

**Starter Kit**

# New to College Teaching

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**Everything new instructors  
need to know to be successful.**



## Starter Kit

# New to College Teaching

FOR THOSE NEW TO COLLEGE TEACHING, entering the classroom for the first time can be intimidating. Whether you are fresh from a Ph.D. program or transitioning into a new career as an university instructor, teaching presents a variety of challenges: How to connect with your students? How to make a big lecture feel personal? How can technology help — or hurt — in the classroom?

*Chronicle* editors searched our archive for the best articles and opinion essays to answer those questions. This collection includes analysis of teaching trends and tips from experienced professors, both those who love to teach and some who don't. For those just stepping into the role of college instructor, we hope this is an invaluable guide.

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# The Personal Lecture

## How to Make Big Classes Feel Small

By KATHERINE MANGAN

Cynthia LaBrake, a lecturer in chemistry at the U. of Texas, often has her 400 students break into small discussion groups. Her 1970s-era classroom, which is scheduled for an overhaul next year, has desks bolted into the floor, posing a challenge. “We crawl over the space to reach them,” she says. “It’s not ideal, but we make it work.”



ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN FOR THE CHRONICLE

AUSTIN, TEX.

**I**NTRODUCTION TO Psychology is about to begin. A student in the front row of the studio audience cues her 23 classmates to give her professors a rousing cheer. Cameras are rolling as the rest of the class — all 910 of them — tune in from their dorm rooms, coffee shops, and study rooms at the University of Texas flagship campus.

Over the next 75 minutes, they’ll watch a “weather report” that maps personal stereotypes by regions of the country (red zones splashed across parts of the Northeast mark areas of high neuroticism), and listen to an expert flown in from Stanford University discuss what someone’s Facebook “likes” reveal about her personality.

They'll participate in a lab exercise that matches students from the studio audience with their taste in music and groan when the burly guy who looks like a country music fan actually favors Lady Gaga. They'll take a pop quiz and watch a video clip of their professor snooping around someone's office for keys to his personality.

Welcome to a version of the giant intro class that's almost guaranteed to keep students awake.

For generations, students have complained about feeling like nameless specks in a cavernous lecture hall. Faculty members often dread a sea of blank faces, or worse yet, those absorbed by online shopping or video games.

As budget cuts intensify pressure to pack more students into these classes, universities are experimenting with ways to liven them up. The approaches can be high-tech, like the webcast psychology class, or they can be more rudimentary, like breaking big classes into small brainstorming groups or interspersing lectures with snippets about students' backgrounds gleaned from surveys. Regardless, the goals are similar: Make classes feel smaller and more personal.

Given economic pressures, "the large classroom is not going away," says Kathryn McConnell, senior director for research and assessment at the Association of American Colleges & Universities. "You can look at it from a deficit perspective and say, Here's everything that's wrong with it. But what if we flip that and look at what the scope and scale of this class could allow us to do?"

Three years ago, two professors of psychology, James W. Pennebaker and Samuel D. Gosling team-taught what they termed the first "synchronous massive online course," or SMOc, the precursor of the introductory psychology class Mr. Gosling now teaches with Paige Harden, an associate professor of psychology.

**T**HESE intro classes, with their short, snappy segments, may be bigger, Mr. Pennebaker says, "but they're psychologically smaller."

Teaching a small class of students while simultaneously beaming in hundreds of others gives the classroom a more dynamic and personal feeling than students would get from a MOOC, or

massive open online class, he says. More than 20 faculty members are now offering SMOcs.

"We want faculty to appreciate that our students are using online technologies most of the day," he says. "That's part of who they are."

Mr. Pennebaker is leading a university-wide effort, Project 2021, to redesign undergraduate courses at UT-Austin.

Part of the project's goal is to get instructors to rethink the traditional large lecture course with its emphasis on a single wise professor holding court in front of hundreds of students. Lectures can be effective teaching tools, says Mr. Pennebaker, but their impact is sometimes overrated.

"Faculty members are often bamboozled into thinking that students are going to remember all these pearls of wisdom we've tossed at them," he says.

**"Anyone who's been to a good lecture knows how you can be carried along by a gifted lecturer as they unspool a story and interpret it for the class."**

Because the program just began in January, it's too soon to measure success, but the factors administrators will look at include the number of departments redesigning their curricula, the changes that result in higher grades in subsequent courses, and increases or decreases in students' satisfaction with the quality of their education.

Much of the experimentation taking place at Texas is coordinated through its Faculty Innovation Center.

"The problem with lectures of over 50 has been that it's hard to know how students are doing and very difficult to have a discussion," says Hillary Hart, a senior

lecturer of civil, architectural, and environmental engineering who directs the center.

Sareena Contractor, a freshman who is enrolled in the psychology class, says the pop quizzes and interactive exercises keep her focused, even when she's working from home and surrounded by distractions. "I thought it was going to be like watching a TV show and I'd be getting up and doing stuff," she says. "They keep you engaged."

The start-up costs of setting up a studio like the one at Texas could run between \$750,000 and \$1 million, according to university officials. Once in place, the classes cost about the same to run as other large classes, Mr. Pennebaker says. The psychology class is being rerun in the spring to another 1,000 students and to several hundred more in the summer. The same studio space broadcasts to some 8,000 to 12,000 students who are enrolled in about a dozen other courses throughout the semester.

Not all the solutions to the impersonal lecture are as tech-heavy as the psychology class. Cynthia LaBrake, a senior lecturer in chemistry at Texas, has her 400 students break into groups of two to four to work on problems while a dozen undergraduate and graduate teaching and learning assistants circulate through the room. Her 1970s-era classroom, which is scheduled for an overhaul next year, has small desks bolted into the floor, making group work a challenge. "We crawl over the space to reach them," she says. "It's not ideal, but we make it work."

At the University of California at Berkeley, Martha L. Olney, an adjunct professor of economics, uses a similar approach in some of her courses. She breaks classes of 150 students into groups of three or four to discuss portions of her lecture — a technique she says takes getting used to. "If you're going to have 50 conversations going on at the same time," Ms. Olney says, "you have to be very comfortable with noise."

For larger classes, like her principles of economics class that typically enrolls more than 700 students, she manages to incorporate active learning, even if it's just using hand-held clickers to quiz students and be sure they understand the material.

That way, she says, students are getting feedback a half-dozen times a day,

# 5 Ways to Shake Up the Lecture

Transforming a large lecture class into a more personal, engaging experience doesn't have to involve high-tech gadgets and a team of production assistants. Plenty of other strategies work. Here are a few of the approaches that have gained traction.

## Flipped Class

Instructors seem to either love or loathe this approach, which reverses traditional teaching by giving students recorded lectures and lessons to access in the dorm or at home and using class time for hands-on assignments or projects.

Many students like being able to stop, start, and rewind a recorded lecture until they understand it. In class, students learn from one another while the instructor circulates through the classroom, acting as a facilitator or coach.

In order for this to go smoothly, students have to prepare extensively before they come to class. Faculty members who have struggled with the approach say that doesn't always happen, and some have responded by giving graded daily quizzes.

Variations of the flipped class abound. Many instructors flip only a portion of the class, or a few sessions a month. The most successful often take place in classrooms that have been redesigned to create collaborative work spaces.

## Scale-Up

One of the most ambitious efforts is the Scale-Up approach, which is being used at more than 250 campuses, according to Robert J. Beichner, the professor of physics at North Carolina State University who is perhaps its biggest champion.

Nine students sit at a round table in three groups of three, each with a laptop and whiteboard. The instructor gives them something interesting to investigate, and while they tackle the challenge, the instructor and assistant roam around the classroom, asking questions and sending teams to help one another. Depending on the enrollment, a classroom might have a dozen of these tables.

The acronym stands for Student-Centered Active Learning Envi-

ronment with Upside-down Pedagogies.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's version, known as Technology Enabled Active Learning, intersperses 20-minute lectures in physics with discussion questions, animations, and pencil-and-paper exercises.

## Small-Group Exercises

A more traditional lecture class can still be split up intermittently into groups so that lectures are delivered in 15-minute bursts rather than 50-minute orations.

Professors might check in with students from time to time using handheld classroom response devices, or clickers. When the answers (or silence) indicate the students are confused, the professor might ask them to brainstorm with someone sitting nearby.

Some faculty members create working groups at the start of the semester, aiming for a diverse mix of class years, majors, and demographics. The same groups meet throughout the year, so members are encouraged to sit near one another.

Other faculty members rely on ad hoc groups that change each class. Students are often graded on group assignments, which creates peer pressure for them to come to class prepared.

Collaborative learning works much better when seats swivel and desks aren't fixed. On a growing number of campuses, classrooms are being built with this in mind. Existing ones are being reconfigured to eliminate the long desks and bolted-down chairs that are typical of lecture halls.

## Undergraduate Assistants

Group work requires more assistants to roam the classroom and help keep discussions on track. There usually aren't enough graduate students to go around, so universities are hir-

ing undergraduate students who have done well in a class to help out for class credit or pay.

Having more teaching and learning assistants allows instructors to offer frequent short quizzes and writing assignments. This lets them engage students more deeply and assess them more regularly.

A 400-seat chemistry class at the University of Texas at Austin relies on a dozen undergraduate and graduate TAs circulating through the room to help students during group work. The instructor has developed a "peer learning assistants" course to train undergraduate chemistry majors to serve as learning coaches in large classes that use active learning. The goal is to give a small-seminar feel to a class that could seem large and impersonal.

## The Personal Touch

Even when it's impossible in a class of 300 to remember students' names, professors can personalize their lectures by referring to details that show they're interested in their students as individuals. Faculty members sometimes start by asking students to fill out a card listing personal tidbits like favorite songs, hobbies, or hometowns.

One professor asked students what songs they listened to when they were stressed; he then played a couple of selections before a test by a class favorite — Ed Sheeran, the English singer-songwriter. Another professor makes a point of asking students their names when she calls on them and then refers to them by name in her response.

And one asks two students to help him take notes when a guest lecturer is speaking. He then combines the three sets of notes to give to the class and takes the two student note-takers to lunch.

— KATHERINE MANGAN



and not just when they get a D on the economics midterm. If she throws out a question and gets a lot of blank stares, she might ask students to brainstorm for a few minutes with someone in the same row.

She tries to set the right tone from the start. When students walk in, she gives them a set of three to five questions they should be able to answer by the end of the hour. “That encourages them to listen for those things during the class,” Ms. Olney says. “They have to show their TA that they tried to answer, and they grade their own quizzes the next day.”

**O**NE of the most popular trends in recent years has been the flipped classroom, which usually involves having students watch videos and read course materials outside the classroom so that class time is used for hands-on experiences and discussions.

But students don’t always do the work before class, says Peter E. Doolittle, assistant provost for teaching and learning at Virginia Tech. Quizzes and short writing assignments can help hold students accountable, he says.

During the summer, Mr. Doolittle helped lead a national conference on teaching large classes, where faculty members critiqued various strategies.

In addition to clickers, some faculty members use programs that allow them to create interactive lectures.

Conference participants also described plenty of low-tech ways of engaging students.

Poster presentations, the staples of faculty conferences, are becoming increasingly popular assignments in large undergraduate classes. Groups of four or five students present their research findings at a public exhibition, and peers evaluate one another.

Another increasingly popular way to make the class feel smaller is to bring in undergraduate teaching assistants to supplement the work of graduate TAs. Undergraduates who have done well in a course can lead small-group discussions in exchange for course credit or pay.

“Undergraduate TAs provide extra eyes and voices,” says Mr. Doolittle. “They’re sources of energy, working with groups and helping keep discussions on track.”

The layout of the classroom can also

make a difference in student engagement. At Virginia Tech, as in many other universities, new classrooms are being built with interactive and technology-driven large classes in mind. Seats can be turned around and multiple screens project shared and student work.

Yet for some lecturers, these extra technological bells and whistles aren’t the key.

For Gabriel K. Harris, an associate professor of food science at North Carolina State University, creating a memorable experience in his 200-person class that he refers back to throughout the semester is what works.

Once, he fried mealworms and served

**“Humans are fundamentally hard-wired to remember stories, and when they do, the scientific principles associated with them will be retained.”**

them to willing students over rice with vegetables, then took the same insects, dry roasted them, and ground them into powder to add to oatmeal raisin cookie batter. What better way to make the point that insects can be a sustainable, high-quality form of protein that people will eat “if you don’t see six legs.” It’s the kind of experience they might go back and tell their roommate about.

“Humans are fundamentally hard-wired to remember stories,” he says, “and when they do, the scientific principles associated with them will be retained.”

**F**EW people would disagree that getting students more engaged in their education is a worthy goal. But with so much focus today on active learning, some faculty members feel like they’re expected to jump through

too many hoops to keep their students entertained. There’s something to be said, they argue, for getting multitasking, hyperconnected students to sustain attention on a full-length, well-crafted lecture.

Molly Worthen, an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says teaching centers are often biased against the traditional lecture.

“There are loads of resources for flipping classrooms and experimenting with other forms of active learning, but if you just want to become a better speaker, that isn’t something that’s advertised,” she says. “It isn’t perceived of as trendy.”

Students sometimes tell her they feel shortchanged if the faculty members who are experts in their fields turn too much of the teaching over to peer discussions. There’s nothing passive, she says, about listening to a lecture, synthesizing the key points, and taking effective notes.

“Part of what I’m doing when I’m on stage is modeling the act of analytical thinking,” Ms. Worthen says. “Anyone who’s been to a good lecture knows how you can be carried along by a gifted lecturer as they unspool a story and interpret it for the class.”

Ms. Worthen believes that a good lecture lays the groundwork for a richer, more informed discussion session than she would get if students watched videos to prepare for the class. Her introductory history classes, which typically enroll about 100 students, meet three times a week. Two of the sessions are lectures and the third is a discussion session for groups of 15 to 18 students with a teaching assistant.

Advocates for revamping the traditional lecture concede that persuading some faculty members to change traditional lectures can be a challenge, in part because there isn’t a lot of data showing what works.

Faculty members who flip their classrooms or try other techniques to get students involved risk flopping in their end-of-semester assessments, say Mr. Pennebaker and Ms. Hart at UT-Austin. Students are sometimes most comfortable with a class that rewards them for memorizing facts for a few exams per semester. Daily quizzes and graded group work make it harder to skate

through a class.

Even though they're key to keeping students engaged, daily quizzes haven't caught on with UT-Austin faculty, though, "because it's too damn much work," Mr. Pennebaker says.

Yet it can pay off in better attendance. In a typical course he teaches, about 60 percent of students were still showing up two-thirds of the way through the semester. After an overhaul that included daily quizzes, it was more like 95 percent, and students were scoring a full grade higher on their tests.

Moving some of his course work online also gave students greater flexibility and allowed him to expand his class sizes, especially for introductory courses. Big introductory courses allowed the university to offer smaller upper-divi-

sion courses, he says.

Faculty members, Ms. Hart says, are given incentives to try new techniques and not have to worry that they'll be punished if students don't immediately warm to the changes. Those incentives include pay bonuses for professors to prepare new courses or for departments to experiment with new curricula.

But elsewhere, changes can also be as simple as making an extra effort to connect with students on a personal level. When that happens, students tend to be more engaged in a class, and less likely to skip, says Windi D. Turner, an assistant professor of family and consumer sciences education at Utah State University.

She has each of the 180 students in her "Dress and Humanity" class fill out

an index card at the start of the semester with personal information, including something interesting about themselves.

When a student confided that she was an avid participant in "cosplay" — in which participants wear costumes to represent a specific character — Ms. Turner tracked down the student and asked if she'd mind explaining her hobby during a session devoted to how people play out different roles through dress.

"If the student feels like he's just a number and doesn't feel a connection or purpose," Ms. Turner says, "he feels like he could slip away and the professor would never know."

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## ADVICE

# *The 4 Properties of Powerful Teachers*

Even if you weren't born with some of these qualities,  
you can develop them

By ROB JENKINS

**A**merican higher education seems to be experiencing a kind of teaching renaissance. Articles on the subject proliferate on this site and others, suggesting a renewed interest and commitment to the subject across academe.

As a faculty member for almost 30 years, I have been inspired and motivated by all of the online chatter. It's made me think about the great teachers I've known — and I've known many, from kindergarten through graduate school and beyond. Several taught in my department when I served as chair, and I had the pleasure of observing them at work.

Those experiences have led me to conclude that, when we boil down all the metrics, we're left with four qualities that all powerful teachers possess. I'm not just talking about adequate, effective, or even good teachers. I'm talking about the ones who most move us, who have made the most difference in our lives, and whom we most wish to emulate. Perhaps we can't all be that kind of teacher, but I suspect many of us at least aspire to be.

So what makes those teachers so great?

## PERSONALITY

Nearly all of the great teachers I've watched in action have similar personality traits. To some degree, teaching is an ability, and just like musical or athletic ability, some people seem to have more of it than others. At the same time, just because you'll never play the Hollywood Bowl doesn't mean you can't do wedding gigs with your garage band. If you weren't born with the personality traits of a

great teacher, you can still work to develop some of those traits.

Just what are those traits? Here are some I've identified, and you could probably add to this list: Great teachers tend to be good-natured and approachable, as opposed to sour or foreboding; professional without being aloof; funny (even if they're not stand-up comedians), perhaps because they don't take themselves or their subject matter too seriously; demanding without being unkind; comfortable in their own skin (without being in love with the sound of their own voices); natural (they make teaching look easy even though we all know it isn't); and tremendously creative, and always willing to entertain new ideas or try new things, sometimes even on the fly.

If none of the above describe you, and you're afraid that means you'll never be a great teacher — well, maybe you're right. Or you can work to develop some of those traits and become a much better teacher than you are now. And if you're fortunate enough to possess several of those traits already — as I suspect is the case with many who choose this profession — then you can still work hard to fine-tune those qualities.

## PRESENCE

What I mean by that, in part, is the unmistakable capacity some people have to “own” any room. We might call it charisma, but it's more than that. It's the ability to appear completely at ease, even in command, despite being the focal point of dozens (or even hundreds) of people. To some extent, this aspect of presence is something you're either born with or not, although I would also argue that own-

ing the room is an ability people can develop over time.

But that isn't the only relevant meaning of the word "presence" in the context of great teaching. In his recent essay, "Waiting for Us to Notice Them," James Lang talked about what he called "a pedagogy of presence." He argued that, just as we are sometimes disengaged in our interpersonal relationships, so, too, can we become disengaged in the classroom — simply going through the motions and barely acknowledging students at all.

Yet the best teachers, as Lang concluded, are always "present" — fully in the moment, connecting with both their subject matter and their students. That's a type of presence to which we can all aspire, whether or not we're born with great charisma. All it takes is a degree of self-awareness, a little concentration, and a fair amount of determination.

## PREPARATION

Speaking of determination, something else all teachers can do, regardless of their natural gifts, is prepare meticulously. Knowing what you're talking about can compensate for a number of other deficiencies, such as wearing mismatched socks, telling lame jokes, or not having an Instagram account. Preparation occurs on three levels: long-term, medium-term, and short-term.

Most of faculty members have already accomplished the necessary long-term preparation by virtue of your advanced degrees. That preparation will serve you well, and be your primary source of authority, from your first day in the classroom until your last.

In between, you must continue your education on a regular basis — by reading extensively in your field, attending conferences and seminars, conducting and presenting your own research, and remaining a practitioner of your art or science. You must also continue to learn and grow as a teacher by exploring new advances in pedagogy and technology that can help you in the classroom.

And in the short term, to be a powerful teacher you must go into every single class meeting as prepared as you can be, given the time you have. That means more than just reviewing your notes or PowerPoint slides. It involves constantly reassessing what you do in the classroom, abandoning those strategies that haven't proved effective, or are just outdated, and trying new ones. It means being so familiar with your subject matter that you can talk about it off the cuff.

Some of that will come with time, as your level of familiarity with your subject will naturally increase the more you teach it. Then again, just because you've been teaching a course for 15 or 20 years doesn't mean you shouldn't approach it each

term as if for the first time. It's that level of preparation that allows great teachers to make it all look so easy.

## PASSION

Of all the qualities that characterize great teachers, this is the most important, by far. The Beatles famously sang, "All you need is love," and while in teaching that might not be entirely accurate, it is true that a little passion goes a long way. Or as St. Peter put it, love certainly "covers a multitude of sins."

Passion, or love, manifests itself in the classroom in two ways: love for students and love for your subject matter.

I'm always amazed, and more than a little puzzled, at how many of my colleagues don't seem to like students very much. Those faculty members are the ones who always buttonhole you in the hallway to talk about how irresponsible and disrespectful their students are; who take great delight in pointing out students' deficiencies or constantly regale you with examples of (supposedly) stupid things students have said or done; who are always tsk-tsking about "kids today."

I sometimes want to say, "If you dislike students so much, why are you in this business? Why in the world would you want to spend so much of your time with a bunch of people you find so disagreeable?"

Don't think, by the way, that students don't pick up on the disdain. They absolutely do. And my experience with evaluating faculty members over the years suggests that the teachers who are most widely disliked are the ones who most dislike students. Conversely, the faculty members who seem to love teaching and love (or at least really like) students are the ones who are the most popular and, I believe, the most effective.

You also have to love your subject matter. Students might not even like a course at first, especially if it's one they're required to take, but a teacher's passion for the subject can be extremely infectious.

Love of your field is probably a reason you became a teacher. But it may be that, after teaching the same thing year after year, you're beginning to get a little burned out. That's where preparation comes in. Perhaps becoming re-engaged with your field is just the spark your teaching needs to reignite the passion. Or maybe it's time to switch things up — bring in new reading assignments, try out some new technology, add a new in-class activity.

The point is that teaching is, in a way, like a relationship. You have to work hard sometimes to keep the passion alive, and yet it's vital that you do so. And if you don't, students pick up on that, too. If what you're covering in class every day seems to bore you, how do you expect them to be interested?

Maybe teaching just comes naturally to you. But even if it doesn't, you can still have a powerful impact on students. By learning what great teachers do and how they do it, and then applying those lessons in your own classroom, you could become one of the "greats," too. With apologies to Lady Gaga, your students will never know if you were born that way or not.

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## ADVICE

# The Messages to Send on the First Day of Class

By ANNE CURZAN

**W**ITH August almost halfway over, my mind has turned to the first day of class. When I first started teaching college-level classes, the first day seemed so straightforward it hardly required prep. As long as I had the syllabus finished, my lesson plan seemed to write itself: (a) introduce myself, (b) hand out and review the syllabus carefully, and (c) do some kind of icebreaker to learn students' names. Almost 25 years and many, many first class days later, I have abandoned the low-prep, autopilot lesson plan, with no regrets. I now spend much more time strategizing about the setup of the first day — and I don't review the syllabus until near the end of the class.

There is nothing revolutionary in my saying that I believe the first day sets the tone for the semester. So what tone does it set to review the syllabus at the get-go of the first class? For me, at least, not a very energizing or exploratory one. The syllabus is the class contract, filled with policies and assignments and due dates. It is important, without a doubt, but it is not the heart or the point of the class itself.

When I stopped to prioritize what messages I wanted to send on the first day of my undergraduate introductory linguistics course (just to take one example, probably because I will be teaching it this fall), I came up with: (a) I hope and expect all students will participate actively in every class; (b) Together we will explore the workings of the language they see and hear around them every day;

(c) Students will learn lots of interesting and sometimes random linguistic facts and gain the tools to answer their own questions about language; and (d) While this course will require a lot of work every week, the study of language can be very fun. No matter how many clever quips I embed in the syllabus, or how friendly and engaging I try to make it, the syllabus is not up to the task of sending these messages.

My classes are 80 minutes, and now I spend at least the first 40 minutes of the first day of my introductory course talking with students about language puzzles (e.g., if the boxes are "still unpacked," is there stuff in the boxes or not?), polling them about how they use the language (e.g., is a "sight for sore eyes" good or bad?), asking them for examples of new slang, listening to a current song that captures an intriguing linguistic phenomenon, taking an informal survey about what they believe is true or not true about language (e.g., the idea that women talk more than men), and the like. You'll notice that all of these activities are participatory, to establish from the very beginning that this is a class where students will be talking with each other and with me (it's also a chance to start learning names even before we get to icebreakers or going through the class roster). And all of the activities are designed to spark students' curiosity about language and to show them that this linguistics course will be relevant to their daily experience of language.

I do tell students near the beginning of class that

the syllabus will be coming, but in a bit, so that they can relax and participate in the activities without wondering whether I am ever going to give them a syllabus. Then when we get to the syllabus, I can relate the progression of topics and the goals of the essays to some of what we have already talked about in the class. I can also tie some of my policies (e.g., asking students not to be late to class and not to use laptops) to the kind of participatory learning community that they have already seen me try to create on the first day.

Each of us as instructors will have different messages we want to send on the first day. While I hear rumors that a few instructors are trying to scare off students (and I did see this as an undergraduate at a college where we had two weeks of “shopping period”), I think many of us are trying to engage students in our course, which they have already made the commitment of registering for, and to help them understand what to expect. I have be-

come a believer in showing students on the first day what the class will prioritize not only in theory but also in practice. If we are going to expect students to write in class, for example, why not use a short, engaging writing prompt at some point on the first day? If students are going to be solving problems in groups, why not do so on the first day? I know that students often have not read or mastered any of the specific course content yet, but we can always create a prompt or an activity that is self-contained and will welcome students to our classrooms and what we plan to do there more than any course description or schedule on the syllabus can.

*Anne Curzan is a professor of English at the University of Michigan. Her publications include Gender Shifts in the History of English and How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction*

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#### ADVICE

# *The Absolute Worst Way to Start the Semester*

By KEVIN GANNON

“**A**RE YOU KEEPING US for the whole time today? Because I need to leave in 20 minutes,” asked a student with a baffled expression on his face. As I looked at him, I wanted so badly to explain: Of all the ways you could have chosen to introduce yourself on the first day of class, that was not the optimal one.

At my university — as was the case at other institutions where I’ve taught — students call the first day of class “Syllabus Day.” Their expectation is that they’ll show up, the professor will hand out the syllabus, go through maybe 10 minutes’ worth of housekeeping stuff, and then turn them loose until the course really starts later in the week. My student was visibly deflated when I told him we would have class for the entire 50 minutes (though, curiously, he did not leave after 20 minutes. Victory!).

One way to approach that anecdote — the easy and tempting way — is to lament the laziness of Kids These Days™ and wail that no one values

education anymore. But since this isn’t a *New York Times* op-ed, I’d like to take another approach and talk about the actual teaching and learning implications of Syllabus Day. My student wasn’t asking for anything unusual from his perspective; he only sought affirmation that I would adhere to the expectations he had for our first meeting. And those expectations came from experience — his own and that of his peers.

There’s a reason that Syllabus Day has become a hallowed tradition and a nearly ironclad rule: So often, that’s all that happens when a class meets for the first time. Whether by accident or design, the pedagogical decisions we collectively make about the first day of our classes have conditioned students to expect nothing more than a syllabus (which they will likely leave unexamined for the rest of the semester), a few perfunctory introductions, a word or two about classroom conduct, and an early exit after about 15 minutes.

That’s the absolute worst way to begin a semester. Like the cliché says, we never get a second

chance for a first impression. And in our courses, first impressions go a long way. If we lament that students never check the syllabus during the semester, well, what was their first impression of that document? If we are frustrated that students don't take class discussion seriously, did we convey its importance when we introduced the class?

Many of the problems we encounter throughout the semester can at least be mitigated if we take a mindful approach to planning that first day of class. Here are some alternate approaches:

- Ideally, the first day gives students a taste of everything they'll be expected to do during the semester. If the course is going to be discussion-heavy, then a brief class discussion needs to be in the first day's plan. If students will be doing a lot of the group work, then a group activity should be on the docket. If you teach a large lecture class, and plan on interleaving activities such as think-pair-share or minute papers, give your students an opportunity to experience that routine on the first day, and model your expectations and feedback for them.
- In addition to modeling the specific activities, though, the first day is an excellent opportunity to convey your larger approach — your tone and style for the course. If the class is small enough, begin learning students' names right away by having them introduce themselves to both you and their peers. If you want students to engage in active learning, give them an immediate opportunity to do so.
- Take some time in that first class to do a mini-lesson on one of the exciting, weird, intriguing, or controversial parts of the course material. Let your own enthusiasm for the material shine, and let it be a model for your students. If you're teaching a new prep, use the novelty to your advantage — what are the interesting questions you're going to cover in the course?
- Sometimes an explicit discussion of your course structure — the pedagogical decisions you've made — can be powerful. By letting students peek under the hood and see the method and purpose of certain aspects of the course, you're demonstrating that they're partners in its success.

Whatever your plan for the first day, students should get some idea of what's expected of them throughout the semester, and also have the opportunity to discern their place in the class and its activities.

Just because we're rejecting the traditional iteration of "Syllabus Day" doesn't mean there's no place in the first class for a discussion of this crucial document. If my Twitter timeline this summer is any indication, we spend a lot of time creating our syllabi. Why ruin all that effort by merely passing it out to students and announcing "read this and let me know if you have any questions"? That doesn't invite students to examine what their experience will be for the rest of the term, nor does it spark their interest or curiosity. At the other end of the spectrum, though, reading the entire document aloud doesn't accomplish those goals, either — and instead can leave the impression that you're pedantic, some sort of apparatchik, or both.

A better strategy is to highlight important points and direct students to the information they'll need throughout the term. I'd also recommend you announce a syllabus quiz for later in the first week, especially if you plan on giving regular quizzes throughout the semester. That way, your

**In my experience, when students come up with a list of class expectations, they hold themselves to a higher standard than we would expect.**

first quiz can both: (a) encourage students to read the syllabus thoroughly, and (b) give them experience with the specific format of your assessments, but in a low-stakes environment that allows them to build some early confidence.

Another important first-day subject that tends to be a slog — though it doesn't have to be — is on policies and expectations for classroom conduct. When I was an undergraduate, I sat through many a class where we spent an excruciating several minutes listening to a list of don'ts from an instructor who treated us like unwelcome distractions rather than college students — and that was before the prevalence of laptops, cell phones, and other mobile devices in the classroom.

It's all too easy to wield a mighty ban-hammer in an attempt to prevent distractions in class. But a one-size-fits-all technology ban, for example, can be counterproductive (and illegal if you have students with documented disabilities who depend upon technological assistance). If you don't want devices out at all, and have sound pedagogical reasons for your stance, share those reasons clearly



with your students. If you don't mind devices used for class purposes (laptops for notes, cell phones for a voice-recorder app) — but are wary of all the other ways in which they can disrupt what's happening in the classroom — invite your students into the discussion on the topic.

I've had a lot of success with collaborative expectations-setting, in which I ask students how they would like to see our class work during the semester: What helps you learn? What gets in the way of your listening or comprehension? What distracts you? In my experience, when students come up with a list of class expectations, they hold themselves to a higher standard than we would expect. The collaboration gives students a sense of ownership over our class meetings; they've gotten to help frame how learning occurs on a day-to-day basis, and they're more invested in the course as a result. An additional advantage is that, when an incident does occur, rather than play the bad cop ("Please stop texting and put away your phone now"), I am merely reminding them of the rules they created ("Remember, we decided that cell phones were only for looking up class-related stuff"). It's a simple, but powerful, shift — and it originates with a mindful approach to the first day of class.

Opening day presents a unique opportunity in our courses. Our students haven't experienced anything yet, so there's a default level of interest which we can leverage with engaged teaching and a welcoming atmosphere. The tone we choose to set and the structure of activities we design can impart a positive first impression, and might also preempt some of the more common frustrations that pop up later in the term. Sure, some students will lament the passing of Syllabus Day, but the dividends from a more substantial and engaging first day will more than offset that disappointment.

We dedicate so much time to designing our courses, planning our activities, reading up on our content, and constructing our syllabi. We ought to ensure that time was well-spent by planning a first day of class that encourages students to become engaged participants in every aspect of the course. This fall, let Syllabus Day go — some traditions aren't worth keeping.

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#### ADVICE

# *Small Changes in Teaching: The First Five Minutes of Class*

By JAMES M. LANG

**"M**ANY years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."

In a conversation I had with Ken Bain, my long-time mentor and favorite education writer, he cited that quote — the first sentence of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* — as one of the great openings in literary history. It's hard to disagree: The sentence plunges us immediately into a drama, acquaints us with a

character on the brink of death, and yet intrigues us with the reference to his long-forgotten (and curiosity-inducing) memory. That sentence makes us want to keep reading.

When I teach my writing course on creative nonfiction, we spend a lot of time analyzing the opening lines of great writers. I work frequently with students on their opening words, sentences, and paragraphs. In that very short space, I explain to them, most readers will decide whether or not to continue reading the rest of your essay. If you can't grab and hold their attention with your opening, you are likely to lose them before they get to your hard-won insights 10 paragraphs later.



The same principle, I would argue, holds true in teaching a college course. The opening five minutes offer us a rich opportunity to capture the attention of students and prepare them for learning. They walk into our classes trailing all of the distractions of their complex lives — the many wonders of their smartphones, the arguments with roommates, the question of what to have for lunch. Their bodies may be stuck in a room with us for the required time period, but their minds may be somewhere else entirely.

It seems clear, then, that we should start class with a deliberate effort to bring students' focus to the subject at hand. Unfortunately, based on my many observations of faculty members in action, the first five minutes of a college class often get frittered away with logistical tasks (taking attendance or setting up our technology), gathering our thoughts as we discuss homework or up-

## Having the questions visible at the start of class, and returning to them at the end, reminds students that each session has a clear purpose.

coming tests, or writing on the board.

Logistics and organization certainly matter, and may be unavoidable on some days. But on most days, we should be able to do better. In this column, the second in a series on small changes we can make to improve teaching and learning in higher education, I offer four quick suggestions for the first few minutes of class to focus the attention of students and prepare their brains for learning.

**Open with a question or two.** Another favorite education writer of mine, the cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham, argues that teachers should focus more on the use of questions. “The material I want students to learn,” he writes in his book *Why Don't Students Like School?*, “is actually the answer to a question. *On its own, the answer is almost never interesting.* But if you know the question, the answer may be quite interesting.”

My colleague Greg Weiner, an associate professor of political science, puts those ideas into practice. At the beginning of class, he shows four or five questions on a slide for students to consider. Class then proceeds in the usual fashion. At

the end, he returns to the questions so that students can both see some potential answers and understand that they have learned something that day.

For example, in a session of his “American Government” course that focused on the separation of powers, the first question of the day might be: “What problem is the separation of powers designed to address?” And the last: “What forces have eroded the separation of powers?” Those questions are also available to the students in advance of class, to help guide their reading and homework. But having the questions visible at the start of class, and returning to them at the end, reminds students that each session has a clear purpose.

So consider opening class with one or more questions that qualify as important and fascinating. You might even let students give preliminary answers for a few moments, and then again in the closing minutes, to help them recognize how their understanding has deepened over the course period.

**What did we learn last time?** A favorite activity of many instructors is to spend a few minutes at the opening of class reviewing what happened in the previous session. That makes perfect sense, and is supported by the idea that we don't learn from single exposure to material — we need to return frequently to whatever we are attempting to master.

But instead of offering a capsule review to students, why not ask *them* to offer one back to you?

In the teaching-and-learning world, the phenomenon known as the “testing effect” has received much ink. Put very simply, if we want to remember something, we have to practice remembering it. To that end, learning researchers have demonstrated over and over again that quizzes and tests not only measure student learning, but can actually help promote it. The more times that students have to draw information, ideas, or skills from memory, the better they learn it.

Instead of “testing effect,” I prefer to use the more technical term, “retrieval practice,” because testing is not required to help students practice retrieving material from their memories. Any effort they make to remember course content — without the help of notes or texts — will benefit their learning.

Take advantage of that fact in the opening few minutes of class by asking students to “remind” you of the key points from the last session. Write them on the board — editing as you go and providing feedback to ensure the responses are accurate — to set up the day's new material. Five minutes of that at the start of every class will prepare students to succeed on the memory retrieval

they will need on quizzes and exams throughout the semester.

One important caveat: Students should do all of this without notebooks, texts, or laptops. Retrieval practice only works when they are retrieving the material from memory — not when they are retrieving it from their screens or pages.

**Reactivate what they learned in previous courses.** Plenty of excellent evidence suggests that whatever knowledge students bring into a course has a major influence on what they take away from it. So a sure-fire technique to improve student learning is to begin class by revisiting, not just what they learned in the previous session, but what they already knew about the subject matter.

“The accuracy of students’ prior content knowledge is critical to teaching and learning,” write Susan A. Ambrose and Marsha C. Lovett in an essay on the subject in a free ebook, because “it is the foundation on which new knowledge is built. If students’ prior knowledge is faulty (e.g., inaccurate facts, ideas, models, or theories), subsequent learning tends to be hindered because they ignore, discount, or resist important new evidence that conflicts with existing knowledge.”

Asking students to tell you what they already know (or think they know) has two important benefits. First, it lights up the parts of their brains that connect to your course material, so when they encounter new material, they will process it in a richer knowledge context. Second, it lets you know what preconceptions students have about your course material. That way, your lecture, discussion, or whatever you plan for class that day can specifically deal with and improve upon the knowledge actually in the room, rather than the knowledge you imagine to be in the room.

Here, too, try posing simple questions at the beginning of class followed by a few minutes of discussion: “Today we are going to focus on X. What do you know about X already? What have you heard about it in the media, or learned in a previous class?” You might be surprised at the misconceptions you hear, or heartened by the state of knowledge in the room. Either way, you’ll be better prepared to shape what follows in a productive way.

**Write it down.** All three of the previous activities would benefit from having students spend a few minutes writing down their responses. That way, every student has the opportunity to answer the question, practice memory retrieval from the previous session, or surface their prior knowledge — and not just the students most likely to raise their hands in class.

Frequent, low-stakes writing assignments constitute one of the best methods you can use to solicit engagement and thinking in class. You don’t have to grade the responses very carefully — or at all. Count them for participation, or make them worth a tiny fraction of a student’s grade. If you don’t want to collect the papers, have students write in their notebooks or on laptops and walk around the classroom just to keep everyone honest and ensure they are doing the work. Limit writing time to three to five minutes and ask everyone to write until you call time — at which point discussion begins.

In my 15 years of full-time teaching, the only thing I have done consistently in every class is use the first few minutes for writing exercises, and I will continue to do that for as long as I am

**In my 15 years of full-time teaching, the only thing I have done consistently in every class is use the first few minutes for writing exercises, and I will continue to do that for as long as I am teaching.**

teaching. I love them not only for the learning benefits they offer, but because they have both a symbolic value and a focusing function. Starting with five minutes of writing helps students make the transition from the outside world to the classroom.

So don’t limit student-writing time to papers or exams. Let a writing exercise help you bring focus and engagement to the opening of every class session. Build it into your routine. Class has begun: time to write, time to think.

In writing, as in learning, openings matter. Don’t fritter them away.

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## ADVICE

# All the Classroom's a Stage

By SARAH ROSE CAVANAGH

**O**NE crisp fall evening during my freshman year of college, I gathered up my courage and struck out across the campus to audition for my university's amateur theater season. In performance after performance, I could tell I was pretty flat, and I could read an answering flatness in the eyes of the judges.

After a series of frustrating flops, a young woman popped out of one of the audition rooms and summoned three of us in. She announced that — rather than reading lines from a play — we would be doing improv.

Any form of acting involves vulnerability — of taking something earnest inside yourself and laying it bare in bright light, risking ridicule and rejection. But a script allows you some protection, at least. You didn't generate the ideas, you only delivered them. In improv, however, it's all you. Given only the sheerest of prompts, you share something of yourself with no chance to consider, prepare, or rehearse.

The director explained that she would give us one word and we'd act it out with whatever came to mind — words, movement, song. I took a deep, nervous breath.

"Hymen," she said.

I froze. I felt exposed, my face hot. But I also really, really wanted this part. So I closed my eyes. I summoned all of my deep, conflicted emotions and surrendered to them, without judgment or sense of propriety or shame. I became my feelings. And then I acted them out.

It was the only callback I received that day.

**Teaching is acting.** If you teach, you are acting. Like acting, your best performance will stem from tapping into your true emotions and connecting with your audience on an authentic level. But you are still crafting an act using speech, movement, and props — and laying it before a critical audience. Your highest hope isn't that your students will approve, necessarily, but that they'll be moved, or somehow changed intellectually and emotionally.

If you ask your students to participate in class activities or discussions, they, too, are acting. They are pulling ideas and words out of themselves, choosing different tones or stances, and

putting all of that on display for your approval.

I was already intrigued by the intersections of teaching and acting when I ran across a recommendation by the psychologist Tom Stafford that all teachers read *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, a 1979 tome about teaching improv by the acting coach Keith Johnstone. Little did I know the book would forever change not only how I teach but also how I think about human interaction in general.

**Lessons on status and vulnerability.** Early on in *Impro*, Johnstone makes the claim that nearly every human interaction involves manipulating one's status with reference to someone else — making yourself or the person you're interacting with bigger or smaller, more or less important.

In the weeks after I read his book I saw people manipulating their status everywhere I looked. An older couple on the train squabbling over whose aches and pains were worse were jostling for status. In battles with my 10-year-old, I now saw an innately high-status creature eternally frustrated by the low status awarded her by virtue of childhood. Most heartbreakingly to me, a passing female undergraduate in the hall scoffed to a male one: "I have no idea how I got that A. Probably just lucky guessing."

Teachers, especially college professors, come with high status preinstalled. We sweep into the room with our Ph.D.s, our jargon, our mysterious notes to shuffle, and, of course, our ability to cast judgment on students in ways that could open or close doors to their desired futures.

Then we demand that they stretch out their tender necks and hazard guesses that might betray their ignorance or (worse) their shallowness or strangeness of thought. "The student hesitates not because he doesn't have an idea," Johnstone says, "but to conceal the inappropriate ones that arrive uninvited."

We ask students to risk all of that, not just in front of us, but also before their peers, who wield a different sort of status — the power to giggle or roll their eyes. "Laughter is a whip that keeps us in line," observes Johnstone.

Such pressures are present for every student. But just imagine how much heavier the burden for

students who walk in already under a big spotlight due to their ethnicity, gender identity, or disability status. No wonder so many students risk getting docked a few participation points rather than lay their unadorned thoughts on the table to be scrutinized. To participate is to risk a lowering of one's status.

**What can professors do about that state of affairs?** Johnstone suggests we intentionally lower our own status — make ourselves vulnerable. In his own classroom, he tells his theater students that if they fail, he is to blame, not them. It frees students from worrying about losing status if they do something wrong, and allows them to take risks.

A colleague of mine, Esteban Loustaunau, an associate professor of Spanish, adopted a similar tactic in his courses. Students often are leery of talking in the classroom, he says, because they believe they start the class with an A and anything

## Students often are leery of talking in the classroom because they believe they start the class with an A and anything they share could lower their grade.

they share could lower their grade. Cleverly, on the first day of class he tells them, “Right now, you are all failing this class.” That simple reframe illustrates that what they say from that point on will not endanger their status but elevate it.

In *Impro*, Johnstone argues that it's critically important for teachers to model self-disclosure in the classroom. Especially when you're asking students to take creative risks, it does no good to simply reassure them that they aren't going to be dinged for the content of those risks. A student needs “a teacher who is living proof that the monsters are not real, and that the imagination will not destroy you,” Johnstone writes. “Otherwise the student will have to go on pretending to be dull.”

**The most dangerous phase — and how to avoid it.** This past spring was one of the worst teaching semesters of my life. I was unable to get students to volunteer for critical class roles. They seemed resentful of assignments, and held me at an emotional remove. That experience, so different from most semesters, has honestly flummoxed

me, particularly since it occurred during a semester in which I had a reduced teaching schedule (thanks to a grant) and thus more time to prepare and plan.

I stumbled onto a potential explanation in a work by Paul Kassel, an actor, a professor, and dean of the College of Visual & Performing Arts at Northern Illinois University. In his 2006 book, *Acting: An Introduction to the Art and Craft of Playing*, Kassel warns of the dangers of increasing competency. In delivering a highly polished presentation, you may have lost a critical energy — both your own vitality and your capacity to evoke an answering liveliness in your students.

When you have taught a class on a given topic 1,000 times before, all the decisions have been made, all the turning points smoothed over into polished curves. That's a problem because it is just that moment of decision — what to do, what to say — that snags interest, that creates energy, that keeps the audience on the edge of their seat: “Once a decision is made the audience need not attend as closely, for decisions have inevitable consequences. Once someone jumps up, we all know they will come down. It is the deciding to jump that creates the suspense.”

Having everything preplanned and running smoothly in the classroom also means you are high status again — you alone know what is coming next and how it will go.

It is scary to begin teaching a course that is completely untested, that is loosely prepared, and that is flexible to student input or to your own decision-making in the moment. But as Kevin Gannon, a professor of history and head of the teaching center at Grand View University, says in his teaching manifesto, “If I want my students to take risks and not be afraid to fail, then I need to take risks and not be afraid to fail.”

Taking risks and trying new things also allows you to approach your teaching from a playful, lively perspective. I had forgotten the lesson I learned in my improv audition — that the best performances, the most moving and effective ones, stem from the raw, authentic energy you summon in the act of creating.

Consider what might happen if you release your hold on your high status, if you chance being earnest and vulnerable, if you strive to play.

Such is my plan for the fall.

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## ADVICE

# Rethinking the Exam

By KEVIN GANNON

**I**N THE WEEKS approaching midterms, I've been thinking a lot about testing. That's partly because I redesigned the survey course I'm teaching this semester, and overhauled the assessments I'm using. Ironically, the principal question that's occupied my thoughts is the same one that regularly emerged in anguished groans at 3 a.m., during my undergraduate career:

Why do we even do exams in college, anyway?

The answers I have now are different from the ones I had then. (It's always different on the other side of the podium.) College Me believed exams were similar to hazing — professors inflicted tests on us because they could, and since they were required to give us grades, something had to be there for us to try and earn points. Professor Me now knows that — when done well and designed appropriately — exams aren't meant to haze, but rather, to measure student progress on specific course objectives.

Exams should challenge students and push them to demonstrate their learning. But assessment shouldn't be weaponized (though, sadly, in some corners of academia, it is). Exams are just one tool in our assessment toolbox. And like a hammer, exams can build what we want when used well, but break things when used for the wrong purposes.

I thought about this a lot last year, while doing the research that led to my course redesign. I realized that I hadn't really thought very intentionally about one of the course's major pieces, at least in terms of how students' grades are determined. My exams had remained essentially as they were since I began teaching — a blend of short-answer and essay questions, with the rare addition of a multiple-choice section to assess familiarity with

basic course content.

Why did my exams look the way they did? Because that's the way they looked in the courses that I was a TA for in graduate school, that's why.

Even with years of teaching experience since then, there were still areas of my pedagogy that remained as they always had been — unexamined and essentially running on autopilot. My exams were one of those areas. I don't think that's unusual. As academics, we spend a lot of time talking about things like classroom-instruction techniques, designing effective research assignments, teaching information literacy, using digital tools — the list goes on and on, yet exams seem to be something we take for granted. And then we end up testing as we were tested, in ways that may or may not align with the actual goals we have the course.

So what are exams for? Our courses have out-

comes — things we tell students (along with parents, accreditors, and other external audiences) that they will learn, or accomplish, or be able to do as a result of successfully completing our classes. Assessment is simply how we prove they did so, and exams are one component of that assessment.

It's not enough to say, for example, "my students have an understanding of the people, events, ideas, and processes that shaped

the history of the United States from 1789 to 1898." I have to provide evidence that they, indeed, acquired and continue to possess that understanding. Just as we ask our students to deploy well-chosen and appropriate evidence to support their claims in a research paper, we have to model the same types of evidence-based practice in our courses.

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Examinations can be — and for many courses are — a significant portion of the evidence that we use to demonstrate student learning. That means our exams ought to have learning outcomes attached, and those outcomes ought to align with our course's learning outcomes. Like a set of Russian nesting dolls, our individual assignments, exams, papers, and other course activities all ought to have outcomes that connect them with the larger goals of the course.

In my own case, I had those alignments clearly articulated and intentionally built into my other course assignments, but not for my exams. Without paying attention to how tests might be doing the work of assessing students' progress toward my course goals, the best I could do if someone asked me why I gave exams would have been to stammer something along the lines of "well, I want to see if they've learned anything." But I would not have known how to use those exams to prove whether my students had done that.

I went into the process of rethinking my exams believing that it would be a matter of format. Multiple choice? Essay questions? Take-home test? In-class? However, I quickly realized that intent and outcomes needed to come first.

Now when I design an exam, it has its own set of learning outcomes attached. From those outcomes flows the decision-making process regarding the exam's specific format. Am I trying to gauge whether students understand and remember specific concepts, people, and events? Then multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, or matching questions may be the most effective format. Am I trying to go beyond basic content literacy to look at high-order skills like evaluation and synthesis? In that case, subjective questions — particularly essay questions — would be the appropriate choice.

Most of us are familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy. I've found its articulation of different levels of student activity to be a useful guide for how I conceive of my exam's particular learning outcomes. But I've also had to be careful, as it is all too easy to associate one type of question format with a particular level of the taxonomy. It is possible, for example, to write effective multiple-choice questions that get at the parts of Bloom above the understand-and-remember base.

Some exams, however, need to do work that goes beyond the specific course we're teaching. A nursing course that seeks to prepare students for their board exams probably ought to use tests that mirror the board exams. An instructor teaching a senior-level accounting course might choose to build exam questions that help students prepare for their licensure requirements. Even in such cases, though, thinking intentionally about the exam's purpose helps to clarify its structure and format.

That's the key to writing effective exams: discernment. What are my goals for this exam? What am I asking it to assess? How can I ensure that it gets me the right materials with which to do that assessment accurately and well?

Of course, as I realized in doing the reading and research for this process, discernment is the key to effective course design as well. It was humbling to realize that — despite my assiduous efforts over the years to design effective assignments and other course activities — I'd basically left my examinations untouched.

As it turned out, my exams for this particular class aligned only partially with the overall course outcomes, and any alignment that occurred was in spite of, certainly

not because of, the amount of attention I paid to their design. I ended up making significant revisions to the exams. I know now that my mistake was in thinking that exams, by their very nature, were effective tools for assessment. Not so. Only through the same type of process we use on our courses — defining outcomes and then aligning material and assignments with them — can exams perform the type of work we want them to in our courses.

When exams are in alignment with course objectives, we can tell the story of our students' learning more effectively and meaningfully. That alone makes the process of rethinking and, if necessary, rebuilding our examinations eminently worthwhile.

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**What are my goals for this exam? What am I asking it to assess? How can I ensure that it gets me the right materials with which to do that assessment accurately and well?**



# Could Grades Be Counterproductive?

By BECKIE SUPIANO

Some institutions, like Hampshire College, give students descriptive feedback instead of grades, arguing that narrative transcripts do a better job of capturing what students have learned.



BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES

A “STRESS REDUCTION POLICY” listed on a University of Georgia business professor’s course syllabi brought the kind of attention this week that colleges prefer to avoid. Among other things, the policy — since removed at the behest of the dean — would have let students get the grade of their choice upon request if they felt “unduly stressed” by the original mark.

The policy was covered by Campus Reform, a website that presents itself as a watchdog against liberal bias in higher education, and made its way across the internet from there.

The professor, Richard Watson, did not respond to a request for comment from *The Chronicle*, and the purpose of the policy remains unclear. Some observers took it as a commentary about the state's campus-carry law, while others suspect that he was trying to make a point about the distinction between earning grades and learning.

Whatever his aims, Mr. Watson's original policy raises deeper questions about how grades do and don't work.

### **What if students had a say in assigning their own grades?**

Students are reasonably good evaluators of their work, says David Boud, a professor and director of the Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning at Deakin University, in Australia. But the extensive body of research comes with two important caveats, he says. First, not all students evaluate themselves equally well. "Good students tend to slightly underestimate themselves," he says, while "weak students tend to grossly overestimate themselves."

Secondly, the quality of students' self-evaluations differs depending on whether they count toward grades. When grades are on the line, students inflate their evaluations, as one might expect.

For that reason, Mr. Boud argues, it rarely makes sense for students' self-evaluations to factor into their grades. But students still need to learn how to assess their own performance, he says. After all, that's a skill they will need in their professional lives after college. "If they graduate and can't make judgments about the quality of their own work," Mr. Boud says, "we have failed them."

### **What if grades are counterproductive?**

Grades do have some value, says Diane Pike, a professor of sociology at Augsburg College. For instance, "grades can be a helpful indicator of consistency of performance across courses," says Ms. Pike, a former director of the college's Center for Teaching and Learning.

But too often, Ms. Pike says, grades are asked to be things they are not: an

assessment of learning, or a complete evaluation of students' work. Grades, she says, are a summary statistic. Knowing that one student got an A and another a B tells you that the first student's performance was rated higher. But it doesn't tell you why.

Grades can actually hinder learning, says Jeff Schinske, a biology-education researcher and biology instructor at Foothill College, who co-wrote an article laying out the evidence on the purpose and impact of grading.

Feedback can take many forms: It can be evaluative, offering a summary judgment like a letter grade; it can be descriptive, offering comments; or both.

**"The grade locates all the authority in the faculty member and makes the student a passive recipient."**

The trick is providing the right kind.

Evaluative feedback without descriptive comments can have negative consequences, Mr. Schinske says. Students who get a low score may become anxious and less engaged. Those who earn a high score can become motivated — but to keep getting high scores, not to learn.

Providing evaluative and descriptive feedback together has mixed results, he says. As a researcher cited in Mr. Schinske's paper put it, "The grade 'trumps' the comment." Professors may labor over comments that students don't even read: They want to know their grade, not the thinking behind it.

Descriptive feedback alone, he says, was the most effective. But that approach is rare.

There are other ways to make grades better, Mr. Schinske says. One is to give students some credit for their effort, which has been shown to be motivating. Letting students evaluate their work and that of their peers is also effective.

### **What if there weren't grades at all?**

A handful of colleges do give students descriptive feedback instead of grades. Such institutions, which include Alverno, Goddard, and Hampshire Colleges, argue that narrative transcripts do a better job of capturing what students have learned. All three colleges also have students write self-assessments, though whether they factor into formal faculty evaluations varies.

These colleges have been using narrative evaluations for decades, but there hasn't exactly been a rush of others following suit. And to be sure, they each have somewhat unconventional approaches to curriculum that might pair especially well with narrative feedback.

Still, their experiences prove that it's possible to graduate students without awarding them grades. And those experiences suggest some shortcomings of the conventional system.

There are practical reasons that grades don't make sense at Goddard, says Josh Castle, the registrar. There aren't any exams, and each student's course work is personalized. But underneath that is a philosophy, he says, that "the introduction of extrinsic rewards corrupts the purpose of education" — student learning.

Grades also alter the dynamic between students and professors, says Rachel Rubinstein, dean of academic support and advising and an associate professor of American literature and Jewish studies at Hampshire. "The grade locates all the authority in the faculty member," she says, "and makes the student a passive recipient." Narrative feedback, she says, makes students more responsible for their own learning.

Students aren't awarded grades, they can't earn a grade-point average, either. That means students aren't penalized if they struggle at first and get better over time, says Laura Wenk, dean of curriculum and assessment at Hampshire.

Similarly, students aren't penalized for taking a class outside their comfort zone or pursuing an unusual approach to completing an assignment. "In a graded system, students are a little afraid to take a risk" says Kathy Lake, acting vice president for academic affairs at Alverno. "Because of our system we don't find that."

*Originally published August 10, 2017.*

# A New Generation of Digital Distraction

By BEN GOSE

Jeffrey McClurken, a history professor at the U. of Mary Washington, encourages students to use their digital devices, but only for classroom purposes. “All too often bans are more about classroom management rather than a pedagogical decision,” he says.



NIGEL HAARSTAD, U. OF MARY WASHINGTON

**G**ENERATION Z has arrived on college campuses, and is reshaping the debate about the use of digital devices in the classroom.

The new crop of traditional-aged students, which follows the millennials, includes those born roughly between 1995 and 2010. They have been dubbed “digital natives” for their comfort with — and addiction to — devices like smartphones. Many spent their high-school years pounding away on school-supplied Chromebooks.



For years, college professors have fallen into two camps: those who believe cellphones, laptops, and tablets should be allowed in class, to assist with instruction and to model responsible usage of the devices, and those who believe the devices should be banned, to eliminate distractions. But the latest generation of students, some experts say, are so wedded to their phones that flat-out bans may simply heighten students' anxiety rather than help them focus.

"I'm a Gen Xer, and if you ask me to turn off my device for a few hours, I don't feel any sense of anxiety or loss," says Corey Seemiller, an assistant professor of organizational leadership at Wright State University, and co-author of *Generation Z Goes to College* (Jossey-Bass, 2016). "But if you ask a young student to do that, they may do what you want externally and turn the device off, but internally they're wishing they were somewhere else — seeing who is texting them back, or who's on Snapchat.

"Is that what you want?"

Nevertheless, the addictiveness of the devices is leading an increasing number of professors who had formerly tolerated them to explore restrictions. Clay Shirky, an associate professor of arts at New York University, allowed devices until 2014, but then abruptly banned them when he realized too many of his students were mentally absent during class.

"It's not about whether there's a body in the classroom," Mr. Shirky says. "It's about whether there is a brain in the classroom. I'll admit I'm not as interesting as Facebook. I'm stacking the deck."

Colleges have generally stayed above the fray, allowing faculty members (many of whom spend committee meetings staring at their own devices) to set their own policies. Teaching centers at many institutions have issued short guides on the pluses and minuses of allowing devices.

The University of New Hampshire is among a shrinking group that sets "no devices" as the default, unless a professor makes an exception. In practice, many apparently do: Christen Palange, a 2017 graduate, says few instructors ever mentioned it. She learned of the policy during her sophomore year, when a professor began yelling after a student cracked open a laptop.

Ms. Palange says she was sometimes

distracted during her college career by classmates using devices, and occasionally surfed the web herself during dull moments.

But she also recalls the benefits of having phones and laptops in class. Her laptop helped with note-taking: She would download lecture slides before class, and then annotate them as the professor spoke. When one professor mentioned a 1950s song that was unfamiliar to students, a classmate quickly found it on his phone and played it for the class. And during a class about weather, Ms. Palange and her classmates were able to track a coming storm in real time.

Bans miss the point, she argues: College is a time for students to begin taking personal responsibility for knowing when to set aside electronics and focus. "I don't know of any job that my class will go into where we won't be using a

## What might become more common in the future is a ban on device bans.

computer and have access to the internet," she says.

Jeffrey W. McClurken, a history professor at the University of Mary Washington, allows students to use their phones and laptops, but only for classroom purposes. "All too often bans are more about classroom management rather than a pedagogical decision," he says. "The world is changing incredibly fast. If we're not preparing students to engage with these tools, then we're doing them a disservice."

For faculty members who don't want devices in class, some experts advocate weaning students off them.

Larry D. Rosen, an emeritus professor of psychology at California State University-Dominguez Hills, suggests giving students a "tech break" for one minute to check and send messages. Instructors should initially schedule the breaks every 15 minutes, he says, but then gradually increase the time between breaks to teach students to focus.

In her own research, Ms. Seemill-

er, co-author of the book about Generation Z, has found that younger students are far more likely than older ones to send pictures during class, usually via apps like Instagram or Snapchat. Rather than try to stamp out such behavior, she brainstormed ways to incorporate it.

In one assignment in an organizational-leadership course, students had traditionally been asked to work with a partner and write down their personal strengths. Instead, Ms. Seemiller gave students 10 minutes to run around campus and use their phones to take a picture of something that illustrated their No. 1 strength. The students shared the photos with her via Dropbox. Later, each student got up to talk about his or her top strength as a slide show of the photos played in the background.

"I found it created a lot deeper reflection than just working with a partner," Ms. Seemiller says.

Many instructors say they have reduced digital distraction by simply talking to students about the downsides of using devices.

Dozens of studies about devices in classrooms now exist. Among the findings: students stray off-task more than they think they do; device users fare slightly worse in classes than nonusers; and even those who use a laptop only for note-taking — with no off-task surfing or texting — perform less well than note-takers who write. (The theory is that students who write on paper are mentally processing the information, while laptop users are mindlessly transcribing.)

"The most important thing is that you explain to students" why devices can be harmful, says Sherry Turkle, a psychologist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the author of *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin Press, 2015). "Students are starting to catch on that the costs are greater than the rewards."

Some professors say policies should vary based on the type of class — or even the type of student.

Siva Vaidhyanathan, a professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, says he bans devices in small seminars but encourages students to use them during large lectures.

"In a lecture hall with 300 students, if

**Hinda Mandell, an associate professor of communication at the Rochester Institute of Technology, bans electronic devices in her classes.**



MEGHAN MARIN, RIT UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY

20 students are playing Candy Crush it's not going to make that big a difference," he says. "But in a seminar, just one student playing can puncture the mood."

And he notes that a ban might be more viable at the University of Virginia, with a large population of traditional-age students, than at an institution with many working adults. "If you tell a 35-year-old mother of two kids to turn a phone off in class, that's pretty insulting," he says. "She needs to know if the buses stop running, or if the babysitter can't make it."

Professors who favor bans must be prepared to accommodate students with disabilities. For instance, a student who has trouble focusing, perhaps due to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, might receive an accommodation to use voice-recognition software to record a lecture.

"That's one thing I haven't had to work out," says Hinda Mandell, an associate professor of communication at Rochester Institute of Technology, who bans devices from all of her classes and hasn't yet encountered a student needing an accommodation. "Obviously, I'm not going to

do something that's against the law."

Technological advances are hindering some old strategies for keeping students off their devices. The University of Chicago Law School shut off wireless internet access to most classrooms in 2008, and that policy is still on the books. But the block on Wi-Fi is less effective today, as students increasingly access the internet via data plans on their phones.

Thomas J. Miles, the school's dean, admits the Wi-Fi block has become "moot," but adds: "The policy still sends an important message to students that when we are in the classroom, it's important to be focused on an intellectual discussion about law."

What might become more common in the future is a ban on device bans. Among the reasons: concern about meeting the needs of disabled students; the growth in the number of students using digital textbooks, often for cost reasons; and university emergency plans that rely on contacting students through their cellphones.

At the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, it is "expected practice" that instructors not ban laptops, since a ban

could discriminate against a student with disabilities, according to Donna Ellis, director of the university's Centre for Teaching Excellence. Even if an exception were made for that student, the accommodation would inappropriately "out" the person, notes a web page maintained by the center.

That position "is probably where a lot of us will end up," says Kevin Gannon, a history professor and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University. "I don't think that's a bad thing."

Mr. Gannon talks to students on the first day about how their use of devices can affect their own performance, and the experiences of students around them. But then he lets each class set its own policies on devices.

"I've been much more successful with that than with the usual 'thou shalt nots,'" Mr. Gannon says. "I have not completely eliminated distractions, but I'm striking a balance between good classroom function and treating students as mature adults."

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## ADVICE

# Playing With Technology

By JAMES M. LANG

**I**N 24 years of teaching, I've worked with a lot of experts in instructional technology, and without exception, they all preach the same mantra: Pedagogy first, technology second. Design your learning goals, they all say, and then we can help you determine which technologies might help you meet those goals.

I'm grateful for that reasoned, cautious approach. The last thing I want in my classroom is some new gizmo that has been pushed on me by an IT staffer, that I have to fumble with in front of a group of bored students, and that will expire in a shower of sparks just when I need it most. Over the course of my career I've spent many hours staring in bewilderment at a variety of classroom technologies — from overheard projectors and DVD players to VGA cords and display control panels.

Yet despite my admiration for a measured approach, my own recent experiences have persuaded me to adopt a more playful, exploratory attitude on this front. Rather than seeing ed tech as a simple servant to my pre-existing classroom goals and practices, I have come to recognize how it can help shape the goals I might set for my students and the practices I might adopt to improve their learning.

That lesson unfolded for me over the past year, as I have been incorporating peer instruction and electronic polling into my courses. The form of peer instruction that I use derives from the work of Eric Mazur, who began posing questions on course concepts to his physics students at Harvard University in the 1990s. First, he asked them to respond on their own, and then to explain or justify their answers in quick discussions with their peers. Afterward, if they'd changed their minds, they could resubmit an answer.

Mazur used their responses to pace his instruction: If most of the class answered correctly, he could move on to new topics; if not, he knew that he had to spend additional class time on the concept. To get a quick overview of students' responses, Mazur gave them handheld clickers, with the results visible to him on a computer screen. Nowadays, in most college classrooms, clickers have mostly been replaced by online polling technolo-

gies that enable students to use their own phones or laptops.

When I first read about peer instruction, it struck me as a terrific teaching strategy, but one I didn't immediately adopt. That may have been because I was intimidated by the prospect of using handheld clickers — although you can just as easily do peer instruction without the technology, with the help of colored index cards. Still, for whatever reason, I recognized it as a great idea but didn't use it.

The book that persuaded me to give peer instruction a try — and that helped me feel comfortable with electronic polling — was Derek Bruff's *Teaching With Classroom Response Systems*. It provides a rich array of methods for using polling technologies (or personal-response systems) to promote better classroom experiences. Although it was originally published in 2009, Bruff's book remains for me an essential read on understanding how technology can foster better learning.

Drawing primarily on Bruff's work, I began experimenting with polling a couple of years ago when I gave keynote lectures and led faculty workshops. I was astonished at how effective it proved in enlivening a lecture or gathering quick and useful feedback from the audience. I used Poll Everywhere, a free service (with paid upgrades for those who wish to use them) that I found easy to understand and manage.

When I finally started using Poll Everywhere in my actual courses, I did so — as any good instructional technologist would recommend — cautiously and in service of my existing teaching practices and course objectives. An essential goal for me in every course has always been to make students feel comfortable participating in class, and to encourage as many of them as possible to speak up. Peer instruction, aided by electronic polling, gave me an opportunity to invite quiet students to engage more actively in class, both through the polls and through the subsequent discussions.

My initial poll questions invited students to voice their opinions about works we had read, or offer interpretation of specific passages. For example:



- As an easy starter question for students who were reading Zadie Smith's complex novel *White Teeth*, I asked: Which character did you find most compelling?
- In a literature-survey course, after students read Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," I asked: Give a one-word interpretation of the meaning of the goblin fruit in the poem.

Early on in my peer-instruction forays, I usually followed Mazur's model: I would pose a question, ask students to reply via their phones or laptops, and then invite them to turn to a neighbor (or two) and explain or justify their answers. Polling absolutely increased student engagement, both during those peer conversations and in the larger class discussion afterward.

This past semester, I decided to try peer instruction in my first-year composition course. I was seeking a new way to teach an old chestnut: how to avoid writing comma splices. That grammatical error dwarfs all others in my students' papers, but is not an easy one to fix.

Enter peer instruction: I wrote five sentences — some of which had comma splices and some of which did not — and put them up as poll questions. Students could simply indicate "correct" or "incorrect" for each one. After casting their vote on each, students had to turn to their neighbor and explain their responses.

As I eavesdropped, and later as we discussed each sentence as a group, I discovered something that had never occurred to me before: Even students who answered correctly could not articulate the relevant grammatical rule.

As they worked through each sentence with one another, though, I saw light bulbs beginning to illuminate in their minds — something that I'm quite sure has never happened before while I was teaching a grammatical rule. Even in their exploratory, fumbling conversations, students were figuring out how to explain the concepts of dependent and independent clauses to one another — and in so doing, were learning it for themselves.

After class, a student whose first paper had been littered with comma splices told me that it was the first time he really understood the problem, even though he had been taught it many times before. I have seen a significant difference in the papers that followed throughout the semester, with substantially fewer comma splices.

I saw enough positive effects from my classroom experiments that I could easily have stopped there. But once I became comfortable with electronic polling, I began to envision other ways I could put it to good use. I've been convinced in recent years of the power of offering students more autonomy in class, and letting them help make decisions about the direction of the course or the nature of assessments. Polling opened up a new way for me

to collect their suggestions on the course.

I realized that I could pose questions about recent or forthcoming content, gauge their interest or assess their comfort level with a topic, and adjust accordingly (on the value of such adjustments, see David Gooblar's excellent essay). For example:

- In a literary-theory class, I asked students a poll question about the theories that they found most — and least — difficult to understand. The results were the opposite of what I would have predicted: They all felt comfortable with feminist theory and baffled by postcolonial theory.
- In a literature-survey class, students responded to a question about which of the Romantic poets we had read seemed most — and least — relevant for us today. Congratulations to Robert Burns, and condolences to William Wordsworth.

In both classes I've made adjustments to my course plans based on their responses. I have asked students these kinds of questions in the past, but doing so in an open discussion usually leads to a few dominant voices expressing their singular views. Done as a poll, all of the students got to express their opinions, and could quickly see how their peers felt — something I know they found illuminating as well.

Electronic polling snuck into my class through peer instruction, but once it had arrived, it opened my eyes to other pedagogical goals and practices. This semester I am teaching in a classroom outfitted with some high-tech collaborative-learning machinery, and although I have not yet mastered its intricacies, I'm much more open and curious about it than I would have been even a year ago. I've invited my students to explore it with me, and we have been engaging in a little bit of technological play.

I don't advocate here for incorporating technology in the classroom if you're uncomfortable with it, or if continually experimenting with ed tech threatens to disrupt the flow of your courses. But I have come to recognize how the road between technology and learning can be a two-way street. Sometimes technology can help us achieve the learning goals we have already set for our students — and sometimes, if we remain open to new possibilities, it can spur us to think anew about our own teaching goals and practices.

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## ADVICE

# Knowing When to Teach Current Events

5 questions faculty members should ask themselves before they weave a recent controversy into their courses

By NOLIWE M. ROOKS

**T**HE SHOOTING DEATH of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by a white police officer has generated national and even international discussion about racial profiling, police brutality, and racial and economic segregation in the United States. Many of those conversations have taken place in public in the form of news reports, town-hall meetings, blog posts, and numerous “think” pieces in the media. Given the rapid rise of Twitter hashtags like #TeachingFerguson and #FergusonSyllabus, and the Facebook conversations on the topic, it would appear that similar conversations are also taking place in college classrooms across the country this fall.

Consider that in early September, *The New York Times* ran a story titled, “Teaching About Ferguson,” with resources and ideas drawn primarily from those who teach history. A few weeks earlier, *Psychology Today* did the same for psychology professors. And in late August, *The Chronicle* looked specifically at how a variety of professors in the St. Louis area were planning to incorporate the events in Ferguson, Mo., into their courses.

Because the controversy took place just as many professors were finishing up their syllabi and preparing to enter the classroom, it is little wonder that there was widespread interest in including the fatal shooting, the aftermath, and the underlying causes in our teaching. Of course, the events of the past summer might just as easily have had professors wondering about how to include a focus on the Israeli bombing of Gaza, the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Africa, or sexual assault on college campuses.

So this was not the first time, nor will it be the last, that professors have had to consider how to include rapidly unfolding current events in their courses as a way of connecting the classroom with the “real” or “everyday.” But it may be time to ask a

different question: Should everyone who wants to add such content to their courses actually do so?

Revising a syllabus to include popular culture and current events is not always in the service of the course or in the best interest of students. Not all news events are easily incorporated into every classroom, and it’s easy for a professor inexperienced in handling sensitive topics to do more harm than good.

I have grappled with these types of questions over the past 20 years—most often when teaching sensitive or awkward topics involving race, gender, or politics. Here are five questions I have developed to ensure that my enthusiasm for a particular topic doesn’t outweigh the overall goals and aims of the course:

**1. Does including the topic allow me to teach students something that, within the context of the overall aims of the course, I think is important for them to learn?**

Like most college professors, I have a general idea of what I would like students to know by the time they leave my class. That may include specific dates, names, places, moments, and scholarly arguments put forward in the readings. But just as often, I have structured a course so that students will be able to answer a question about the differences in, for example, what constitutes political organizing if it’s from the grass roots or the political elite. If the topic currently in the news challenges, makes more complex, or is particularly illustrative of an overarching theme I’m focusing on, then I may revise the syllabus to include it.

**2. Am I familiar with enough scholarly sources to contextualize the moment or event beyond what is readily available in newspapers and social media?**

If my choosing to “teach” a subject will ulti-

mately amount to little more than chatting with students about what has been written in the mainstream or digital news, in my Twitter feed, or on my Facebook page, I will probably not teach it. If I am engaged by a topic, in order to teach it I have to be able to contextualize it with relevant scholarly work that I can present in a lecture or assign as readings. If I can't do that, then I might chose to just spend a few minutes at the beginning or end of class, during which we all share what we are thinking about the subject and how it's being represented in social media.

**3. Is more gained by my teaching this topic than by my leading a town-hall meeting, urging students to organize a panel, or allowing them to discuss the issue during the first few minutes of class?**

More than any other question, this is the one that has stopped me from revising a syllabus to include a unit on a current-events topic. If I am contemplating spending a week or more of class time on one topic primarily because I want to know what students are thinking about it, or think students need to let off steam, then I will probably choose to work with student groups to host an event or workshop that can accomplish those aims, rather than rework my syllabus.

**4. Is this my “lane”?**

There are certain topics, figures, regions, and historical eras about which I know enough to teach to others. I take those things to be my lane. Lanes can certainly change as our interests and training do. Like many professors, I have an opinion and can make an argument about many topics. But having an opinion, or the ability to make an argument, is not a substitute for training, research, and knowledge.

**5. If I introduce a new topic into the course, am I prepared to teach students what they don't know but may need to know in order to fully understand it?**

It's not always possible to know what students come to class having already learned. But it's often possible to hazard a guess. For example, a few years ago, the Southern Poverty Law Center published a report, based on the National Assessment of Edu-

cational Progress, that found that more than half of the states fail at teaching the civil-rights movement. If a current-event topic requires a certain amount of background knowledge in order to teach it effectively, then I either have to further revise the syllabus to include that background information or take a pass on teaching that event.

This semester I am teaching a course, “The Black 70s,” about race, activism, protest politics, and popular culture during that decade. We were always going to begin with a survey of urban rebellions and uprisings from 1964 to 1968, as a sort of “prehistory” for the course. By Week 3 we were going to be looking at the executive summary of the Kerner Commission

reports on the riots of 1967, which chronicled the reasons each riot took place and outlined how government action and inaction were ultimately responsible. The commission found the main causes to be police brutality and overreaction; race-based disparities in housing, education, and employment; racial segregation; anger and frustration allowed to fester without acknowledgment or redress for far too long; and a basic lack of interest on the part of a majority of whites living in suburban communities regarding the lives and well-being of black Americans.

In the context of my course this fall, the circumstances that led to the events in Ferguson this summer helped to explain and make real a past that students had previously only dimly understood. That past in turn became a key means of un-

derstanding the contemporary consequences of both community and government inaction in the face of race-based injustice. For both periods of time, the students in the course are gaining both the skills and the knowledge to help explain for themselves and to others all the ways, as the Twitter meme says, that #BlackLivesMatter.

When the marriage of a current event and a course are that tightly intertwined, there isn't a need to ask any other questions beyond one: How quickly can I get that syllabus revised?

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**If a current-event topic requires a certain amount of background knowledge in order to teach it effectively, then I either have to further revise the syllabus to include that background information or take a pass on teaching that event.**

# Teaching the Art of the Difficult Classroom Conversation

By VIMAL PATEL

Christina Bohannon, a law professor at the U. of Iowa, is helping to develop a workshop for graduate students on how to facilitate difficult conversations in the classroom



COURTESY OF CHRISTINA BOHANNAN

**A**CADEME HISTORICALLY hasn't paid much attention to preparing graduate assistants for the complexities of managing a classroom of undergraduates. That was the case for John C. Keller, now dean of the graduate college at the University of Iowa.

"When I was a graduate student," Mr. Keller says, "my introduction to teaching undergraduates was, 'Here are the slides and hand-outs. I'm going to be out of town this week. Give the lecture.' If they had teacher-preparation activities back then, I sure didn't know about them."



Colleges have come a long way since 1982, when Mr. Keller earned his doctorate from Northwestern University. Iowa, for example, plans to soon start offering graduate students a new workshop on how to facilitate difficult conversations in the classroom. Mr. Keller says that while graduate students of all generations could have benefited from such a workshop, today's minefield of political and social issues requires even the most experienced educators to step carefully.

The workshop on difficult conversations will be part of a new series of workshops for graduate teaching assistants, created partly because a survey showed that TAs received lower student-satisfaction scores than faculty members. Also, Iowa's president, J. Bruce Herrald, a business-minded leader who has been controversial among faculty members, wanted teaching assistants to have more training. (Speaking at a Staff Council meeting in 2015, Mr. Herrald said that any professor who went into class unprepared "should be shot." He later apologized, calling it an "unfortunate off-the-cuff remark.")

Christina Bohannon, an Iowa law professor who teaches a similar workshop for faculty members, is helping develop the graduate-student version. She spoke to *The Chronicle's* Vimal Patel; the interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q. Can you give me an example of something you want to teach in these workshops?**

**A.** I first talk about the First Amendment. I'm a law professor. At a state institution, faculty need to know they are governed by the First Amendment. Students do have a right to express their views, even if they are controversial. They don't get to yell or disrupt the class, but if it's germane to the subject and someone has a contrary view, they can express that. That is sometimes unclear to people because they want to be sensitive to all the diverse groups in the class.

**Q. So your goal seems to be to allow students to express a view, however controversial, if it's relevant, while trying to make everyone in the class feel welcome. How do you do that?**

**A.** Exactly. That's really what this is all about. I first talk about the material. You need to include a variety of viewpoints in your material. Students are typically much more likely to engage if they see

**"You have to be almost relentless and think, every day, did I do enough to get them to talk?"**

their viewpoint already represented or if they see someone like them has been represented. If you're a conservative student feeling like everyone around you is liberal, you'd feel more comfortable about expressing your viewpoint if the instructor includes your viewpoint in the readings. In my own classes, I've come in and expressed a controversial view that swims in the opposite direction of most. And I'll say, What do you think about that? It's amazing the response I get.

**Q. What was a time you did that?**

**A.** I was teaching torts. We were talking about sexual assault, and consent. I raised the issue of affirmative consent, and showed them the university's policy on affirmative consent. [The policy states, in part, that sexual consent occurs only when both partners agree to have sex and that "consent is never implied and cannot be assumed, even in the context of a relationship."] I asked the students, Does this go too far? Is it realistic of what actually happens in real life? Nobody wanted to talk. After class, a male student came up to me and said a lot of men probably had thoughts but likely didn't feel comfortable saying them in class.

So the next day I brought up the same issue again. I said, "Nobody talked about this yesterday, but I think there's a lot more here than the conversation we had." Then I read part of an article from a female professor [Laura Kipnis, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe"], who argued that we've kind of gone way off the deep end and we treat women too much like victims. After that, I had 40 hands up. Everyone wanted to talk. It was a really interesting conversation. You have to be almost relentless and think, every day, did I do enough to get them to talk?

**Q. Is there a line, and how do you know when a student has crossed it? And what do you do if they have?**

**A.** That's hard. The first question is, have

they crossed the line? When they clearly have, I won't say it's easy, but it's easier because you know you have to say and do something. But sometimes it's hard to know if a line has been crossed. First, you're making these decisions in real time. That's the hardest part. The key is to take more of the decisions out of real time. In other words, plan more so you're not making so many decisions in that heated moment.

For instance, the stuff I was saying about the diverse viewpoints. If students feel represented in the materials, they're less likely to get their backs up about something. Also, frame the discussion at the beginning of class. You start by saying, 'Look, we're going to cover some difficult topics in class. We need to be able to do that civilly and be respectful of views you find controversial.' And then when it happens people aren't so shocked by it, and if I have to I can remind everyone of the ground rules. And then maybe come back to the subject in a slightly softer way. Also, part of taking it outside of the class means that you follow up with students afterward if there is a difficult moment in class.

**Q. The academy in general is clearly paying more attention to pedagogy and other classroom skills than it did a generation ago. But I still hear from graduate students who say they receive little or no training before they start to teach. Why is such training still hit or miss?**

**A.** When I started teaching, I think they just assumed that I was smart and I had seen good teaching before and I would figure it out. The truth is, most of the time you do. It might take a while, and you might have some bumps along the way, but I think over time you do. But we can do a lot more to train new faculty and especially graduate students, who are just evolving from students to teachers themselves. It's especially important now in this politically charged environment.

It's hard enough to get the material together, but the piece that's been missing is the classroom-management piece. You're often managing a class with more than 100 or 200 students at a time. And any one of them can say or do anything at any moment. Managing that can be hard, and that's where we need to focus.

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## ADVICE

# *I Don't Like Teaching. There, I Said It.*

BY SIDNEY PERTH

I WILL never forget the day. I was in my third year of graduate school and had reached a point where I was comfortable discussing things with a faculty mentor. Perhaps letting down my guard too easily, I told him that I was not so sure I liked teaching.

That was an understatement. My admission wasn't because of a bad episode. And it wasn't that I was experiencing my first taste of burnout (that would come later). Rather, my discomfort with teaching stemmed from the broad experience I was gaining in the classroom. My Midwestern state university required teaching assistants to lead four 50-minute tutorials each week for a large introductory course. I had four semesters of that behind me, and two small courses that I taught on my own during summers.

I had become aware of just how repetitive teaching can be, of how few students had much interest in the topics to which I wanted to devote my life, of how universities thwart learning in various ways, of how sometimes I was too tired to enjoy a class or was just not in the mood to teach, and of the many pedagogical failures and disappointments that I would face if I continued. The list of cons has multiplied since then.

The mentor to whom I spilled the beans had won teaching prizes and honors at college, university, and even national levels. His response? He didn't like teaching, either.

The effect of his remark was liberating. I had been captive to the claim that I would be good at teaching only if I liked it. Discovering that I didn't like it had led me to think that I was not fit for aca-

demic life, and that I should leave teaching to people who liked it.

The connection between enjoying teaching and being a good teacher admits of plenty of exceptions. We all know people who genuinely love teaching but are not good at it. In fact, enjoying teaching because one enjoys the spotlight might increase the likelihood that one is an ineffective teacher.

I'm certain some readers are thinking: But if you enjoy teaching for the right reasons, wouldn't you be more likely to be good at it? Perhaps that is right. But even so, another attitude works just as well: I don't enjoy cutting the grass, but I do a good job anyway because I care about how my yard looks. Plenty of things are like that: exercising, changing diapers, cooking risotto, doing the laundry, picking up trash. You don't have to enjoy something to do

it, and you don't have to enjoy something to be good at it. Do all good writers like doing the writing? Do all of them enjoy it?

So if you don't like teaching, don't worry about it. You don't have to like it; you just have to care about it. For many faculty members, that's much easier. Reasons to care are numerous: democracy needs more educated and critical citizens; being educated correlates with higher levels of happiness; teaching affects your annual

performance evaluations. The list goes on. I chose to write this essay under a pseudonym because the pressure to publicly pledge your love for teaching means that some administrators and colleagues at my institution, having read this, would recall only that I dislike teaching, not that I nonetheless make an effort to be good at it.

And all is not lost if you have crossed over the

**So if you don't like  
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line to disliking teaching. It is still perfectly possible to do a good job, even an excellent job. In fact, it probably happens on your campus every semester. The trick is as simple as it is human: Hide your dislike. Effective teaching is, after all, a set of behaviors. What students need from us are clear presentations, careful selections of course material, engaging discussions—in short, the right behaviors. One of those is hiding your dislike. Students don't learn by peering into your mind to see if you are enjoying teaching. Why would it matter to them if you feign it? It isn't a wedding.

Take grading papers, an activity to which many of us are deeply averse. Don't we often dislike grading because we care about whether our students are learning, and we think they have fallen short? If you were indifferent, you might not dislike grading papers so much.

The same points apply to other aspects of teaching. Several semesters ago, I found that I no longer enjoyed working with a particular undergraduate. He showed promise in the major early on but soon plateaued and no longer pushed himself to learn more. But I found plenty of reasons to continue to care: He was still learning, he clearly deserved to pass my course, and he deserved the degree. Shifting my attention to those things motivated me to

continue doing a good job. And through it all, I hid my dislike.

Even if liking and enjoying teaching are neither necessary nor sufficient for being a good teacher, I found out some years ago that it is a mistake to not pause and reflect during those times that I actively dislike what I am doing in the classroom. Sometimes I have discovered that I have slid into ineffective teaching. Gripe sessions with colleagues hinder more than they help. I just have to take note, reflect, and shift my attention from whatever I am disliking about a particular course to what I care about it.

Too often we look at whether a colleague or a prospective colleague seems to like teaching, and then use that as a proxy for whether they are good teachers. We should look at whether they engage in the right behaviors. And for those of us who sometimes find ourselves not liking teaching, let's not feel guilty. There is nothing wrong with not liking what we do. There does not have to be anything debilitating about it, either.

*Sidney Perth is the pseudonym of an associate professor in the humanities at a university in the Midwest.*

*Originally published June 5, 2013.*

# What Professors Can Learn About Teaching From Their Students

By BECKIE SUPIANO

Specially trained undergraduates like Guatam Panakkal (right) lead sessions where students assess an instructor's teaching in a course they're currently taking.



MAX WHITTAKER FOR THE CHRONICLE

**M**ARCOS E. GARCÍA-OJEDA wants to improve his teaching. He has flipped his classroom and embraced active-learning techniques. And he's even invited some observers to sit in on his "General Microbiology" class here at the University of California at Merced on a recent afternoon.

The observers will give Mr. García-Ojeda, an associate teaching professor of biology, a detailed depiction of the teaching and learning in his class — actions that are central to a college's purpose but rarely examined.

This examination is especially unusual because of who's performing it: undergraduates. The observers — three current students and a recent graduate — are part of a program called Students Assessing Teaching and Learning, or Satal. And they have been trained in an array of techniques: observations, interviews, focus groups.

Professors may be fond of students, on balance. But if an interloper wanted to blend in at a faculty gathering, casually dismissing the opinions of undergraduates would be a convincing approach. Course evaluations? Useless. Designing a college around students' needs? Selling out.

The program pushes back against this view. At the heart of its work is the assertion that students have something valuable to say about teaching. In fact, it's precisely because they're students that they possess a unique ability to translate the perspectives of their peers.

The four observers arrive just as class is about to begin. The classroom they're walking into is an unconventional one, specifically designed to foster active learning. It has no clear front or back — there's a podium in the middle, with rectangular tables, each equipped with a screen, arranged in a square around it. As a result, there's no obvious place for the observers to sit, so they improvise quickly, borrowing some chairs from the classroom next door and positioning themselves at the edges of the room, two on each side.

Gautam Panakkal is one of them. He pulls his chair to the far side of the room, across from the door. Leaning back in his seat with his backpack between his feet, he pulls up a spreadsheet on his laptop. The first of its five columns is for the time — the observers record what is happening every two minutes. The remaining columns are for notes on what the students and instructor are each doing and for coding those behaviors using a classroom-observation tool. The code "MG," for instance, indicates that the instructor is "moving through class guiding ongoing student work" during an "active learning task."

The observers had split up who would track the behavior of the instructor and that of the students, but Mr. Panakkal, who is a psychology major, finds he has time to do both. The class unfolds without tangent or disruption, and students

remain on task.

The class has nearly 90 students, who work with their tablemates in groups of about 10. Mr. García-Ojeda wanders from table to table, speaking briefly with one group before moving along to the next. Sometimes he gathers the whole class together and asks a series of questions.

About half an hour into the class, Mr. García-Ojeda projects a diagram showing the forces that influence how a positive ion moves across a membrane. He asks if the membrane potential and gradient always work in the same direction. A student murmurs "no."

"Somebody said no," Mr. García-Ojeda says. "An example of an ion in which that will not be the case, then?"

There's a pause. Finally, a student says he has a guess: "Sodium."

## **It's easy to dismiss students' feedback about teaching. But students may bring some special advantages to the task.**

Mr. García-Ojeda welcomes the attempt and draws the student out. "Tell me about sodium," he says. The student begins to explain, but trails off, apparently losing confidence. "Sodium ... or potassium?" Mr. García-Ojeda offers. "So now tell me about potassium."

The student finishes explaining, this time using the correct ion.

"There we go," says the professor.

On his spreadsheet, Mr. Panakkal types: "Students feel comfortable answering questions because of the informal atmosphere the professor creates."

**I**T's easy to dismiss students' feedback about teaching as inexperienced and rife with biases. But the program at Merced is rooted in an opposing view — that students may actually bring some special advantages to the task.

Because they're taking other classes at

the university, students in the program can tell professors how a class fits into a cross-section of students' experiences of Merced. The students working in the Satal program can help explain where their peers' feedback is coming from, and what it might mean. And because of that peer relationship, the student workers may be able to get better feedback in the first place. Students are often willing to talk more openly with fellow students than they are with a faculty member about challenges they encounter.

At some colleges, getting a new initiative off of the ground can be a challenge. At Merced, it's practically unavoidable — the university, which has some 7,000 undergraduates today, enrolled its first ones in 2005. So when Adriana Signorini returned from a conference excited about a program at Brigham Young University in which trained students gave teaching feedback, Merced's Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning, where she works, gave her a green light to create something similar.

The Satal program began in 2009 with five paid student workers, and now has 11. New students go through an orientation, and continuing training is a key feature of these campus jobs. In the course of an academic year, the program will provide Merced professors with about a hundred services, which include observations, interviews, and focus groups.

If professors aren't convinced that they should listen to what students have to say about teaching, there's good reason for their skepticism. Typically, feedback comes from course evaluations. And course evaluations are as ubiquitous as they are famously flawed. They're an important moment in the relationship between student and instructor, but they don't seem to be working all that well for anyone.

Instructors' disdain for course evaluations is often personal. Most can probably recall comments that were irrelevant, inappropriate, or simply outside of their control.

But the problems are systemic. Students' comments, research shows, are influenced by their instructors' race, gender, and attractiveness. Even if these biases were corrected, course evaluations might not be a good measure of teaching, anyhow. What they really capture, their many critics argue, is student satisfaction.

All of that matters because course eval-

uations often feed into decisions about tenure and promotion, or in the case of adjunct professors, continued employment. On top of everything else, feedback in evaluations is often quantified in ways that one mathematically informed critique argues makes little statistical sense.

Students, for their part, have little incentive to put much effort into their feedback. Evaluations are usually distributed at the end of the term. So even if students have a great suggestion for how a class could be improved, and the professor decides to make the change, they won't be around to benefit from it.

Ms. Signorini believes the Satal program can improve the quality of course evaluations at Merced. The plan: offer a short training on how to provide valuable feedback to a broad swath of the university's students.

If that project is successful, it might have a side benefit: priming more of the university's professors to seek out the program's other services — its observations and interviews that can give professors insight into what's really happening in their classrooms.

Those insights only make a difference, though, if professors are willing to adjust their teaching.

**N**OEMI PETRA, an assistant professor of applied mathematics, regularly seeks out the center's services for new insights on her teaching. On this day, Mr. Panakkal and Brian Vasquez are interviewing students in her numerical-analysis class, a small upper-level math course. About a dozen of them are clustered in the first few rows of a lecture hall.

Mr. Panakkal and Ms. Vasquez guide students through three questions: "What helps your learning in this class? What changes could the instructor make to improve your learning?" and "What actions could you take to improve your learning?" The questions are designed to keep the focus on students' learning, not their satisfaction.

First, Ms. Petra's students answer these questions in individual written surveys. Then they break into groups to discuss and record their answers. Students in one group have an animated conversation about how Ms. Petra should give them more examples. Those in another group keep to themselves, looking down at their papers.

Finally, Ms. Vasquez and Mr. Panakkal open the floor for students to share their comments and to gauge consensus. When the discussion turns to changes the instructor could make, the students say they want Ms. Petra to give more examples. "Could you put, like, in reference to, like, with actual numbers?" one student says. "More examples with numbers."

Mr. Panakkal types the comments, which appear on a projector so that everyone can see. Ms. Vasquez asks students to raise their hands if they agree. The whole

**"Interviews like these can reveal small problems with easy fixes, misunderstandings between professors and their students, say, or things the instructor does that inconvenience students and serve no educational purpose."**

class thinks that more examples with real numbers would help. Mr. Panakkal takes note of that, too.

Seven of the students agree with the next suggestion, that Ms. Petra could offer more office hours. One student adds they should be Mondays and Fridays, but not everyone agrees. The students go on to raise several points about the homework, including a desire for the professor to post correct solutions after their work is graded.

The structure through which Mr. Panakkal and Ms. Vasquez solicit feedback is built deliberately. It helps Ms. Petra's students articulate their own opinions instead of resorting to group-think

and gives them space to share thoughts they might not be comfortable expressing in a group.

The next morning, the students and Ms. Signorini walk Ms. Petra through her results. "Apparently," says Mr. Panakkal, "all 11 of them who were there said that they would like more math problems with actual numbers in them."

Ms. Petra is not surprised — she's heard students make this point before. "They're hitting the level in math where things are getting more abstract," she explains.

It's only natural for students to ask for more real numbers. After all, that's what math has been about up until this point. But it's Ms. Petra's job to get them to the next level of understanding the discipline. That puts her at odds with her students, at least a little bit. From the professor's perspective, the students are asking for something that won't ultimately help them.

Interviews like these can reveal small problems with easy fixes, misunderstandings between professors and their students, say, or things the instructor does that inconvenience students and serve no educational purpose. Sometimes, though, they describe students' frustration with challenges that are inherent in the learning process.

Ms. Signorini mentions that she and the students discussed similar feedback with a different professor recently. It can help, Ms. Signorini explains to Ms. Petra, to link challenging work back to the course's learning outcomes. A professor could even begin a course by having students buy into the idea that it will develop deeper abilities than rote memorization, she says.

Conversations like these are why Ms. Petra is a big fan of the program. Students observed the very first course she taught at Merced, in the spring of 2015, and she's had a class interview done every semester since then. The reason? "Every single class is different," Ms. Petra tells the interviewers. "I'm just going to fine-tune a couple of things."

Improving how she frames her students' expectations, as Ms. Signorini suggested, is something that Ms. Petra thinks she can do. She offers an analogy. She writes in pretty — but very small — cursive, and students often find it hard to read. Ms. Petra knows this, warns her students, and posts her notes online so that





MAX WHITTAKER FOR THE CHRONICLE

The questions asked by Guatam Panakkal (right) and other student workers during assessment sessions are designed to keep the focus on students' learning, not their satisfaction with the class or the instructor.

they can revisit them. “Not many complain about my writing,” Ms. Petra says, “because I tell them from the beginning.” Perhaps she needs to do the same thing when it comes to the absence of real numbers. “They have to know in advance, probably,” she says.

Sometimes students use the class interview as an opportunity to try to negotiate with their instructor, Ms. Signorini says. “It opens the conversation,” she says. “This is what we’re going to change. But I’m not going to change this because this is the outcome for the course.”

And sometimes, students will be content with the status quo if a professor ex-

plains the thinking behind it — or simply hears them out.

The conversation works in both directions. Ms. Petra asks the student interviewers for suggestions about one of the pain points in her class: Students don’t set aside enough time for their homework.

“They actually do know they should be doing it earlier,” Mr. Panakkal says. Eight of the students agreed it was something they could do to improve their learning. One idea, he adds, is to design the homework so that the first question is relatively easy.

Ms. Petra already does that. Eventually, she comes up with a solution that she

later shares with her students: She adds an hour of office hours, not long after her class ends on Tuesday afternoons, which is the day she assigns the week’s homework. That way, her students can start on at least the first problem or two in her presence. And as Ms. Signorini suggested, Ms. Petra tells her students about how the absence of real numbers relates to the learning outcomes for the course — though she’ll give some more concrete examples when it makes sense.

Listening to students, in other words, doesn’t require giving them everything they ask for. Professors are still in charge.



**W**HAT'S TRUE for math students confronting problems without numbers is also true for professors working on their teaching: Learning does not move in a straight line. Carefully collected feedback, closely listened to, might result in small changes. Another hour of office hours. A sprinkling of concrete examples. Once in a while, professors might decide to overhaul the way they teach. But change often happens in fits and starts.

Before any of that can happen, though, professors need to know whether their actions in the classroom match their intentions.

All of the codes the observers jotted down during Mr. García-Ojeda's microbiology class were converted into pie charts to illustrate how he and his students spent the 75-minute period. The largest slice of the professor's time, 25 percent, went to guiding students through an activity. The next largest pieces were for posing a question, working one-on-one, and waiting. The students' pie, meanwhile, showed that they were listening 24 percent of the time and working in groups 18 percent.

To Ms. Signorini, it all looks great. But the more important issue, she says, is whether the picture of Mr. García-Ojeda's class reflects what he's trying to do with his teaching.

"Are you happy with this?" she asks.

"I'm happy that the lecture time is only 10 percent," Mr. García-Ojeda says.

The student observers have lots of positive things to say about his class. They liked the informal atmosphere, the high energy level, the fact he knew his students' names.

Most of the changes they suggest re-

volve around the finer points of his students' engagement. One of these concerns relates to team-based learning. Students who don't understand the material can go undetected when they work in teams, Mr. Panakkal says, since their collaborators provide cover.

"To counter that, because that's been one of my big concerns," Mr. García-Ojeda says, "I use the clicker questions." Students' individual answers

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count as their class participation, he says — and give him a sense of whether or not they grasp the material before they take a formal test. When he teaches, Mr. García-Ojeda makes a point of calling on students who have not yet participated. He does the same thing during the feedback session, specifically asking Valezka Murillo, an observer who's been relatively quiet, what she thinks.

It turns out she thinks Mr. García-Ojeda's solution is incomplete because, she says, he gives students time to discuss

clicker questions before they punch in their answers. "So some students may be able to get away with not watching the lecture," she says, "or not doing the readings because they're, like, mooching off of what other people are saying."

Ms. Vasquez suggests a solution. "What if you were to give them the question to answer on their own," she says, "and then after, they could discuss it as a group and then answer again?"

"Good point," Mr. García-Ojeda says.

Mr. García-Ojeda used to lecture much more. Back in 2010, he was teaching in a traditional lecture format, but he wasn't satisfied with how his classes were going. He asked the program to observe one of his classes, hoping to find ways to get his students interested in the material.

The feedback he received sparked Mr. García-Ojeda's interest in active learning, and he made some changes in his teaching. Then in the fall of 2014, he was asked to teach two sections of cellular biology, because Merced was short on large lecture halls. So he flipped both of his sections, and then studied how his students' outcomes differed from those of the students who had taken the lecture-based version. His students' exam scores were higher in the flipped version. For Mr. García-Ojeda, the recent class observation was further confirmation that his new approach was good for students.

Feedback serves more than one purpose. It can lead professors to make changes, big or small. It can also tell them something just as important — whether those changes are paying off.

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