

# 18

---

## Classroom Roles of the Teacher

---

**Kathleen M. Galvin**  
*Northwestern University*

Teaching implies a multifaceted and changing relationship. The noun *teacher* seems to indicate a singular entity—a teacher is a person who performs the act of teaching—yet, the more time you spend in classrooms, the more you recognize the complexity of the teaching–learning process. Rather than a one-dimensional, linear process, teaching is a multidimensional, interactive process. Reflective teachers continually ask themselves “Who am I for these students in this classroom?”, “How are they impacting my life?”, and “By what means do students make sense of the knowledge and skills developed in this discipline?” Classroom roles provide one lens for examining the intricacies of the teaching–learning process.

Historically, roles have been conceived of as positions—a static view describing a series of expectations for an occupant of a given position, such as, teacher or student. Such expectations convey beliefs about how a role should be enacted no matter what the circumstances (Linton, 1945). According to this traditional view, the role teacher implies the performance of a list of behaviors, such as: (a) teachers come to class prepared, (b) teachers treat all students equally, and (c) teachers evaluate student performance.

Some role theorists (Homan, 1985; Timpson & Tobin, 1982) view the college classroom from a dramatist perspective, drawing parallels between acting and teaching, maintaining both exercise one’s capacity to learn, problem solve, and communicate. The dramatist metaphor represents

teachers as performers playing a part. Classic instructional literature describes teachers as managing multiple roles including supporter, evaluator, disciplinarian, expert, facilitator, socializing agent, formal authority, ego ideal, or person (Mann et al., 1970). These one-dimensional approaches overlook the effects that other parts of the instructional setting have on teacher performance.

More recently, roles have been viewed from an interactive perspective, emphasizing their emerging aspects and the behavioral regularities that develop out of social interaction (Millar, 1996). In this interpretation, roles serve to reduce anxiety that would arise from constantly choosing between alternative behaviors; they create an organizing structure for one's self and for social interactions, thereby reducing the need for constant negotiation. Classroom roles are viewed as repetitive patterns of behavior by which classroom members (teachers and students) fulfill classroom functions. This approach is congruent with the transactional nature of encounters experienced by teachers or students, a position that describes each party in an interaction as mutually involved. Such a view of classroom interaction implies that teachers and students are engaged in a constant mutual influence process with each simultaneously affecting how the other communicates. Millar (1996) argued this should be viewed as a dialogical process as "the teacher as well as the student must attend to the intentions and understandings of the other to sustain a teaching-learning interaction" (p. 161). Hart (1986) captured the essence of this process: "Teachers act. They act on people. And they are acted upon in return. This is the physics of educating" (p. 5).

In this chapter, I maintain that classroom roles of the teacher are dynamic, evolving, and unpredictable because they are intrinsically linked to, and dependent on, student roles within a defined context. In the following pages I explore this position through an examination of contextual issues, role development, role functions, and role conflict.

### CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

With each passing decade, the college or university instructor faces exponential change. Management educator Vaill (1996) used the term "permanent white water" to describe today's complex, turbulent, changing environment, arguing that we live in a world of conditions that are "regularly taking us all out of our comfort zones and asking things of us that we never imagined would be required" (p. 14). Therefore no universal consensus exists on normative expectations or enactments. Roles are no longer taken for granted or prescribed; rather they are negotiated and renegotiated

within a particular context such as the institution in which you find yourself. In addition, your institution may be in flux because colleges and universities are reinventing themselves to meet the demands of external forces.

Institutional mission will impact on your classroom experience. In a school with a strong commitment to teaching, your efforts will be monitored carefully, a faculty development program will provide support, and the reward structure will privilege excellent instruction. Students will expect individual attention. At other institutions you will keep your teaching concerns to yourself because the research mission overshadows the classroom commitment. Students regretfully expect to be kept at some distance.

Specific departmental expectations directly affect your teaching. If you are expected to administer a departmental exam at the end of the term, you cannot ask students to design their own learning evaluation measures. If you receive feedback from your department chair that your persuasion course is too difficult for freshman, you may change your materials for the next term. You may maintain required office hours and teach required classes.

Some institutions are calling on communication faculty to work as consultants to the communication across the curriculum initiative, or to participate in newly designed programs, such as in an engineering applied design program that integrates communication. Such faculty function as coaches or facilitators responding to student needs. As these examples demonstrate, roles are enacted within a context that frames the interaction process. Teacher and student roles are developed and maintained through communication congruent with institutional expectations.

### ROLE DEVELOPMENT

Classroom roles emerge through a complex twofold process that involves (a) role expectation, and (b) role performance. In both cases, personal background, relationships with significant others, system expectations, and feedback affect teacher role development.

#### Role Expectation

Much of your life has been spent in classrooms—evaluating teachers and developing implicit expectations about teaching. Your former instructors serve as instructional models impacting your expectations. As you considered a teaching career, you may have resolved to nurture fine writers, as your creative writing teacher did, or you may have decided never to ridicule poor speakers, as your basic speech course instructor did. You may have

found intercultural communication or oral history to be so fascinating that you planned to incorporate such issues in many of your classes.

On a personal level, if you attended schools with a homogeneous religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic student body, you may base your instructional expectations on this experience. If your undergraduate school emphasized an experiential approach to interpersonal communication, you will bring different expectations about what class time should include than a colleague who heard only theoretical lectures on the subject. You may have studied with one professor for three or four classes, resolving to “teach like Professor Griffin someday.” If you enjoyed small group work, you are likely to use small groups in your teaching.

Significant others, such as your college peers, establish expectations about how good teachers behave. Their criticism or praise influences how you view “good” or “bad” classroom behavior. The hours spent drinking coffee and comparing teachers set strong expectations for future behavior.

Finally, messages from the educational system influence expectations. While job hunting, faculty may tell you their students are brilliant and highly self-motivated, information that establishes very specific expectations for classroom behavior. It is in these ways that beliefs and background, significant others, and the general system expectations influence role expectations.

### **Role Performance**

New instructors immediately encounter the difference between expectations and reality. No matter how carefully you have planned, there will always be some, if not many surprises that alter your classroom behavior. Thus role performance implies how you enact the role.

Personal characteristics affect teacher behavior. Your own learning style will impact how you construct and respond to actual learning situations (see Gorham, chap. 19, this volume). You may exhibit a field-dependent learning style, responding best in collaborative and affective situations, or you may be field independent, preferring to focus on tasks, objectives, and analysis (Whitkin & Moore, 1975). If you are highly analytical, you may critique points of organization or reasoning in a speech that someone else might miss; if you are collaborative and reflective you may engage in extensive dialogue with the presenter regarding underlying beliefs. Your learning preference may be abstract or concrete, active or reflective (Kolb, 1984). Such factors will impact your actual performance.

In addition, your classroom responses are influenced by characteristics such as your gender, age, cultural heritage, and value system (Nussbaum, 1992), and similar characteristics of students affect your role enactment.

Significant evidence suggests that men may learn differently from women, older students may learn differently from the traditional college-age student, and persons from varied cultures may learn differently (Upcraft, 1996). If you are teaching primarily returning female adult students, your instructional practices will be different than if you have a mixed-gender class of traditional-age learners.

Sometimes you will surprise yourself by your inability to act according to your expectations. For example, although you may wish to hold discussions, your personal anxiety may surface whenever students raise unpredictable ideas and, in order to keep control, you may return to lecturing. Although you wish to use simulations, you may find your lack of experience keeps you from being comfortable with this approach. Positive surprises also may occur when expectations do not meet reality. A teacher who expects to lecture regularly may feel drawn to a collaborative learning approach.

A major report on life in college classrooms indicates a frequent mismatch between faculty and student expectations, a gap that leaves both parties unfulfilled (Boyer, 1987). The faculty want to explore scholarly ideas with appreciative students. “‘Intellectually meek’ students wanted everything spelled out and were willing to conform for the sake of grades” (Boyer, 1987, pp. 140–141).

Other faculty also influence how you enact a role. A colleague may say, “I refuse to support your move to develop a competency test for the basic course” or “Here are my outlines for the language unit, which might help you.” In his study of new faculty, Boice (1992) indicated that few reported colleague support.

Finally, as noted earlier, the institutional system influences performance. The curriculum committee may mandate a specific number of writing assignments within the speech course. The basic course committee may decide to drop the rhetorical analysis assignment and replace it with an interviewing experience. You may wait for years to teach your favorite subject because another professor or department “controls” the course.

Whatever your current state of role development, be assured it will be different in 5 years and in 25 years. Personal changes will be reflected in your classroom expectations and performance. Societal and institutional changes will be reflected in the students and systems you encounter.

### ROLE FUNCTIONS

Role functions provide a more specific means for examining classroom life. The image of a system as a mobile can be used to visualize the various

role functions within a classroom that affect the balance of the institutional system.

Figure 18.1 pictures a mobile containing the various role functions needed to keep the system operating and balanced. From a transactional perspective, teachers, students, and significant others may perform as part of each role function. The primary role functions are: (a) providing content expertise, (b) providing learning management, (c) providing evaluative feedback, (d) providing socialization, and (e) providing personal models.

### Providing Content Expertise

The finest teachers care passionately about their subjects, finding joy in talking about the field of study that pervades their lives. Such instructors are committed to creating changes in their students through thoughtful structuring of content that connects to their students' lives. Communication instructors experience countless opportunities to excite students. The most memorable teachers use the previous night's presidential address as an example of a rhetorical device or describe family systems theory at work in a new film. Communication becomes part of one's intellectual life, rather than an isolated academic responsibility. Students contribute to this process through questions, challenges, individual knowledge, and personal research. Such classrooms reflect a sense of intellectual heritage as well as recognition of current thought.

Although content expertise may result partly from graduate school training, over time it depends on a teacher's willingness to keep abreast of his or her chosen area and explore the complexities of the communication field

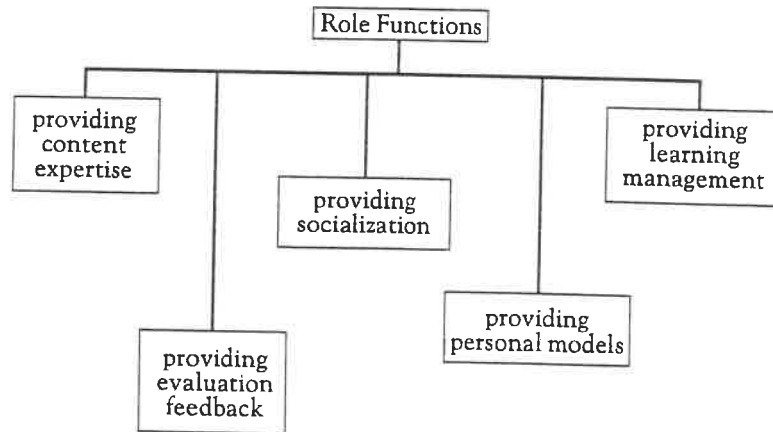


FIG. 18.1. The various role functions within the classroom.

and its related areas. Today's courses in political communication, telecommunications, or the performance of culture were originally exploratory offerings taught by persons exploring interconnections of theories and research perspectives.

### Managing Learning

Not only must teachers know their subjects; they must communicate them effectively to learners. When Boice (1992) asked new faculty about the kind of help they needed most as teachers, he received universal perceptions that the "hardest tasks are learning what level of lecture difficulty was appropriate for students and managing reasonable preparation time for classes" (pp. 57–58). By their third and fourth semesters, nearly half of the experienced new faculty had relaxed their styles to encourage more student participation. In his study of master college teachers, Epstein (1981) concluded:

There is many a tried, but no true method for doing this: Socratic teaching, sonorous lecturing, sympathetic discussion, passionate argument, witty exposition, dramatics and other parts of derring-do; plain power of personal example, main force of intellect, and sometimes even bullying.  
(p. xii)

Each instructor creates, alone or with student input, the specific learning process, including diagnosis, objective setting, selection of strategies, and evaluation. Effective teachers demonstrate an ability to use a wide range of methods or strategies (such as discussion, lecture, higher order questioning, or role playing), selecting the appropriate one based on perception of student needs. Throughout the term, the teacher uses learner feedback to modify original goals and plans.

Management includes the creation of a classroom climate designed to support a particular type of learning. For example, teachers of performance or discussion-oriented classes work to establish a safe and supportive climate for taking risks and the sharing of personal opinions. Rules and disciplinary policies are developed as an intrinsic means of supporting the desired learning climate.

Currently, communication professors are involved in educational efforts such as collaborative learning, communication across the curriculum, or learning communities, all of which have implications for managing learning. In his discussion of learning communities, Angelo (1996) described them as places where faculty, students, and other members of the educational community work collaboratively toward shared goals:

In learning communities everyone has both the opportunity and responsibility to learn from and help teach everyone else. Faculty become less purveyors of information and more designers of learning environments and experiences, expert guides, and practicing master learners themselves. (p. 1)

In practice, learning communities typically feature purposive groupings of students, shared scheduling, significant use of collective and collaborative learning approaches, and an emphasis on connecting learning across course and disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, faculty need teamwork skills and an ability to recognize communication opportunities and implement them.

### **Providing Evaluation and Feedback**

Most educational institutions require a formal evaluation on the completion of a specified unit of study. Often the function of evaluation serves to demonstrate a separation of teachers and students on the basis of power. It could, however, serve to engage them in a cooperative development of evaluation measures. According to Fuhrmann and Grasha (1983), assigning grades may be perceived as negative if grades allow faculty to exercise superiority and unnecessary control over students, who view the grade solely as an academic end. Grades may be perceived as valuable if they are used to motivate, reward student accomplishment, or provide feedback. The use of the evaluation function interacts significantly with the management of learning.

The nature of the communication field necessitates that classroom members develop skills in critiquing or delivering feedback on oral performance. Students must receive carefully created critiques designed to foster continued improvement. Such feedback may be given by the teacher, other students, or both. A review of research on providing feedback suggests that teachers need to be knowledgeable about the effects of various types of feedback and should consciously provide appropriate criticism to student speakers. In addition, the research indicates that students can be trained to give helpful feedback to peers (Book, 1985).

Faculty must also evaluate themselves using methods such as self-reflection, student feedback, and peer and chair evaluation (see Vangelisti, chap. 29, this volume). The current emphasis on peer review for formative purposes has the potential to provide faculty with valuable feedback because the "emphasis is on development, where efforts toward improvement can be directed toward any or all professional roles" (Keig & Waggoner, 1994, p. 12).



### Providing Socialization

Classrooms are the settings for academic socialization to an entire field and to models of thinking. Teachers serve as gatekeepers to a world that represents their field as well as the values, assumptions, and types of intellectual life that characterize their discipline. A representative of an academic field and way of life, a teacher discusses his or her intellectual positions, research interests, and the process of intellectual growth. Students question, react, and contribute positions learned elsewhere.

A teacher's classroom behavior may include lectures and anecdotes describing positions taken by members of the field and reasons for these positions. In addition, a teacher may describe his or her academic background, past professional positions, current research interests, and intellectual struggles. Out-of-class behaviors may include personal conversations on choices of graduate schools and future careers.

Classrooms are also the scene of more personal socialization as teachers exert influence regarding social values. In Hart's (1986) words, teachers are revolutionaries, insurgents, and liberators as "they make people better than they thought they could be" (p. 4). Communication courses speak directly to values that support democratic citizenship, interpersonal growth, or political awareness.

In specific cases, faculty become mentors for one or more students, serving as a guide to life in the academic world of communication. Issues of sensitivity to students, a scholar's curiosity, academic ethics and values, publication directions, and personal boundaries may be explored over time between mentor and student, a relationship that enhances both parties.

### Providing Personal Models

Teachers teach who they are as well as what they believe intellectually. From the first moments in a classroom, students construct a persona for their instructor. Although some instructors deliberately cloak themselves in distance or mystery, most portray many sides of their nature, engaging students in mutually rewarding relationships. Teachers share personal anecdotes, family stories, or feelings about certain significant moments in the class. Students refer to family and work experiences, as well as to their developing values and intellectual position. Kirp (1997) captured this interaction in the following way:

Professors deliver lectures, hold office hours, supervise theses. Meanwhile, students fabricate character studies, hang on to the inadvertent

asides, the jokes that slip out, the impromptu examples, because this is the raw material from which they can convert presentations of ideas into presentations of self. In doing so, students invite themselves not just to their professors' lectures but also into their lives. (p. 12)

This relationship may continue outside of disciplinary boundaries as students seek personal guidance about family, romantic, or personal growth issues.

Sometimes a teacher serves as a role model—an adult who appears to have reached a desired level of intellectual and personal development. This person demonstrates ways to manage prejudicial classroom comments or use technology creatively. Bonwell (1996) suggested faculty should serve as a role models because “students are more likely to take risks if they see the instructor is more willing to take risks as well” (p. 5). Within the communication field, students expect to view a teacher as a model of personal communication competence as well as a communication scholar.

The preceding five role functions could be expanded to include additional categories. Whatever the categories, they will reflect the interactive nature of the functions. As you already know, this interaction may not occur smoothly or predictably. The final section of this chapter addresses some of the conflicts that may occur as teachers and students together attempt to create a learning environment.

## ROLE CONFLICT

Teaching has been described ideally as two persons sitting on either end of a log and talking. At key moments, teaching resembles that image—an intense interlocking of two minds. A thoughtful teacher struggles to confront and understand concerns that surface as one's being (background, beliefs, experience, values) comes into contact with that of another person or system. Conflicts may occur over differences in the priority of role functions or the choices within role functions. These interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts are related to role development and role functions.

### Interpersonal Conflicts

When role expectations or role exactments of significant others collide, role conflicts develop. For example, you may wish to present your content knowledge in stimulating large group lectures, but students or administrators may pressure you to use some collaborative learning groups. You may plan to manage classroom learning as a facilitator, forcing students to take responsibility for extensive independent work. The class, however, may re-

sist this approach by consistently arriving unprepared or remaining silent, forcing you to confront the issues directly or alter your methods.

Your position within the college system may contribute to role conflict. If you are a graduate teaching assistant, you may find yourself constantly negotiating the boundaries of a system. You struggle with questions such as, "To what extent am I a full-fledged teacher and to what extent am I still a student?" and "Will undergraduates treat me differently than they would a full-time faculty member?" The ambiguous "in between" status may leave you open to more conflictual experiences than those faced by full-time faculty.

Background experiences provide you with role expectations for managing classroom differences or disagreements. Hocker (1986) described this well: "If one had as models professors who were imperious and demanding but rigorous and fair, one might try to emulate that style in class" (p. 75). On the other hand, she suggested if one learned from professors who were empathetic and concerned about the personal growth of their students, a different style of conflict resolution would be adopted.

In today's classrooms professors can expect to encounter student resistance and behavior problems (Lee, Levine, & Cambra, 1997) as well as highly charged or offensive comments directed to other students. The conflict management style you develop will reflect your expectations and experiences in the performance of classroom confrontation (see Plax & Kearney, chap. 20, this volume).

### **Intrapersonal Conflicts**

When teachers experience incongruity between role expectations and performance, internal conflict arises. On occasion, such conflict serves the productive function of driving you to meet a desired expectation. In other situations, you may realistically or reluctantly revise your expectations and rely on the feedback of students or colleagues to inform your perception of teaching effectiveness. Students experience similar types of internal conflict when their expectations do not match the feedback given to their performance.

Finally, faculty members face a special type of internal conflict when confronting interface issues. An educational myth suggests that teachers can and should treat everyone equally. Yet reality tells you that you connect easily or positively with one student, whereas your contact with another is negative or distant. In some cases, this linkage or lack of linkage is so powerful that it can interfere with fairness in the classroom. Interface issues arise when a strong internal psychological concern is triggered by

another classroom member. A brash, confrontive student may remind you of your immature teenage self and evoke feelings of discomfort; a shy student may remind you of your own reticence and lead you to be overprotective. These powerful, emotional reactions to a student signal an internal conflict and you need to consider whether the problem lies in the student or in yourself.

Conflicts are less likely to arise when all parties believe they are engaged in meaningful work. The effective functioning of a classroom depends on the cooperative attitude and intellectual curiosity of all members. If faculty and students do not see themselves as having important business to do together, prospects for effective learning are diminished (Boyer, 1987).

The teaching-learning process is enhanced when members of the classroom community can make explicit and negotiate, if necessary, their role expectations and performance of role functions. When all persons involved in learning enrich each other, sparks fly. If learning is to be constructed as inherently dialogical, the teacher as well as the student must attend to the intentions and understandings of the other to sustain a valued teaching-learning interaction.

## REFERENCES

- Angelo, T. (1996). Seven shifts and seven levers: Developing more productive learning communities. *The National Teaching & Learning Forum*, 6, 1-4.
- Boice, R. (1992). *The new faculty member*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bonwell, C. (1996). Building a supportive climate for active learning. *The National Teaching & Learning Forum*, 6, 4-7.
- Book, C. (1985). Providing feedback: The research on effective oral and written feedback strategies. *Central States Speech Journal*, 36, 14-23.
- Boyer, E. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Epstein, J. (Ed.). (1981). *Masters: Portraits of great teachers*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fuhrmann, B., & Grasha, A. (1983). *A practical handbook for college teachers*. Boston: Little/Brown.
- Hart, R. (1986, February). *Sex, drugs, rock 'n roll and speech: Why we're in Tucson*. Speech delivered at the meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association, Tucson, AZ.
- Hocker, J. (1986). Teacher-student confrontations. In J. Civikly (Ed.), *Communicating in college classrooms: New directions for teaching and learning* (pp. 69-78). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Homan, S. (1985). The classroom as theatre. In J. Katz (Ed.), *Teaching as though students mattered: New directions for teaching and learning* (pp. 69-78). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Keig, L., & Waggoner, M. D. (1994). *Collaborative peer review: The role of faculty in improving college teaching* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 2). Washington, DC: The George Washington University.
- Kirp, D. E. (1997, May-June). Twenty-seven ways of looking at a classroom. *Change* 29, 10-18.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experimental learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lee, C., Levine, T., & Cambra, R. (1997). Resisting compliance in the multicultural classroom. *Communication Education*, 46, 29-43.
- Linton, R. (1945). *The cultural background of personality*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Mann, R., Arnold, S., Binder, J., Cytrynbaum, S., Newman, B., Ringwald, B., Ringwald, J., & Rosenwein, R. (1970). *The college classroom: Conflict, change and learning*. New York: Wiley.

- Millar, S. B. (1996). New roles for teachers in today's classrooms. In R. Menges, M. Weimer, & Associates (Eds.), *Teaching on solid ground* (pp. 155-178). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nussbaum, J. F. (1992). Effective teacher behaviors. *Communication Education, 41*, 167-180.
- Timpson, W., & Tobin, D. (1982). *Teaching as performing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Upcraft, M. L. (1996). Teaching and today's college student. In R. Menges, M. Weimer, & Associates (Eds.), *Teaching on solid ground* (pp. 21-42). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a way of being*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Whitkin, H. A., & Moore, C. A. (1975). *Field-dependent and field-independent cognitive styles and their educational implications*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

**Teaching Communication:  
Theory, Research, and Methods**  
**Second Edition**

*Edited by*

**Anita L. Vangelisti**  
**John A. Daly**  
*University of Texas at Austin*  
*and*  
**Gustav W. Friedrich**  
*Rutgers University*



LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
1999 Mahwah, New Jersey London