked by stressors and students become more likely to use traditional narratives and biases to make sense of their experience.

Entering the Ensemble: How It Works

Act I occurs during the first three weeks of the semester, a typical orientation period. Here, faculty and students bring in assumptions about one another and what teaching and learning should look like in the course. At this point, faculty can introduce the Ensemble Class approach and invite students to think more complexly about their own presence in the course as well as the professor's role. For example, Sampaio suggested prompting students to record *their* learning expectations for the semester (Sampaio, 2006). This prompt presents the initial challenge that prepares students for the critically reflective work of the class, not just content and concepts, but conceptions of what learning looks and feels like. It also begins to guide students into investigating the very implicit biases that can misshape the stories of SETs.

Act II begins when the first assignment is submitted, graded, and returned. Here, each member of the ensemble is learning new cognitive and affective skills and, as the midterm approaches, everyone's anxiety may be heightened. Throughout this act, students may resist or question their faculty member's pedagogical choices, such as questioning why the professor is implementing active learning or how the instructor chooses to assess student learning (Seidel & Tanner, 2013). This tension is exacerbated for women faculty of color (Pittman, 2010). In the Ensemble Class, faculty can encourage students to return to the reflective prompt of Act I and they can remind students that they are not the enemy. Rather, faculty may instead encourage students to take ownership of the learning process, which includes productive struggle. At this point, the ensemble might seek support from allies, such as other members of the ensemble (peer study groups, attending office hours, etc.), and actors external to the ensemble such as the campus writing center, counseling services, departmental colleagues, and the teaching and learning center.

The semester culminates in Act III, when the ensemble integrates their experiences in Acts I and II into a new paradigm as they complete the final assignments for the course. As the semester closes, students

may believe they deserve a better grade. Women faculty of color are disproportionately pressured to make grade changes to favor the students' narrative in the course (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Pittman, 2010). However, as Fink (2013) noted, "[f]or learning to occur, there has to be some kind of change in the learner. No change, no learning" (p. 34). In the ensemble, the transformation occurs as students' work to concretize their new outlook on learning, and faculty encourage them to reflect on how they have examined their assumptions about learning over the course of the semester. While they may still harbor initial biases and resistance, they are nevertheless interrogating these assumptions with more rigor and regularity. This keeps the focus on student progress and on the process of learning, not grades.

The Ensemble Class is a framework that may reduce bias in SETs, especially for BIPOC faculty. By taking this approach, faculty and students begin the semester by bringing awareness to the expectations and assumptions they bring into the learning environment. Together, they work through resistance and reflect on the learning process throughout the semester, shifting from individuals to an ensemble. Here, SETs become an epilogue of the semester, offering more holistically representative narratives of student learning and faculty teaching effectiveness.

References

- Brody, J. (2018). *Save the cat! Writes a novel: The last book on novel writing you'll ever need* (1st ed.). Ten Speed Press.
- Chávez, K., & Mitchell, K. M. W. (2020). Exploring bias in student evaluations: Gender, race, and ethnicity. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 53(2), 270–274. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519001744>
- Curran, S. J. (2020). Pitfalls in using small number statistics in teaching evaluations: A case study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(3), 419–430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1664396>
- Fink, L. D. (2013). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Gutierrez y Muhs, G., Niemann, Y. F., Gonzalez, C. G., & Harris, A. P. (Eds.) (2012). *Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia* (1st ed.). University Press.
- Harris, M., Sellers, S. L., Clerge, O., & Gooding, F. W. (2017). *Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy*. Rowman & Littlefield. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781475825176/Stories-from-the-Front-of-the-Room-How-Higher-Education-Faculty-of-Color-Overcome-Challenges-and-Thrive-in-the-Academy>
- Kreitzer, R. J., & Sweet-Cushman, J. (2022). Evaluating student evaluations of teaching: A review of measurement and equity bias in sets and recommendations for ethical reform. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 20(1), 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-021-09400-w>
- Matthew, P. A. (2016). *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the hidden truths of tenure* (1st ed.). The University of North Carolina Press.
- Niemann, Y. F., Gutiérrez y Muhs, G., & Gonzalez, C. G. (2020). *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia*. Utah State University Press.
- Pittman, C. T. (2010). Race and gender oppression in the classroom: the experiences of women faculty of color with white male students. *Teaching Sociology*, 38(3), 183–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X10370120>
- Pittman, C. T. (2021, April 15). *The overlooked minefield*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/04/16/teaching-issues-can-be-among-biggest-obstacles-retaining-bipoc-women-faculty>

- Radchenko, N. (2020). Student evaluations of teaching: Unidimensionality, subjectivity, and biases. *Education Economics*, 28(6), 549–566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2020.1814997>
- Sampaio, A. (2006). Women of color teaching political science: examining the intersections of race, gender, and course material in the classroom. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(4), 917–922. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506061191>
- Seidel, S. B., & Tanner, K. D. (2013). “What if students revolt?”—Considering student resistance: origins, options, and opportunities for investigation. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 12(4), 586–595. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe-13-09-0190>