

## **What About Joe? A Reflection on the First-Year Seminar**

**Eileen Grodziak**

The Pennsylvania State University

### **Abstract**

This article is the author's reflection on pedagogical factors relating to student success in a three-credit first-year seminar course (FYS) at a land-grant university in the northeast United States. The narrative reflection focuses on an undergraduate male student, "Joe," who represents a composite of students. Multiple layers of meaning and insight about the student and the instructor inform considerations for responsive and co-created course design.

### **Keywords**

first-year seminar; student success; reflective practitioner; undergraduate; course design

Joe was one of the twenty-four, bright-eyed, first-semester, first-year undergraduate students who greeted me during my introduction as their replacement instructor. It was the second in-class meeting of a three-credit community building course which serves as our campus' first year-seminar course (FYS) (Reynolds et al., 2019). Joe and his classmates received a course syllabus and schedule during the first class. I received an empty Learning Management System (LMS) course shell. He looked hopeful. I was nervous.

Joe was a tall, friendly male student who was fresh out of a local high school. He attended most nine o'clock morning class sessions. This class directly followed an eight o'clock lecture course in which he and several other classmates were enrolled. Joe was chatty and often engaged in side conversations with the student who sat beside him. His goal was to major in a pure science discipline with an aspiration of entering the medical field. In addition to this FYS, he enrolled in the requisite college-level math and science courses.

Because he sat toward the front of the class, I noticed that he normally opened computational work upon arriving at his seat, often with his headphones in. If I happened to glance in his direction during a class lecture, his attention was directed toward the papers in front of him, his phone, or his tablemate. An early class activity involved the students in setting ground rules for class participation. One of the resulting agreements, "One person speaks at a time," was Joe's nemesis. In addition to his penchant for side conversations, he tended to blurt out what he wanted to share during larger class

discussions. Nevertheless, he was cooperative and friendly with his classmates, and he actively participated in the small group activities that accounted for a large portion of each class session.

During a class session with students engaged in discussing an overloaded lifeboat scenario, Joe exhibited his most animated participation. Somehow during the small group reports of their discussion results, the topic of euthanasia emerged. Immediately, Joe's face lit up; his eyes opened wide, and he stood up. With his hands moving to add impact, he responded and appeared ready for an engaged discussion. I immediately thought, "Oh, I do not want to go there . . ." I quickly steered the conversation back to the topic at hand. Ethics, even controversy, appeared to be Joe's interest, a stark contrast to my *modus operandi*.

Despite Joe's consistent attendance and participation in class, he submitted a scant number of the required writing and project deliverables. As the semester progressed, and I added zeros to unsubmitted assignment after unsubmitted assignment, I often included the comment, "You are doing the heavy lift of attending class; now follow through on the remaining work." There were several students who fell behind, and other students also failed the class. Students' failure always alarmed me because of their higher risk for dropping out of college (Ajjawi et al., 2020). Yet, Joe haunted my thoughts. What was it about Joe? Why was I bothered? I felt that I had failed in my responsibility as instructor. Why did I feel that I failed him? Then, a piercing question came to mind—Am I Joe? How could that be? I never failed a class. Could there be a thread of truth in that thought? I am a "show up" type of person. I attend, engage, and stay present. And like Joe, I do tend to lag behind-the-scenes. For me, the lag occurs when many competing responsibilities pile up or when the task is not interesting.

What exactly happened with Joe? Joe was a traditionally aged commuter campus student who was not the typical at-risk student whom I encountered. He did not give up and stop participating in class. He also did not fit the profile of the type of student of whom I heard other faculty bemoan. He did not graduate from one of the area's socio-economically disadvantaged high schools. Joe was taking all college-level courses, unlike peers who were placed in remedial classes during their first year. Because it was not evident to me whether he worked an outside job in addition to attending school and/or was a first-generation student, I was not able to attribute either characteristic as a plausible cause for his failure. Initially, Joe did not present as a student who was at risk. Even if he was at risk, what was happening? Was something else lurking behind-the-scenes?

Looking back over the work that Joe did complete, I found that he selected assignments which aligned to his interest in the sciences domain. Joe's first missed assignment touched upon the topic of societal injustice. Immediately, I wondered, "Did I do it wrong?" Was there an injustice which he experienced which was not visible to me? Is that why Joe did not complete the assignment? With this line of questioning, my investigation came to an abrupt stop. It took me several weeks to muster up the courage to once again peek behind that course content curtain. What I discovered surprised me. Through an examination of Joe's pattern of complete and incomplete work, a picture emerged which signalled a declaration of sorts: Joe let me know that this FYS course could not help him succeed (Adahi et al., 2019). To a degree, Joe is correct. It is the student's responsibility to do the work. Through my collaborative work with other instructors, I observed that Joe was successful in doing other hard work. Yet, a mindset appeared to emerge in his written work for my class which alarmed me—the student alone must figure out how to be

successful—a contrast to the literature indicating that help-seeking is a factor in student success and college persistence (Thompson et al., 2019). Although I noticed a pattern of Joe separating himself from the course content, and to a certain extent, from me, as the instructor, he stayed connected with the other students.

After the point where Joe appeared to indicate that the course was useless, he continued to attend and participate in class sessions; although, he did skip a few. In fact, his fellow students ratted him out, indicating that they had just encountered him in earlier classes or in the student area. It appeared that he saved “face” among his peers. Toward the end of the semester, he presented to the class along with the other students, despite omitting the artifact submission.

In pondering Joe’s engagement with me, the instructor, I sought to answer the question: What was my role in Joe’s failure? The literature indicates that the faculty and student relationship is a critical factor in student success for college students (Felton & Lambert, 2020). I do have a pivotal role here. Was it possible to learn a little more about my students personally? Why was I not aware of Joe’s outside work status or his home responsibility status (care of younger siblings, an aging relative)? Why did I fail to act on lagging student performance earlier in the semester? Why was I hesitant to seek to understand Joe’s position by having a conversation with him? Why did I not pivot course activities to counter the “I am a silo” mentality. Knowing my personal tendency toward conflict-avoidance, I likely shied away. Reflecting further, I realized that my mindset also might be similar to Joe’s. When I took over the class, I scratched one class activity previously assigned by the first instructor which I felt inadequate to conduct—a debate. Did I think that I must figure it all out myself? The “we” in the classroom dynamic did not occur to me. We can do this together—a debate, an uncomfortable conversation. I have resources to support my success in the classroom, just like Joe had resources to support him.

After exploring the interactions between Joe and his fellow classmates, as well as his interactions with me as the instructor, I sought to investigate Joe’s interactions with the course content beyond the assignment submissions. In the LMS analytics, I discovered that his course access page view total (aggregate number of course pages viewed) aligned with other students who successfully completed the class. In fact, students with significantly lower page views successfully completed the course. Initially, I expected to find scant access of missed assignment direction/submission pages. On the contrary, I discovered that they were viewed multiple times in most cases. Some were surprisingly revisited at the beginning of the next semester. Joe maintained more interaction with the course content than I assumed. Did he have trouble writing? This line of reasoning did not match the quality of work which he did submit. What else was going on?

Digging further a pattern emerged: The completed assignments appear align with Joe’s interest in science. Was he not interested in the other topics? Was adequate opportunity provided for students to relate the content back to their own interests, goals, values? Joe was a traditional-aged student, yet his choices appear to be in line with adult learners who seek relevance (McGlynn, 2007). Some assignments challenged students to examine their assumptions, values, beliefs, morals, and actions. Did challenging his own assumptions cause him distress? Was that too much to ask? What was going on in his head while he previewed the assignment requirements or revisited them? Surprisingly, the Joe’s second most frequently referenced page in the LMS, after the home page, was the grade page, including during weeks when no work was submitted. Why continually check grades

when there was no submission? Did he assume that he was going to fail? Was he confirming a belief?

There is a limit to what we can deduct from the single page-access data point. The LMS analytics only accounts for computer access and does not account for mobile device use; thus, successful students may have accessed the course content to a greater degree than reported. Furthermore, the analytics lack an indication of how long the content was viewed, what action Joe made in response to the view, and what he was thinking in the moment. Despite the limitations, my findings do raise important new questions, some of which may never adequately be answered.

As a full-time instructional designer, I felt that I should have known and done better. Picking up a course at the last minute is challenging, at best, and added to the urgency of deep reflection in retrospect. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to attend a faculty retreat on writing. This composite of students, Joe, emerged along with three course design elements: Alignment of course objectives and assessments, communicating the value of the course, and the course materials and learning activities that support the objectives.

A core learning outcome of the FYS course is to build supportive relationships with peers, mentors, and the university community in a variety of interpersonal skills (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The strategies that I employed engage students in active and cooperative learning. As the semester progressed, I encourage interactions with the greater campus community. Joe was a regular contributor to classroom discussions, and he participated in events which connected him to the greater campus community. Did Joe's final grade reflect his success in meeting this important outcome? After careful examination, I can honestly say, no. Realigning the assessments to the course objectives is a critical first step, specifically the grade weighting for classroom participation.

Taking the course learning objectives one step further, I asked myself: How do I communicate the value, the reason, the point of this course to my students? What do students do with these course objectives? Do they re-read them in the syllabus? Do they refer to them as the course progresses? Personally, I like to have a route map at-the-ready before traveling to an unfamiliar place. During the way, I often refer to my route plan to ensure that I successfully reach my final destination. My students deserve the same preparation and tools for their journey in this course (any course, really). At the beginning of the course, I can review the objectives and ask the students their predictions of how we will meet the objectives. While we are engaging in learning activities and when particular assignments are introduced, I can once again invite the students to identify and assess how the activities align with the outcomes of the course. Why might we be doing this? Why a 3-credit first-year seminar? (Vaughn et al., 2020). What is "my promise to the students"? (Gannon, 2020). Simply verbalizing content does not guarantee students' learning. Simply providing written learning objectives in the syllabus or at the beginning of modules does not guarantee that students will gain an understanding of why or how the course components all fit together.

Universal Design for Learning encourages the use of course materials from diverse authors and learner choice in how learning is demonstrated (Tobin & Behling, 2018). I made the stark realization that our main text, *How to Become a Learner* (Sanders, 2018), is authored by a well-educated middle-aged, upper-middle-class man. While I did use supplemental videos and articles, I wondered: Was Joe able to see himself in the course materials? Did I make the diversity explicit, as in displaying the author's photos (Gannon,

2020)? Our students include immigrants or relatives of immigrant families, first-generation college students, students from lower socio-economic status, minority races and ethnicities. All would benefit from the use of diverse course materials.

The class debate was the one learning activity that I scratched from the syllabus which students received from the original instructor. I told myself that I had enough to worry about in taking over the class after the semester commenced. Deep inside, I felt I should only attempt what I felt comfortable doing. I felt inadequate and unprepared to facilitate a debate. Would Joe have preferred the debate? Judging from class participation, he may have been up to a debate on euthanasia or any other science/medical related controversial issue. I discovered that I have a deep-seated belief that I can only present a learning activity that I previously mastered. What about the resources available to me as instructor? How do I muster the courage to seek help? Perhaps, “we” needed to do a debate discussion together as a classroom community. Is it okay to learn with students? Is it okay for me to seek help from colleagues? Oh, I have much to ponder.

Reflecting on Joe’s failure to successfully complete the course requirements, his engagement—with classmates, with course materials, with me, the instructor—I discovered human threads that connect us despite our vast differences. As I continued to explore and answer the questions, “What about Joe?” and “What actually happened with Joe in this class setting?”, I debunked probable assumptions about Joe related to his age, his social and economic status, his achievement, his disposition, and his engagement. In doing so, I was able to reflect on Joe as a human being, both similar and dissimilar to others (Vetter et al. 2019). I unearthed many questions, most of which I will not adequately be able to answer. Many aspects of Joe’s experience I will never fully understand due to my positionality as an older woman. Nevertheless, probing my part in Joe’s failure gave me the opportunity to consider my role as instructor and course designer, and what I might change for the future Joes who walk into my classroom. I uncovered a gap in my communication with students who do not meet course expectations and my timidity to initiate hard conversations. Ironically, as I struggled to answer the question, What about Joe?, I found that I also considered myself.

## References

- Ahadi, D., Pedri, J., & Nichols, L. D. (2019). Implementing a first-year curriculum in a large lecture course: Opportunities, challenges, and myths. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 49(2), 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v49i2.188241>
- Ajjawi, R., Dracup, M., Zacharias, N., Bennett, S., & Boud, D. (2020). Persisting student's explanations of and the emotional responses to academic failure. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(2), 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1664999>
- Felten, P., & Lambert, L. M. 2020. *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gannon, K. M. (2020). *Radical hope: A teaching manifesto*. West Virginia University Press.
- McGlynn, A. P. (2007). *Teaching today's college students: Widening the circle of success*. Atwood Publishing.
- Reynolds, D., Byrne, L., Campbell, J., & Spritz, B. (2019). One size doesn't fit all: Students' perceptions of FYE approaches. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 19(3). 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v19i2.23844>
- Sanders, M. L. (2018). *Becoming a learner: Realizing the opportunity of education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Macmillan Learning Curriculum Systems.
- Tobin, T. J. and Behling, K. (2018). *Reach everyone teach everyone: Universal Design for Learning in higher education*. West Virginia University Press.
- Vaughn, A. L., Pergantis, S. I., & Moore, S. M. (2019). Assessing the difference between 1-, 2-, and 3-credit first-year seminars on college student achievement. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 31(1), 9–28. [https://sc.edu/about/offices\\_and\\_divisions/national\\_resource\\_center/publications/search/details.php?id=2551](https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/publications/search/details.php?id=2551)
- Zhao, C., & Kuh, G. D. 2004) Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115–138. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:RIHE.0000015692.88534.de>

## Corresponding Author

Eileen Grodziak  
The Pennsylvania State University  
Lehigh Valley, 307-C  
2809 Saucon Valley Rd  
Center Valley, PA 18034  
[emg15@psu.edu](mailto:emg15@psu.edu)