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*This chapter explores the important role that anger plays in teaching and learning.*

## Anger in the Classroom: How a Supposedly Negative Emotion Can Enhance Learning

*Ryan C. Martin*

There are times when teaching, despite how rewarding it can be, is an extraordinarily frustrating experience. It can be time-consuming and difficult to do well, and even the best students do not always appreciate the hard work teachers put into their assignments and activities. Teachers are sometimes swamped with resource limitations that make it difficult to achieve their learning outcomes, and even on their best days, they do not reach all the students they hope to reach. Plus, despite their best efforts, their innovative and grand plans for teaching do not always work, leaving them frustrated.

As a psychologist who researches anger, I routinely come across people who feel that anger is a purely negative emotion. That, however, isn't true. In fact, anger is usually a valuable emotional experience, as it alerts people to problems and energizes them to confront those problems (Deffenbacher 1996). In this chapter, I will draw upon my research on anger and my experiences as a college teacher of psychology to explore the reasons teachers become angry, the meaning of that anger, and how teachers can use the experience to motivate students and themselves toward better learning outcomes.

### **What is Anger**

Anger is an emotional state associated with having one's goals blocked, being provoked, or insulted (Spielberger 1999). It is different from aggression, which is a behavior with the intent to harm someone or something (Deffenbacher 1996). This distinction is important, as people often misunderstand anger as being just the outward, aggressive expression. In reality, anger is the emotion at the root of some aggression (e.g., hitting, yelling), but also a host of other thoughts and behaviors (e.g., problem solving, activism, pouting, rumination). If we think of anger more broadly than just the aggressive

behaviors sometimes associated with it, it is easier to understand how teachers can put the emotion to good use.

## Why We Get Mad

To really understand how to use anger in a positive way as a teacher, one needs to understand why people get angry in the first place. Deffenbacher (1996) argued that anger occurs as a result of three factors: (1) a provocation, (2) the individual's interpretation of the provocation, and (3) the individual's pre-provocation psycho-biological state.

The provocation is the easiest part to understand. This is the event that immediately preceded the anger (e.g., getting cut off in traffic, misplacing your car keys, having students fail to follow the directions you gave them). People often think of this as the *cause* of their anger. They say things like, "I'm angry *because* I can't find my car keys" or "it *makes* me so mad when students don't follow directions." These provocations do not cause the anger directly, though. If they did, everyone would become equally angry when faced with the same provocation. But that does not happen. The things that make me mad are not the same things that make you mad. Similarly, if the provocation really did cause the anger directly, you would experience the same level of anger each and every time you faced the provocation. But that doesn't happen either. Sometimes I get really angry when I misplace my keys, and sometimes I get just a little angry.

That said, the provocation is definitely important and some types of events are more likely to lead to anger than others. For instance, those situations where we are treated poorly (e.g., disrespected by our students) or when our goals are blocked (e.g., administrators require us do things that are counter-productive) are most likely to lead to anger. Much of this, though, has to do with the second of the three factors associated with the experience of anger: our interpretation of the provocation. When people face these sorts of provocations, they appraise the situation to determine whether or not it was negative, unfair, unjustified, or blameworthy. Once they appraise events in such a way, they get angry. Deffenbacher (1996) calls this evaluation of the stimulus primary appraisal. Secondary appraisal, according to Deffenbacher, is when we evaluate our ability to cope with the event. If we interpret this event as so negative that we cannot cope with it, we become even angrier (e.g., "Computer problems won't allow me to grade tonight but it's no big deal because I have time tomorrow" is less likely to lead to anger than "Not being able to grade tonight is going to ruin my entire day tomorrow.").

Deffenbacher's third factor, the pre-provocation state, refers to our psycho-biological state right before the event occurred. When people are tense, fatigued, already irritated, or in some other negative state prior to the provocation, they are more likely to get angry. For example, a person getting stopped by a red light on the way to work may not get angry under

normal circumstances. However, if it is hot out and they are in car without AC, they may become angrier than they otherwise would have. Similarly, a teacher may become angrier in response to student disrespect if they are already on edge, fatigued, or feeling pressed for time.

## Why Teachers Get Mad

To get a sense for the situations that tend to drive teacher anger, I collected data via an anonymous survey asking teachers “Tell me about a time you got angry as a teacher. Please include why you got angry and how you handled it.” The responses revealed four main types of situations. First, teachers became angry when they felt students were being disrespectful. For example, one respondent wrote, “A student once wouldn’t stop talking and when I called on him to answer a question, he had no idea what I even asked.” Another wrote, “A student was wearing sunglasses and headphones in the classroom. I asked him to remove them. He did not answer me, even after I got his attention.” Typically, the appraisal of such provocations had to do with the belief that students should behave in certain ways toward their teachers and that not doing so reflected an unjustified lack of respect.

A second type of situation that led to teacher anger had to do with students not following instructions. Here, teachers described situations where students did not complete assignments correctly, did not listen to in-class instructions, or did not follow other sorts of class guidelines. For example, one respondent wrote, “I spent ten minutes going over the instructions for an in-class activity and when it was time to begin, several students had no idea what they were supposed to do. They obviously hadn’t been listening, and it was so frustrating.” The appraisal that typically accompanied these provocations had to do with the teachers’ goals being blocked and feeling as though they could not move forward with an activity because students were slowing them down.

A third provocation for teachers had to do with anger at administrators or other public officials. Teachers would express frustration over what they perceived as unnecessary paperwork or ineffective policies. One respondent wrote, “I had to document a bunch of crap via educator effectiveness. I used the two or three hours after school that I usually spend making lessons or grading or something to benefit the students.” Again, the appraisal that seems to exacerbate the provocation is the idea that the required documentation is blocking the teacher from accomplishing his or her goals and limiting his or her capacity to teach effectively.

Finally, the fourth type of situation had to do with anger over the content of the course. Some respondents described feeling angry as they discussed issues related to poverty, sexism, healthcare, violence, or other topics. One respondent wrote, “I use anger to show my passion for a

subject. I NEVER use anger directed at the students but instead use it to show how I feel about a system and its impact on our lives.” Another wrote, “I get angry every time I talk about institutionalized racism in class. I try to show students that it’s ok to be angry and that, in fact, there are some things we should be angry about.” This anger over the content stemmed from appraisals of situations that were unjustified, unfair, and blameworthy.

## What We Can Do When We Get Mad

As I mentioned earlier, a common misunderstanding about anger is that it is the same as aggression. Research shows that most people associate anger with aggressive behavior such as yelling, swearing, hitting, kicking, pushing, or in other harmful ways. In truth, anger is a very healthy and adaptive emotion, and there are infinite ways one can express their anger (Deffenbacher et al. 1996). Anger actually plays a very important role in our lives in that it alerts us to the fact that we may have been wronged and energizes us to confront that injustice (Aarts et al. 2010; Deffenbacher 1996). Thus, it’s not only normal to feel angry sometimes, it’s good for us to feel angry. Without that feeling we wouldn’t have the energy to respond to those provocations that may require a response.

What we do when we get angry is what separates adaptive and useful anger from maladaptive and problematic anger (Aarts et al. 2010; Ford and Tamir 2012). If we get angry and immediately scream at the person who offended us, we may get ourselves into trouble or damage a relationship. Likewise, if we don’t respond at all, we may end up feeling frustrated, sad, or guilty later on for not having done anything when we felt wronged (Robertson, Daffern, and Bucks 2015). However, if we politely assert ourselves and try to address the provocation that led to our anger in the first place, we may end up in a better position than when we started. In fact, there is even evidence to support the notion that anger can enhance creativity if handled in the right way (Van Kleef, Anastasopoulou, and Nijstad 2010). Of course, the “right” thing to do when we are angered depends on the context. There are times when it may be best to suppress our anger, times when we should forgive (Goldman and Wade 2012), and there may even be times when the right thing to do is to yell or scream.

Another way of thinking about Deffenbacher’s model is that anger occurs as the result of a problem. In a given moment, we become angry because we interpret a situation as slowing us down, interfering with our goals, unfair, or otherwise problematic. Thus, one approach to using our anger in a positive manner is to work toward solving the problem. If I am angry because my students keep texting during class, I need to make it clear that they are not allowed to text during class, outline a policy regarding the consequences of texting during class, and enforce that policy.

## How Can Teachers Solve the Four Problems That Lead to Their Anger?

According to the survey above, the most common reason for teacher anger was feeling disrespected by students. In many of the cases that teachers described, it seemed that anger was an understandable and appropriate response to the situation. Likewise, if student disrespect is not addressed, it can lead to further problems (e.g., other students engaging in similar behaviors, teacher frustration increasing to a debilitating level). There are a few potentially useful strategies to channel that anger into dealing with the disrespect. First, outline expectations early and clearly. Let students know what behaviors are not acceptable. Second, explore where the student disrespect is coming from and try to better connect with the student. Does this behavior occur with other teachers or is it unique to you? Is the disrespect the result of frustration? Students can be disrespectful for a variety of reasons, including that they are feeling frustrated with the material or with their performance in the class. Finally, work with the student to curb the disrespectful behavior. The tendency with such behavior is for the instructor to want to shut it down with a heavy-handed approach. That may be the best option in some cases, but in some situations it might be better to try and connect and work with the student to address the issue.

The second reason teachers became angry is related to students not following instructions or asking questions that had already been answered by the teacher. Again, we can think of such anger as alerting us to a problem and giving us the energy to solve the problem. One of the first things teachers should do if they find themselves encountering this issue often is to explore whether or not their instructions are clear enough. If this is a common problem, it might actually speak to the instructor not providing adequate information or not providing information effectively. Related to this, some instructors find it useful to embrace technology as a way of minimizing student confusion over material (e.g., record yourself giving the instructions so they can go back and watch/listen to it). Similarly, embracing the “rule of three” where students are told that they must look to three places (e.g., syllabus, a classmate, assignment instructions) for the answer to a question before asking the instructor. Last, make sure you are holding students accountable for their failure to follow directions by building following instructions into the grading scheme for the assignment. One of the reasons students do not follow directions is because there are no consequences for failing to do so.

The third reason teachers became angry relates to decisions made by administrators or public officials. Specifically, teachers voiced anger over those decisions that either increased their work load or that they perceived were ineffective or even disrespectful. Such anger is often rooted in two related interpretations. One, the very idea that someone who does not teach would be passing laws or making policy that influences what they do in

the classroom or how they spend their time, often times feels disrespectful. Second, there is often a feeling of powerlessness that is included in the interpretation of administrative decisions. Thus, in addition to the fact that your workload increased, there is a sense of decreased autonomy and decreased decision-making that leads to anger. A strategy for dealing with such anger, therefore, is to seek ways to regain some of that power and decision-making. For example, teachers might decide to express their concerns regarding a policy change using an assertive, respectful, and healthy approach. Likewise, they might want to find ways to work more closely with administrators to try and help them understand the impact of the decisions they make.

Last, for those teachers who become angry over the content of their course, there are multiple ways this anger can be used effectively in the classroom. First, there is an opportunity to teach students that anger can be a healthy, adaptive, and reasonable response. Further, this might be an opportunity to demonstrate that there are things we *should* be angry about (e.g., racism, sexism, climate change). Second, such anger provides a way of modeling appropriate anger expression. Instead of the multitude of ways that anger can be negatively expressed, a teacher can demonstrate the host of ways it can be positively expressed (e.g., letters to the editor, creating public service announcements). In fact, such anger can often be harnessed into class projects designed to address the problem you and students are angry about. In the case above where the teacher expressed anger every time he or she discussed institutionalized racism, the class could begin a project designed to inform the public about what institutionalized racism is and how it can be addressed.

### **Anger as a Reflection of Student Frustration**

Although this was not mentioned in the responses to the survey above, I find that teachers sometimes get angry when students struggle with the material. When students either collectively (i.e., the entire class) or individually (i.e., a particular student or small group of students) do poorly on an exam or an assignment or struggle to engage with class material, teachers may become frustrated. What is important to recognize about such frustration is that, assuming the students are putting in adequate time and effort, it is likely not anger at the student. Instead, it reflects the type of anger or frustration we often feel when our goals are blocked.

This is important because the frustration the teacher feels likely echoes the same frustration the student is feeling, and can lead to one of two outcomes: (1) diminished interest in the material, followed by giving up on trying to learn or (2) increased determination and increased feelings of success at goal accomplishment. First, when frustration becomes too intense, students and teachers may decrease their effort. This is particularly true for students and teachers with a low frustration tolerance who may have

difficulty working through frustration. Obviously, this is the worst possible outcome of student or teacher frustration. The other possible outcome, though, is that the student and teacher feel even greater joy after having worked through the frustration and obtaining their goal. From a teacher's perspective, it really speaks to the need to help students work through their frustration by modeling how to work through frustration themselves. Obviously, if a teacher conveys to a student, either explicitly or implicitly, that the frustration is too much and they should scale back their goals, a potential learning opportunity has been squandered.

### **Tips for Using Anger in the Classroom**

Although anger can certainly interfere with quality teaching, anger in the classroom has great potential to enhance teaching and learning. I have described several examples of how teachers can better handle their anger to enhance learning in specific types of situations. In summary, here are some general tips, with examples, for using anger effectively.

1. Remember that anger is not inherently bad: One of the first things teachers need to remember is that anger is inherently good in that it serves such an important role in our lives. That said, it does not always feel good to people and we often want to get rid of our angry feelings as soon as we can. That is what makes learning to deal with anger effectively so important.
2. Search for insight: Sometimes the reason for our anger is obvious. The provocation is such that our primary and secondary appraisals are very clear. In fact, sometimes the provocation is so clear that practically anyone would get angry in such circumstances. However, sometimes the origin of the anger is a little less obvious because it is not so much about the provocation as it is about our psycho-biological state at the time of the provocation or our interpretation of the provocation. It is very important for teachers to try to identify how these other two elements of the anger experience are shaping their feelings.
3. Modeling: Teacher anger has potential to help students develop their own understanding and management of anger, and can be used as an important teaching tool. By modeling appropriate and healthy anger expression for students, and by labeling it for students in that way, teachers have the ability to help students think about anger and use it as tool to motivate themselves and address issues.
4. Problem Solving: If there is one thing I have tried to make clear throughout this chapter, it is that anger alerts us to problems and energizes us to confront those problems. When we feel angry (and after our search for insight into why we are feeling that way), we typically find that there is a problem we need to address. Dealing with anger effectively is often about trying to solve that problem. Problem solving can take many different forms. In some instances, it might be trying

to clarify instructions or expectations for students. In other instances, though, it might be that we need to write letters to representatives, or become involved in administrative work to address issues we feel need addressing.

5. **Acceptance:** We need to acknowledge that sometimes the things that we are angry about reflect problems that cannot be changed or that we are powerless to change. In other words, some problems have no solutions. While that feeling alone can be frustrating, at a certain point, teachers need to learn to accept those situations and move on. Dwelling in the anger by ruminating or pouting will likely only make things worse.
6. **Seek Support or Therapy:** For some, the anger is too intense, too long-lasting, or harder to control. In some instances, it may be impossible to turn that anger into a positive learning experience for students. Similarly, the acceptance of problems that cannot be changed may be particularly difficult for some teachers. When this happens, it is important for teachers to reach out to trusted colleagues for support. Additionally, if the anger interferes with teaching or is otherwise problematic, meeting with a therapist to work through the anger-related problems may be warranted.

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*DR. RYAN C. MARTIN is a psychology professor and anger researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. He manages a blog and podcast, All the Rage, that provides up-to-date research, commentary, and tips on managing anger.*