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Review article

## Dealing with Anxiety about Teaching

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**Abstract.** This article describes the prevalence of teachers' anxiety in the classroom, the problems that teaching anxiety can cause, and a set of myths about teachers and teaching that can make teaching anxiety worse. It also offers suggestions for combatting these myths in ways that make teaching more comfortable and productive for both students and teachers.

**Keywords:** Anxiety; Teaching; Cognitive restructuring

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### Introduction

Classroom teaching, by definition, whether in-person or synchronously online involves public speaking, an activity that for many people, including teachers, creates anxiety that can range from slight nervousness to near-panic (Aydin, 2021; Cheek, 2022; Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Fish & Fraser, 2001; Lang, 2008; Pull, 2012). A survey of psychology professors revealed that 87 percent of respondents reported experiencing some degree of anxiety associated with teaching, and 28 percent described their anxiety as very to extremely severe. In other words, many professors suffer anxiety in the classroom that is severe enough to disrupt their teaching performance, even after years of experience. Surveys of faculty in other disciplines have yielded similar results (e.g., Ameen et al., 2002; Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016; Houlihan et al., 2009; Musgrove et al., 2021; Pelton, 2014; Roach, 2009) and suggest that the effects of prolonged anxiety about teaching (as well as other sources of stress) can extend far beyond the classroom. It can cause or amplify (a) psychophysiological symptoms such as ulcers, colitis, cardiac arrhythmia, headache, chronic pain, and hypertension, (b) psychological problems including depression, irritability, hopelessness, cynicism, lack of confidence, and indecisiveness, and (c) behavioral consequences such as alcohol or drug abuse, breakdown of professional and family relationships, sexual dysfunction, absenteeism, and disengagement from teaching, sometime eventually leading to what is known in the United States as "teacher burnout" syndrome.

## Methodology and Discussion

### Signs of Teaching Anxiety

Some signs of teaching anxiety, such as tremors, sweating or a quavering voice, are obviously fear-related, but others take the form of behaviors that students may interpret as evidence of incompetence, laziness, aggressiveness, or disinterest. Here are some examples:

1. *Confused thinking*, especially when responding to students' questions. As anxiety interferes with access to the information they need to answer a question, some teachers end up giving long, rambling, confused, and confusing answers. For others, anxiety might motivate hostile, sarcastic, or condescending responses that by chance or by design, discourage student questions.

2. *Avoidance tactics*. Some teachers who are uncomfortable with students may show it by being "too busy" to talk to students after class, missing scheduled appointments, or restricting communication to texts or email. If they are frightened when making classroom presentations, they might present numerous videos, invite several guest speakers, assign lots of student presentations, and do whatever else they can think of to minimize the need to give lectures. They may be particularly attracted to setting up flipped classrooms and the other active learning methods that focus class time on students rather than teachers (see Bernstein, 2018).

3. *Poorly organized or overly organized lectures*. For some teachers, the mere thought of facing the next class is so threatening that they avoid planning their lectures until the last minute, if at all. This can result in class sessions that are uncomfortable for the teacher and boring for the students. Other teachers seek to deal with their anxiety by preparing meticulously detailed lecture notes that they deliver like a speech to students who do little more than take dictation.

4. *Development of overly rigid or overly lenient relationships with students*. Some teachers' anxiety focuses on the possibility that dissatisfied students will complain about their teaching or challenge their authority. This is of particular concern among teachers in the United States and other countries where students tend to be easily offended (see Bernstein, 2025). These teachers may either try to intimidate students into silence or adopt grading practices and other policies that are so lenient that students will have no grounds for complaint. Those in the first category may adopt an authoritarian teaching style that includes creating aggressively worded syllabi featuring unreasonably strict and punitive rules and regulations (Bernstein, 2013). We know of one psychology teacher who backed up his ban on the recording of his lectures with the threat of prosecution under the privacy protection provisions in his state's criminal code. At the other extreme are anxious teachers who adopt a permissive teaching style designed to curry favor with their students. Their exams are easy, their course requirements are flexible (they may allow students to vote on how many exams to have), they will raise a student's score or grade at the first sign of complaint without regard for rules about capricious grading, and they might even reveal exam questions ahead of time in response to students' badgering.

5. *The appearance of «Jekyll and Hyde» personality*. Anxiety about teaching can cause a person who is normally calm, relaxed, and gracious in most situations to become defensive, hostile, and rigid in class. Part of this transformation might even include paranoid thinking; we have heard otherwise level-headed, rational professors expressing concerns that students are out to make them look foolish.

## Ten Scary Myths about Teaching

If you have been experiencing anxiety about your own teaching or in anticipation of teaching for the first time, it might help to work on your relaxation skills (e.g., Hazlett-Stevens & Bernstein, 2022), but remember, too, that what you tell yourself about teaching – and about yourself as a teacher – can have a significant effect on your comfort level. Even if you are well prepared for class, you might still be upset by thoughts about not really being ready to teach, about not knowing enough about your subject to be teaching it, about being a fraud or a phony, and the like. These irrational, self-defeating thoughts can interfere with effective teaching not only by distracting you during class but also by raising your anxiety enough to disrupt your performance (Ellis & MacLaren, 2005).

I know how frightening such thoughts can be because I suffered with these self-doubts myself. In fact, few people who care about effective teaching can face their first class without wondering how it can be that they are really the teacher! This “imposter syndrome” (Clance & Imes, 1978), combined with fear of rejection and other factors, can lead to burnout in experienced teachers as well as novices, and though these feelings are common, they are seldom revealed or discussed (Jaremka et al., 2020). That is a shame because disclosing one’s fears can be a crucial first step toward finding effective ways of dealing with them, whether it be through self-help readings, mentoring, psychotherapy, or other means. So consider talking to trusted people about whatever teaching-related anxiety you may have, especially if you think it is undermining your effectiveness as a teacher, or is likely to do so once you start teaching. After all, your students want and need you to be at your best (Cavanagh, 2023).

If you are a new teacher, remember that, like your teaching skills, your self-confidence will grow with experience, especially if you can learn to think realistically and rationally about your role as a teacher. The best way to keep yourself calm in the classroom, whether things are going well or not, is to recognize – and be ready to counter – the following ten myths about teaching that tend to make it far more stressful and anxiety-provoking than it has to be.

1. *I should always stay in the «teacher» role while I am teaching, even if it means suppressing my real self.* Trying to be emotionless, or unflappable, or detached, or to enact any other pattern of behavior that reflects not who you are, but what you think someone in the «teacher» role should do, places on you the added burden of being an actor as well as a teacher. So don’t try to be someone you are not, and don’t expect yourself to be superhuman. If a squirrel jumps in through an open classroom window (which actually happened to me), don’t try to ignore it. When funny or weird things happen in class, it is perfectly fine to be amused or astonished along with your students. In short, combating the “teacher role” myth is as easy as letting your own personality come through to your students. Many teachers don’t do that, though, because of the myth described next.

2. *If I come out of the «teacher» role, I will lose the respect of my students.* This myth is a variation on the more widely held dysfunctional belief that if you let someone get to know you, they will discover how inadequate you are. It also carries the presumption that students are against you and are constantly probing for weaknesses to attack. But most of your students want you to succeed and are ready to support you if you simply show them respect and make it

clear that you care about them and about your teaching. It will be easier to begin to reveal your real self in class if you can recognize the falsity of the next myth.

3. *I should never allow myself to appear uncertain or ignorant about certain information or to admit that I am wrong.* The truth is that no teacher can know everything there is to know about their discipline. Your students don't expect you to be omniscient, so why expect it of yourself? There is nothing wrong with letting your students know that, like them, you are a fallible human being. They won't mind your being imperfect, but they won't like it if you insist on posturing or making up information, or otherwise pretending to knowledge you do not have.

4. *My students must respect me because I am their teacher.* Many teachers expect respect from their students at all times, and they are upset by any hint of disrespect. In my opinion, these teachers' dismay, anger, and other negative reactions are a waste of emotional energy. Students should be respectful, but I know from long experience that not all of them are, at least not all the time. This fact of teaching life is not a pleasant one, but getting upset about it is not likely to help you to deal with the few problem students you may encounter from time to time. Handling classroom incivilities is much easier and less stressful if you can remember not to take them personally. Stay calm, deal with the problem in class and perhaps in private after class, but don't jump to the conclusion that any disrespect from even one student is evidence that you are a bad teacher.

5. *My students should always be interested in what I have to say.* It would be ideal if all our students were interested in everything we say and do in every class, but this is not always the case. You yourself, like the rest of us, have probably allowed your attention drift during lectures or conference presentations (e.g., Wammes et al., 2016), so when you see a few of your students losing focus during class, it does not mean you are failing. Even if you see a lot of students losing focus during class, there is no need to panic. Recognize that the students' inattention indicates that it is time to ask the class a question or to start that demonstration or active learning exercise you had been planning. It might also serve as a reminder to review your lecture notes for this section of this class session to make it more interesting the next time around. You may also encounter students who, for some reason, remain disengaged from your course material no matter how well you present it. If their bored expressions or other signs of disinterest bother you, discuss the situation with them outside of class. Perhaps they are required to take your class to fulfill an unwelcome requirement or have something going on in their lives that distracts them in all their classes. In any case, remember that, sometimes, there is a mismatch between a student's goals and yours, and if this happens, there is no need to get upset about it or question your teaching ability.

6. *My students must learn everything I teach.* It would be ideal if all your students achieved high test scores and retained what they learned in your course for years to come. Unfortunately, not even the smartest and most motivated students will learn and remember everything you teach. And even if you were the best teacher in the world, some of your students will do better than others. Some will do poorly on tests and some will forget much, or even most, of the details of your carefully presented course material within days or weeks after the final exam (Khanna et al., 2013; Landrum & Gurung, 2013). In short, no matter how hard you work at organizing and presenting your courses and no matter how reliable and valid your quizzes and exams, some of your students might not do as well as you and they had hoped. This is unfortunate, but

you should recognize such outcomes are inevitable in some cases, and that they do not always or entirely reflect on your teaching ability. Sometimes, and to some extent, poor academic performance reflects students' lack of motivation or ability. If you have done all you can to teach well, to assist students who need help, and to evaluate their performance fairly, don't worry too much about the appearance of a normal (bell-shaped) grade distribution.

7. *Students are basically lazy, dull, unmotivated cheaters interested only in grades.* This is certainly true of some students, but teachers who behave in accordance with this myth – perhaps by assuming that no one will do their reading on time or that most students will download their term papers from the Internet or use AI to write them – are likely to create an adversarial classroom atmosphere that makes teaching unnecessarily stressful for everyone. You can eliminate this source of teaching stress by recognizing that most students do not fit this profile. Assume the best about your students and then deal with the problem cases as they identify themselves to you through their behavior.

8. *My class presentations should cover all the assigned readings in my course.* Teachers who are guided by this myth find themselves rushing through their material in a vain attempt to cover everything in all the students are supposed to read. The result can be a hectic classroom experience that provides neither enjoyment nor educational benefits for teachers or students. I believe that students should be expected to take some responsibility for independent learning, so don't feel guilty about not covering all the assigned material in class. Present a reasonable amount of material at a comprehensible pace and in enough depth to stimulate students' interest in reading the textbook for themselves and perhaps in taking additional courses in your field.

9. *This is my students' only class or at least their only important class.* Many professors overestimate the importance of their courses in students' lives, but your students have to fulfill reading and writing requirements in other courses, too. Keep this in mind when drawing up your required reading list, planning writing assignments, and the like. If students' lack of class preparation, missed deadlines, or requests for deadline extensions are a source of stress for you, perhaps a partial solution lies in asking yourself how realistic your expectations are. I am not in favor of making courses too easy or expecting only the minimum from students, but I don't think there is any point in adding to the stress of teaching by trying to do too much. In my view, you can make your teaching less stressful and ultimately more effective if you adopt ambitious but realistic goals.

10. *I am in competition with my teaching colleagues.* This myth might ultimately be the most anxiety-provoking of all. Taking a competitive approach to teaching and worrying about where you are in terms of relative teaching excellence, is not likely to be very productive either in terms of improving your teaching skills or minimizing teaching anxiety. In fact, a competitive attitude perpetuates anxiety by isolating you from the help you might need to teach better and to make teaching more enjoyable and satisfying. If you can reject the competition myth, you will find it far easier to take advantage of the many sources of teaching assistance and advice that are available to you in books, articles, mailgroups, and in consultation with your more experienced colleagues.

## Conclusion

In summary, teaching can be less stressful and more fun if you focus not only on what you put into your class presentations and how you organize your courses but also on being realistic about your teaching. Ease up on yourself and don't let yourself be governed by self-defeating myths that can make teaching seem to be such a frightening prospect.

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### **Оқыту туралы алаңдаушылықты жеңу**

**Андатпа.** Бұл мақалада мұғалімдердің сыныптағы мазасыздығының таралуы, мұғалімнің мазасыздығын тудыруы мүмкін мәселелер және мұғалімдердің мазасыздығын күшейтетін мұғалімдер мен оқыту туралы бірқатар мифтер қарастырылады. Мақалада сонымен қатар студенттер мен оқытушылар үшін оқытуды ыңғайлы және өнімді ету үшін осы мифтермен күресу бойынша ұсыныстар берілген.

**Түйін сөздер:** мазасыздық, оқыту, когнитивті қайта құрылымдау

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### **Преодоление тревоги по поводу преподавания**

**Аннотация.** В этой статье рассказывается о распространенности тревожности учителей в классе, о проблемах, которые может вызвать тревожность учителя, и о ряде мифов об учителях и преподавании, которые могут усугубить тревожность учителя. В статье также предлагаются

предложения по борьбе с этими мифами, которые сделают преподавание более комфортным и продуктивным как для студентов, так и для преподавателей.

**Ключевые слова:** тревожность; преподавание; когнитивная реструктуризация.

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