Communicating (un)fairness in the classroom: Research examples and recommendations

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Classroom justice (fairness)

- **Student perception**

- **Three types (Chory)**
  - **Distributive justice**
    - fairness perceptions regarding outcomes or allotments
  - **Procedural Justice**
    - fairness perceptions regarding the system or process used to determine outcomes or allotments
  - **Interactional Justice**
    - fairness perceptions regarding relational treatment
Are students concerned with fairness?
- Yes

Are college instructors concerned?
- Most concerned about interactional justice, followed by procedural justice, and distributive justice
  - Potentially, college teachers may assume distributive justice is a given (it’s not)
Justice

- Students have reactions to perceived fairness
  - Perceive instructor as fair…
    - View teacher as credible; students report higher levels of motivation
  - Perceive instructor as unfair…
    - Resistance, verbal aggression, deception, revenge, & hostility

- So, if college instructors are
  - a) concerned about justice but,
  - b) students perceive us unfair, this begs the question of
  - c) what does unfairness look and sound like?
Justice

- Asked 138 college students to describe an experience with an unfair teacher & their reaction
Injustice/Unfairness

- **Distributive (outcomes)**
  - Grade (68.3% of responses)
  - Opportunities (14.6%)

- **Procedural (fairness used for outcomes)**
  - Grading Procedures (33%)
  - Make-up/late policies (19.2%)

- **Interactional (fair treatment)**
  - Insensitive/Rude (42.6%)
  - Implied/stated stupidity (25.5%)

[see article for remaining categories]
Student Reactions

- **Students’ Emotional Reactions**
  - Angry (34.8%)
  - Pained (18%)
  - Others: frustrated, powerless, stressed, cheated

- **Students’ Behavioral Reactions**
  - Dissent (complain; 52.1%)
  - Inaction/acceptance (31.4%)
  - Hostility (6.5%)
  - Withdrawal (6.5%)
So what to do?

- Be mindful of fairness
  - Students pay a lot more attention to this than most think
  - They have *strong* reactions to unfairness

- Communicate/highlight your fairness efforts to students
  - A lot of us already behave fairly in many ways → highlight some of those to students
Communicating fairness

- Other fairness recommendations...
  - Clear assessment forms given to students
  - Removing the mystery behind the grading process
  - Explaining the choices you make
  - Have students turn in subjective work with their names on back of assignment (or use ID number)

- That said...
  - Despite students' concerns, what some students identify as “unfair” may still be in the best interest of students.
Selected references:


