This paper draws from my experience in teaching introductory political science courses for the last fifteen years. Although I am not a faculty developer or an expert in instructional development, I am, in the words of Stephen Brookfield (1995), a “critically reflective teacher” and in that spirit I share my experience in teaching first-year courses in order to accomplish three goals. First, I want to introduce the 2x2 matrix that I have developed in categorizing first-year students based on what I consider to be two predictors for academic success: talent and motivation. I developed this matrix in recognition of the multiple demands placed on even the most committed and dedicated teachers in the professoriate. Second, I want to discuss the sorts of evaluative mechanisms in my introductory political science courses that I use in order to nurture talent or foster motivation in my students. These may be instructive for others teaching at the first-year level because I have met with some success through the years. Finally, I want to bring out the limitations of my matrix that, in reflecting further, are underpinned by some unstated, if not problematic, assumptions about students and the necessity to find a new or different paradigm to deal with the challenges of teaching first-year courses. In the end, it was the privilege of being at a retreat with award-winning teachers from throughout Atlantic Canada that helped me to understand the importance of carefully choosing my words and how it is that I “categorize” my students.

Introduction

Teaching first-year courses is a recognizable challenge for the newly-hired to the most seasoned university professors, leading many faculty members to prefer not to teach at the first-year level as part of their course offerings for any given year. In departments like mine, there is an unwritten understanding that every full-time faculty member must teach an introductory level course at least once in a three-year cycle. Although departments can likely hire part-time faculty to teach first-year courses, many do not primarily because these courses are oftentimes not only a student’s first exposure to the discipline, but also a source for future majors. Indeed, the importance of teaching first-year courses is
arguably acknowledged by the *Maclean’s* annual ranking of universities which uses the number of first-year courses taught by tenured faculty as one of its measures for the best post-secondary education in Canada.

This paper draws from my experience in teaching introductory political science courses for the last fifteen years where classes have ranged around 60 students on average. The political science program at my university is strictly at the undergraduate level so I do not have teaching assistants to aid me in marking the work of my students. Although I am not a faculty developer or an expert in instructional development, I am, in the words of Stephen Brookfield (1995), a “critically reflective teacher” and in that spirit I share my experience in teaching first-year courses in order to accomplish three goals. First, I want to introduce the 2x2 matrix that I have developed in categorizing first-year students based on what I consider to be two predictors for academic success: talent and motivation. I developed this matrix in recognition of the multiple demands placed on even the most committed and dedicated teachers in the professoriate. Second, I want to discuss the sorts of evaluative mechanisms in my introductory political science courses that I use in order to nurture talent or foster motivation in my students. These may be instructive for others teaching at the first-year level because I have met with some success through the years. Finally, I want to bring out the limitations of my matrix that, in reflecting further, are underpinned by some unstated, if not problematic, assumptions about students and the necessity to find a new or different paradigm to deal with the challenges of teaching first-year courses. In the end, it was the privilege of being at a retreat with award-winning teachers from throughout Atlantic Canada that helped me to understand the importance of carefully choosing my words and how it is that I “categorize” my students (Keeble, 2006).

The Necessity of a Matrix

The privileges of academic life are arguably offset by the stresses experienced by faculty members not only as they strive for tenure and promotion, but also as they attempt to balance their research, teaching and service responsibilities throughout their career (Gmelch 1993). The two reasons are intricately linked because the three pillars of academia are not equally weighted in terms of
assessing academic success. Research productivity generally remains the prime measure of scholarship and, thus, merit in ensuring tenure and promotion in most universities although there are continuing encouraging signs that such a myopic view may be changing (Schmidt 2006). Although conventional university reward systems have not discouraged committed teachers from persisting in making students their priority, professors also remain active in both research and service. Balancing this troika of responsibilities is one of the fundamental challenges of academic life.

In addition, professors need to balance their professional and personal lives. The challenges of modern life have been characterized by the rise of two-career households, the increasing dual (and at times concurrent) demands of child and elderly care, and the absence or lack of family or community support as individuals move for paid work. Most employers recognize that worker productivity has a direct correlation to a stable family or personal life, and that maintaining a balance between work and family eliminates a key stressor in the workplace. Thus, the life of a teacher who is dedicated to her students must be placed in perspective: not only must she fulfill her research and service responsibilities, but she must also balance the demands of her academic and personal life.

That need for balance has certainly governed my life as an academic, and the very real constraints on my time have led me to articulate clearly the goals that I want to achieve in my classroom and apportion my time accordingly. I am a professor in the social sciences and humanities, and there is a very telling bumper sticker that recently brought home to me the undervaluing of a Bachelor of Arts degree. The sticker states the following: “B.Sc.: Why does it work?; B.Eng.: How does it work?; B.Comm.: How much will it cost?; BA: You want fries with that?” (see Appendix A). What amazes me is not simply that the society at large gets the joke, but also that for our students who graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree, this is a commentary about their job prospects after graduation. Moreover, for us as professors in the social sciences and humanities, this is a commentary that we have been unable or unsuccessful in transmitting even minimal skills to our students (after all, at least those with a B.Sc., B.Eng. or B.Comm. know how to ask a question without dropping the interrogative word). That is why one of my principal goals in teaching, particularly at the
first-year level, is to ensure that my students develop critical writing and verbal skills as opposed to simply memorizing definitions and repeating them back by rote. An Arts degree is indeed a “how to” degree, and if we succeed in what we do as teachers, our students will graduate knowing how to think critically and how to express such thoughts reasonably well both in written form and verbally. However, to meet this goal at the first-year level, professors need to devote extra attention to students, above and beyond the delivery of the course.

I developed my 2x2 matrix not only to make sense of the different types of students in my introductory courses, but also to develop specific evaluative strategies according to the type of student. Two factors underpinned the development of my matrix: first, as much as I want to give extra attention to all of my students, there are real constraints on my time, given the need to balance not only my teaching, research and service responsibilities, but also my academic and personal life; and second, there are arguably two predictors for academic success – talent and motivation – which, for example, I highlight when I write reference letters for students vying for scholarships or admission to graduate programs. Talented students are those who are reasonably capable and bright, and who often enter university with sound writing and verbal skills nurtured at the secondary school level. Motivated students are those who are diligent, industrious and determined and who often enter university with sound study and time management skills.

The matrix that I have developed stems from how these two traits intersect and this is how, generally speaking, I have categorized my students at the first-year level (see Appendix B). Arguably, my four groups of students are: (1) talented and motivated; (2) talented but unmotivated; (3) untalented but motivated; and (4) untalented and unmotivated. The first group of students – the talented and motivated – are such a pleasure to teach. They are the ones for whom we compete at the introductory level to major in our program, we encourage to go on to graduate school, and we feel thankful when they show up in our upper-level courses to take another course from us. This is a cohort that will naturally get our extra attention, if they need it, because these are the sorts of students who would flourish and succeed in any setting or course. The second group of students – the talented but unmotivated – are the ones who demonstrate that they are reasonably bright and capable, but they do not hand in
all of the assignments or take all of the exams. They also do not attend class regularly. We can tell from the assignments that they do hand in that they can be top-notch students but they do not seem to care about the course; they appear distracted; and they do not take responsibility for their own learning. They are unmotivated. In contrast, the third group of students – the untalented but motivated – are the ones who are hard-working and determined, attending classes faithfully, struggling through the course material and asking questions outside of the classroom. They pass in all of the assignments and take all of the exams, but their work is average at best. Both of these groups end up with our extra attention because their potential is obvious, either because they are reasonably capable or because they are reasonably hard-working.

Finally, the fourth group of students – the untalented and unmotivated – are those who rarely attend class. They do not do the readings; they do not hand in all of the assignments or take all of the exams; and if they do hand in work, they end up with a failing mark. These students often end up withdrawing, barely passing or failing the course. We can easily reason that these students do not want to be in university, and until they are ready to take their work seriously, they do not end up with any of our additional attention. In other words, this is a group of students whom, as teachers, we accept that we cannot reach because they appear not to have any potential to succeed in university.

**Examples of Evaluative Mechanisms**

Fostering skills in critical thinking is central to an undergraduate degree, particularly in the liberal arts. Critical thinking can only prosper in an atmosphere of active learning, and as documented in the instructional development literature, active learning is fostered through interactive lectures, structured discussions, small group discussions, “think, pair, share,” debates and other pedagogical tools to engage students, divided into small groups, in a classroom setting. Indeed, most presentations in teaching conferences is about how to improve our teaching by better engaging students in various, often group-based activities because such activities typically result in both the acquisition of critical skills and the creation of a dynamic, motivating environment for students. In other words, fostering active learning is a minimum
requirement for ensuring talented, motivated students, and providing this kind of atmosphere is what I consider to be the normal delivery of a course. Active learning is crucial at the first-year level, and it is a class-by-class commitment that I offer to all of my students.

My grouping of students is to aid me in apportioning additional time to focus on improving their skills (talent) or their motivation. Accordingly, I have developed evaluative mechanisms focusing on two groups of students: the talented but unmotivated, and the untalented but motivated. The talented and motivated will always capture my attention and they will prosper with or without extra effort from me. I will provide two examples of evaluative mechanisms which I have used in my introductory political science courses.

First, it has become a common complaint on many university campuses that students do not have minimum writing skills to succeed in university and I have found this to be the case with my untalented but motivated group of students. Accordingly, I have developed a series of four writing assignments in my introductory political science course, based on formative evaluation, which has allowed me to improve the writing skills of my students. These writing assignments are about 350-500 words dealing with topical issues and they must be properly referenced, usually from newspaper or newsmagazine articles. I assign two in the first semester and two in the second semester, and the grade that the student receives is the grade for the fourth writing assignment. I provide detailed feedback and I expect that students will learn from, and address, my comments in subsequent assignments. For example, in the 2005-06 academic year, my introductory political science students wrote on issues of globalization, differing perspectives on prostitution, the results of the 2006 federal election, and the extension of the deployment of Canadian troops in Afghanistan. I have provided an example of the sort of feedback that I provide to students (see Appendix C), and in the example provided, the student received an “A-” for all of the writing assignments.

Second, it is commonly understood that students tend to be more motivated to learn if they see the relevance of course material to their lives. As I state outright in my syllabus, I empower my students to define the relevance to them of course material by requiring them to make an 8-10 minute, structured, rehearsed, verbal
presentation to the class. I expect them to have read the course material for the topic for which they have signed up and then to have spent some time reflecting on the ideas, concepts or issues found in the material, defining for themselves the relevance of the material. I tell them that they cannot be wrong in what they have defined as the relevance of the course material, only ill-prepared. I have found that this motivates students to become engaged because it provides them a platform to talk about issues or topics that they consider important, or to share experiences that they have found worthwhile. I have provided an example of the kind of feedback that I give to presentations (see Appendix D). In this case, the student presented on his experience in a Model Commonwealth forum where his point of departure from the course was the topic of international organizations, principally the sorts in which Canada has been involved.

These two sorts of evaluative mechanisms that I have instituted in my introductory political science course are undertaken on an individual basis to improve skills (talent) or address motivation. They may appear to be time-intensive in terms of the provision of written feedback, but in reality because they are targeted to specific groups of students, I provide more or less detailed feedback depending on the needs of the students. For example, the group of talented and motivated students do not need detailed written feedback and the extra time that I allot to them is often spent advising or counseling, or engaging in higher-order intellectual discussions in my office. These students already have sound written (and verbal) skills and they are highly motivated.

The Fourth Group and being a Critically Reflective Teacher

The fourth group of students in my matrix – the untalented and unmotivated – receive little, if any, extra attention from me. Because I am a believer in individual responsibility, these are the sorts of students whom I see as not taking responsibility for their own learning. If talk around the water cooler or in the faculty lounge is any indication, many professors have encountered, and continue to encounter, this group of students in their classroom. This group is a source of frustration, if not outright hostility, by my colleagues. Like me, they have asked: “Why are they here?” Compound that frustration with the kinds of time constraints that faculty members face, as I described earlier, and it is no
surprise that professors feel that their time is being wasted by this group of students. However, this kind of thinking is highly problematic. We begin to question admission standards of our institutions and lament the passing of exclusivity in post-secondary education. In so doing, we undermine in some crucial ways the centrality of students – and thus of teaching – in our institutions because we see some students as more deserving of our time than others.

This is exactly what happened to me after I attended the Association of Atlantic Universities’ (AAU) retreat for teaching award winners on Friday, October 27, 2006 at Memorial University in St. John’s which had immediately preceded the AAU Teaching Showcase on Saturday, October 28. I realized that my 2x2 matrix was about me as a teacher, and thus about “getting our attention in first-year courses,” as opposed to being about my students. Since then I have done more research on the first-year experience as opposed to teaching first-year courses, and it has helped me to appreciate not only the substantive challenges faced by the millennial generation, but also the necessity to address those challenges in a holistic way and from an institutional viewpoint. If universities are indeed serious about the retention of students, then first-year success is not, and cannot be, the sole responsibility of teachers in the classroom. The fourth group which I categorized as untalented and unmotivated may likely be neither, or simply one or the other, which means that they belong to one of the first three groups that I outlined in my matrix. The challenge is to ensure that these students are engaged, if not in a specific classroom like mine, then in someone else’s, but this requires an environment that values all students. It is clear to me that my matrix in categorizing some students as less deserving than others only serves to undermine that most fundamental value.

References


Keeble, E. (2006, Fall). Three hours in St. John’s, discovering bonds. Teaching and Learning at Saint Mary’s, 17(1), 5.

### Appendix A

**Bumper Sticker**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.Sc.</td>
<td>Why does it work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Eng.</td>
<td>How does it work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Comm.</td>
<td>How much will it cost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>You want fries with that?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B
Matrix of Student Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talented but Unmotivated</td>
<td>Talented and Motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untalented and Unmotivated</td>
<td>Untalented but Motivated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix C
Feedback on Writing Assignments

**POLI 1200: WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (Keeble) – FEEDBACK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Feedback |

| #1 Globalization | Good. You have good writing skills, but watch your use of punctuation. Proofread; several small obvious errors. Watch singular/plural agreement. Avoid colloquialisms like “the states” for the United States. Your use of parenthetical notes is almost correct; get the correct format. Your understanding of economic globalization needs refinement. Make the link in your argument to globalization more explicit: local companies are vulnerable to the ups and downs of economies abroad, particularly that of the United States. | C+/B- |
| #2 Prostitution | Very good. You articulate some of the points in terms of whether prostitution is a matter of choice or one of exploitation. However, I think you mean “ideologies” rather than “idealists.” Watch for sentence fragments – you wrote two, both beginning with “Although.” Also, watch paragraph structure. Avoid contractions in academic writing. You have notes, but you did not include any references. Was this an oversight? Still, an improvement over your first assignment. Keep it up. | B |
| #3 Election | Nice work. Good analysis. You have addressed past feedback points. Well done. Now work on capitalization rules (why do you capitalize “government”?!) and especially the possessive form (you absolutely must understand the difference between voter, voters, voter’s and voters’)! Take this one word as an example and learn the differences. | B+ |
| #4 Afghanistan | Wonderful. You nicely bring out the major points of controversy on the Afghanistan issue. You continue to show improvement in your writing – just a few relatively minor observations as marked. You had the possessive form totally correct until “ears,” which I assume was a typo? A real improvement from your first writing assignment to this one. I am very proud of your work as it demonstrated your careful attention to improving your writing, thus leading to clarity in your arguments. Great job. | A- |
Appendix D
E-mail Response to Student’s Presentation

What a delightful presentation on the Commonwealth, a descriptive venture that then encapsulated a personal aspect. I am a real believer in forums that directly engage students, and your participation in the exercise in Ottawa clearly aided your learning (and, it seems to me, your support) of the Commonwealth.

If your interest in the Commonwealth continues, you ought to explore more deeply the Canadian connection and how this became a principal forum for the anti-apartheid actions, statements, etc (even to the point of breaking with the UK) of former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

In addition, there is never any need to be apologetic when you make a presentation, particularly one that is required in the university classroom. Part of your job is to demonstrate the relevance of your topic to your audience, and you organized your pictures well to bring out how this was both educational and a lot of fun – which leads to a love of learning.

Wonderful job. Grade: 8/8

EK