Teaching tips and good practices for UCSC instructors

The material in this document largely captures teaching tips offered during a Fall 2016 CCA workshop on teaching. Panelists included Maria Evanglatou (CCA Chair in 2016-18), Jody Greene (Director of the Center for Innovations in Teaching and Learning), and Tracy Larrabee (Professor at Computer Engineering). If you have any comments about how this document could be improved, please email Maria at maevang@usc.edu to share your suggestions.

The topics covered in this document are: Purposeful teaching, confidence in the classroom, time-management, presentation/communication skills and generating dialogue, feedback and evaluations, assignments/exams, working with TAs, academic integrity, Ecommons, DRC issues.

Find out what works best for you, your subject matter, and your discipline. Most of the relevant resources mentioned in this document are also available at the Committee on Career Advising (CCA) website.

If you teach in STEM, consider participating in the Active Learning Seminar initiative sponsored by the Division of Physical and Biological Sciences (PBSci). See the seminar program here: http://www2.ucsc.edu/ali/seminars.html

Purposeful teaching

Teaching somebody to fish is better than giving them a fish (how does this apply to your classes?) Giving fish: factual knowledge and grades. Teaching fishing: teaching about the process of learning, imparting love for learning, developing students' skills in critical thinking, analytical/intellectual/scientific inquiry, communication, presentation, writing, visual literacy…

Learning is a process that extends beyond the classroom. We plant seeds that will keep growing, we open doors and windows to concepts and ideas that the students will keep exploring after the class is over. It is helpful to point this out to the students.

It is important to set clear learning goals, present them to the students, and pursue them through all aspects of your teaching (selection and presentation of content, assignments, exams, interactions with students, etc.). Discuss with the students why the class learning goals are relevant to them. Explain how the different components of the class (such as assignments and exams) support the learning goals.

Share with students your enthusiasm about the learning process and the subject matter.

Make students responsible for their learning process by challenging them to work hard. (Point out that you work hard for them, so they should work hard for them too.) Usually students rise to the expectations, especially if you are as committed as you want them to be.

Confidence in the classroom.

Perfect/ideal courses do not exist (don’t set impossible goals for yourself). Aim for fruitful learning experiences, and see them as work in progress.

Remind yourself that you know much more than your students.
Be comfortable with and honest about what you don’t know. Such occasions are learning opportunities for you, but they also allow you to share your humanity with the students and foster a more inclusive environment for their participation. Nobody can possibly know everything there is to know on a given subject. If the occasion arises, you can admit to your students that you haven’t thought about their question before, and you need time to reflect on it and come back to them with more information and suggestions. Make sure you do come back to the students with your thoughts and answers at a later point.

**Train your mind to translate stress into excitement, focus on the positive aspects of a challenge.** If for example you are uncomfortable speaking to large audiences, you can say to yourself: “I have the chance to share my interests with so many people, to engage them and to get their feedback. I have the chance to overcome my fears and become a better public speaker. I have the chance to improve.” Don’t be discouraged if you cannot reach and engage all the students at the same level, this is normal, as not all people have the same interests and goals.

Before class, practice confidence body postures that condition your mind to embrace confidence as well. Watch [http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are)

Also before class, try brief meditation sessions that help you concentrate and relax. For example, focus on your breath for even 1-2 minutes, to allow your body and mind to synchronize and become more centered. If you visualize a positive environment or outcome in your meditation, consider include your audience in the visualization (i.e. in the picture you create in your mind), to reinforce your sense of community and connectivity with the students.

Do not be your own worst critic, acknowledge your achievements, and recognize what needs improvement as an opportunity for growth.

**Time management**

Take it one step at a time, do not be overwhelmed by the entire scope of the project in front of you.

**Don’t over-prepare. Be selective. Information overload exhausts both you and the students.** When you prepare less, you might be more creative and focus on fewer and more important issues.

Do not try to fit in the quarter system what you would normally teach in a semester, especially when you deal with material that requires class discussion and reflection for better retention.

Do not overload students with readings. You can include optional/recommended readings in your material for those students who want more.

For more efficient and less-time consuming feedback on written assignments, use a list of numbered comments that represent the most important and frequent comments you use when grading student papers. Write the relevant numbers next to the appropriate parts of students’ work (so that you don’t have to repeat the same comments over and over again). Provide students with a key of the numbered comments you use. Also make sure to provide some narrative feedback at the end of their papers.
Keep your guidelines on assignments and exams clear and brief.

Direct students to appropriate resources (e.g. writing tutors, TAs). Don’t try to do everything yourself.

Offer group meetings, if numerous students want to use your office hours or require mentoring.

**Do not indulge student requests that ask you to do their work for them (e.g. request for class notes or definitions of terms). Explain why you say “no”**. For example, some students want PowerPoint presentations posted before class –explain why this is not possible. Some students might say they want notes on the PowerPoints –but research shows they learn better if they take notes themselves, not if they read your notes on the screen and online.

Limit the time you answer emails at specific slots in the day (e.g. that time in the day when you are less productive on teaching preparation or research).

You can choose not to reply to emails with substantive questions, but invite the student to visit you at office hours instead.

Ask students to read the syllabus as an assignment in the first week of class, have them discuss it in pairs or groups (e.g. at section time in the first week), and answer each other’s questions before they ask you or the TAs.

Say “no” to major service requirements until tenure. You are actually not expected to have major service until then. Commit to some departmental and college service that will help you learn about your colleagues, students, and the possibilities you have to contribute to the communities you are part of.

Recharge your batteries with breaks that work for you. Even when they are short, breaks can help you be more productive and effective and therefore make a better use of your time. Take those breaks when it is most appropriate for you, listen to your needs. For example, you can use meal breaks and the time you walk on campus to disengage from work. See also the CCA website resources on work-life balance.

**Presentation/communication skills, generating dialogue.**

Ask your mentors and department colleagues if they could attend at least one of your classes and give you feedback, and if you could attend one of theirs. Reflect on what works and what doesn’t in other people’s lectures. See CCA’s recommended tips and form for teaching observations.

Be lively, color and project your voice, occasionally walk towards the audience, gesture, crack a joke (if it comes naturally to you), show your enthusiasm about the material.

Be willing to experiment and learn from your mistakes. Teaching is a constant learning process.

**Do not assume students have prior knowledge of anything.**

Make the material relevant to them by drawing connections with their experiences and concerns.

**Classroom climate:** read *Teaching across cultural strengths: A guide to balancing integrated and individuated cultural frameworks in college teaching*, by Alicia Fedelina Chavez and Susan Diana Longerbeam (highly recommended by Jody Greene).
Diversify the modality of presentation and interaction (e.g. PowerPoint, video, sound projection, physical activity, brief quiz, free-write, drawing assignment, discussion in pairs, role-playing).

Visit FITC and ask their input with resources and suggestions. If you want to use a tablet and follow the presentation suggestions by Tracy Larrabee (shared in the Fall 2016 CCA teaching workshop), download Classroom Presenter (free from the University of Washington) on any windows tablet.

Invite participation by asking both factual and interpretative questions. Use the Socratic method as much as you can.

**Give extra credit for participation,** and encourage everyone to contribute according to certain guidelines (e.g. raise their hand, speak loudly, be respectful…) An easy way to keep participation records is to ask students at the end of each lecture to either circle their name on the roster, or write down their name in a note pad. Ask them to do that in front of you, so you have an additional opportunity to learn their names. You can say at the beginning of the quarter that those who participate consistently and at the end of the course have a strong letter grade can earn the higher step (e.g. a strong B+ can become an A- with good participation).

**Create a safe environment for students to participate, by emphasizing the following:**

- We all learn from each other.

- All opinions are valid as personal views –but we need to be aware of their subjectivity and learn to argue them convincingly.

- **All participation counts as contribution.** Off-topic, improbable, or inaccurate answers, or clarification questions are welcomed because they give you the opportunity to better explain things to everybody. It is helpful to emphasize this at the beginning of the course, and say that for the instructor it is very encouraging to have students participate, even when the answers they give are not applicable to the material (because that is still a sign that those students are attentive and engaged). Thank students throughout the course when they ask clarification questions or they alert you to something they misunderstood through the replies they give (so they do not hesitate to continue their contribution).

- Validate students’ answers (acknowledge the logic in their reasoning. If their answers are not compatible with the material, help them identify (or provide yourself) contextual information that clarifies why their logical assumptions are not applicable. Encourage them to develop their thoughts and argue their point. Ask other student to share their opinions and arguments. Finally add your comments.

- Tell students that when they participate in discussion they should start by mentioning their name –so that you can gradually memorize names and start using them in class. Your effort to learn student names contributes in creating a more welcoming environment that encourages participation.

**Student Feedback and evaluations about the class**

**Inviting students to participation in a midterm reflection or evaluation process about the class** has many advantages: students feel involved. They share their concerns so that you have the opportunity to address them, and either change things, or explain why you chose to keep things as they are. See sample midterm reflection/evaluation forms shared by Jody Greene and
Maria Evangelatou on the CCA website. See this reading about midterm evaluations as a “metacognitive pause”. If you use specific learning outcomes on your syllabus (as you are probably required to do by your department), you can include relevant questions in your midterm evaluations, to see if your students feel they are achieving those learning goals.

**Short feedback every week or every other week** can also be very productive (especially in smaller classes). At the last lecture of the week ask students to reply to the following questions on a piece of paper: 1. What is the most important thing you learnt up to now, and why is it important to you? 2. Is there a major question that you would like me to answer, clarify, etc.? 3. Do you have any other comments you would like to share?

You can anonymize the evaluation process/forms, or you can ask students to write their names, so that they become more accountable for their feedback and the way they deliver it. In the latter case, you also have the opportunity to address student concerns directly (by discussing issues with specific students, as appropriate). If you require students to share their name, it helps to point out that you are never anonymous as recipient of their feedback, so their anonymity introduces an imbalance that can become an obstacle to fair feedback.

Use constructive evaluation criticism to improve. Do not be discouraged by unfounded, unfair or biased comments.

Build students’ trust in you by being honest with them and letting them see your humanity and limitations (e.g. be honest about what you don’t know, what affects you or touches you the most in class material or in student behavior and why, or what challenges you face in your own learning process).

**Do not engage complaining students through email, request to talk to them in person.**

Ask the advice of your mentor, colleagues, or department chair, if you are uncertain about how to deal with a challenging situation.

If you feel students’ behavior or emails are offensive, share them with your department chair. Your chair can advise you on the appropriate course of action and be a supportive resource and advocate.

**Assignments/exams**

**Explain what you expect students to learn through each assignment or exam.**

Include all requirements in the syllabus. Give students clear instructions about essays and exams. Clarify expectations and evaluations.

**Space the assignments** in ways that allow students time to absorb and utilize what they learn and to use the feedback from previous assignment to improve the next one. Good timing also allows TAs to grade and give back comments before the next assignment is due.

**Hold students accountable/responsible for implementing the feedback they get:** you can ask them to include a reflection paragraph on the previous assignment in each new assignment they submit (e.g. they have to list all the areas that required attention and improvements in the previous paper and what they did to address them in the new paper). Make this a graded
component of the assignment. Reward students who actually improve by taking feedback seriously and working to implement it.

In order to improve student skills on writing you also need to offer them some recurring writing assignments (e.g. rewrites, or similar assignments that guide students to improve specific skills). One-offs of written assignments do not provide adequate time and engagement for students to reflect on feedback received and to improve accordingly.

Use appropriate resources (on campus, online, etc.) to support students’ performance. For some examples see this list on “writing resources and helpful material for students”, on the CCA website.

Aim for a variety of writing and exam assignments that cultivate different skills and are appropriate for different modes of learning (quiz, flash-card poll, essay exam, short visual analysis, film papers, research papers, group project, role-playing, problem-solving...).

If you use essay questions for the exams, consider providing the question/essay prompts weeks ahead of time, so that students can focus their study accordingly. This is something that you can do more easily after the first time you teach a class (once you have gone at least once through the course and the exam cycle).

Consider if it would be helpful to post the best papers as examples for all the class to read, anonymously or eponymously according to what the authors of the papers prefer.

Do not use your own performance as a student to evaluate UCSC students (most of them will not become university professors, and have gone through a very different educational system). Share this comment with your TAs, and ask them not to use their own student performance as a standard either.

**Working with TAs**

Meet TAs before the quarter starts, as a group, to discuss class structure, expectations, and workload. At that early stage, consider sharing with your TAs the evaluation form you will use at the end of the class to review their work. This helps TAs be more aware and mindful of their responsibilities.

Meet with TAs once a week through the quarter. Group meetings with TAs can also allow the more experienced of them to share their knowledge and suggestions with the group.

Be mindful of TA workload when you plan the assignments of your course.

Do sample grading as a group.

Consider sharing with your TAs a list of numbered comments for grading in a timely and efficient manner. As discussed under “Time management” above, here is the process: use a list of numbered comments that represent the most important and frequent comments you use when grading student papers. Write the relevant numbers next to the appropriate parts of students’ work (so that you don’t have to repeat the same comments over and over again). Provide students with a key of the numbered comments you use. Also make sure TAs provide some narrative feedback at the end of student papers. You can develop a list of comments in collaboration with your TAs, and refine it after the first written assignment is submitted, according to what TAs observe to be recurring issues in student work.
It is helpful to provide study questions to students and TAs, in order to guide and structure their work. You can post the study questions online as student prepare for the next session, but you can also use them in class to generate discussion or test students. For example, you can use one of those study questions for a weekly quiz, to encourage students to do the readings and absorb the material.

For courses without sections you might consider turning TA office hours into optional sections, so that students and TAs can have group discussions. You need to arrange this with your department (for the scheduling of a class space). Especially for large classes, it is ideal if each TA can hold one hour of optional section and one office hour per week, so group discussions do not exclude the possibility for students to have one-on-one meetings if they need them (you should factor this arrangement into the TA workload). The advantage of group sessions/optional sections is that TAs don’t need to repeat the same comments and clarifications to individual students, and they can work as a group to prepare for class assignments. You might consider using a hybrid model, in which TAs offer optional sections/group sessions especially before exams and major assignment submissions. Remember that optional sections cannot be a graded component, nor can they be used for extra credit – because some students might want to participate but they have scheduling conflicts, so they miss the grading or extra credit opportunity.

**Academic integrity**

Use clear definitions and guidelines in the syllabus and in your assignment prompts (see the relevant material provided by Jody Greene).

Not all incidents are wilful plagiarism (consider cultural issues, students who really don’t know how to cite sources, etc.). See also the article recommended by Amy Mihyang Ginther: “Coloring Epistemologies: Are Our Research Epistemologies Racially Biased?”, by James Joseph Scheurich and Michelle D. Young, *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (May, 1997), pp. 4-16.

You can also tell students you use turnitin.com even if you don’t, to discourage them from plagiarizing. Turnitin checks student papers for plagiarism signs and identifies the sources students used.

Wikipedia can be a useful tool if students acknowledge they used it and they are aware of its limitations. Remind your students that Wikipedia does not always provide reliable information so they need to fact-check and expand their research beyond it. You can point out that Wikipedia might be more effective for simple clarifications of terms, or for some basic suggestions on a few research resources, but its entries should not be taken for granted as comprehensive and reliable discourse on any given topic. Some Wikipedia entries might offer useful suggestions for further research resources, but students should expand their research beyond those recommendations.

**Ecommons and other online platforms for course material**

Selecting to offer fewer tools (only the ones you actually use), is more productive than cluttering the home page with several tools you don’t use.
Organizing the resources (readings, PowerPoints, study guidelines, etc.) by week folders can help students navigate the material more effectively.

You can use an additional folder to provide writing resources (e.g. info on writing tutors, your own guidelines on writing, resources on developing a thesis statement etc.).

Another folder can be dedicated to exam material and instructions (e.g. in subfolders for midterm and final).

Consider using dropbox as an additional way for students to submit written assignments: not instead of but in addition to the hard copy, so that you have an electronic receipt of submission and a digital copy to use if needed (e.g. to post as an example of a good paper for the class to see –with the author’s permission).

Include a wejoinin.com link for your office hours, for example at the top of the resources page.

**DRC (Disability Resource Center)**

About 26% of our students identify themselves as having some kind of disability. You should follow the steps below to support their equal access to education.

It is highly recommended that you post articles and required reading lists early (preferably months before the beginning of the course) so that the DRC can convert hard-copy materials into electronic formats for students using assistive technology to access reading texts. Posted reading material should be clean (free of notes and underlining, not crooked). If you make reading materials available in electronic formats that allow copy-pasting (e.g. PDF or Word), students can easily use assistive technology to access them. For more information see [http://drc.ucsc.edu/faculty-and-staff/fac-staff-overview/creating-accessible-course-materials.html](http://drc.ucsc.edu/faculty-and-staff/fac-staff-overview/creating-accessible-course-materials.html) or contact DRC by phone at 831-459-2089 or by email at drc@ucsc.edu

Make course content accessible through an online platform. For support, visit the Faculty Instructional Technology Center at McHenry Library ([http://its.ucsc.edu/fitc/](http://its.ucsc.edu/fitc/)). A great online resource can be found here: [http://www.pcc.edu/resources/instructionalsupport/](http://www.pcc.edu/resources/instructionalsupport/)

**During your first lecture and in the syllabus,** request that students with DRC needs come see you in person, during office hours or after lecture. Ask them to arrange this meeting within the first two weeks of class, to submit their DRC form and discuss the challenges they face and how you could help them. Remember that everything you discuss, including the names of students, are confidential material.

Make a list of the needs you have to address in exams, and ask your department and DRC to help with resources.

If you teach big classes and have many DRC requests, consider assigning take-home exams (e.g. essay questions, if they serve your class objectives), to reduce the logistical pressure of accommodating several different DRC requirements.

Always use subtitles when screening videos and only purchase videos that are already subtitled (they benefit visual learners, international students, those who are learning English as a second language, those with hearing impairment or sitting somewhere in the classroom where sound projections is not clear enough).
The following is provided by DRC Director Rick Gubash

**Disability Statement to Students in Class**

We ask that you incorporate the following paragraph in your course syllabus, website, and class announcements: UC Santa Cruz is committed to creating an academic environment that supports its diverse student body. If you are a student with a disability who requires accommodations to achieve equal access in this course, please submit your Accommodation Authorization Letter from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to me privately during my office hours or by appointment, preferably within the first two weeks of the quarter. At this time, we would also like us to discuss ways we can ensure your full participation in the course. We encourage all students who may benefit from learning more about DRC services to contact DRC by phone at 831-459-2089 or by email at drc@ucsc.edu.

**Universal Design**

Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) is an approach to curriculum that minimizes barriers and maximizes learning to meet the needs of all students. UDI relies on three principles: (1) using a variety of mediums for instruction, including audio (e.g. lecture), visual (e.g. video), kinesthetic (e.g. acting out a scene), etc.; (2) providing multiple forms of assessment, such as papers, presentations, projects, debates, etc.; and (3) utilizing different ways to engage and motivate students. When designing your future courses, consider how both classroom and curricular design may pose barriers for your students. When possible, implement UDI practices to increase student success. Information about UDI and its application in postsecondary settings can be found here: [http://www.washington.edu/doit/programs/center-universal-designeducation/](http://www.washington.edu/doit/programs/center-universal-designeducation/)

**DRC Resources**

For additional information, please view the faculty and staff link on the DRC website ([http://drc.ucsc.edu/fac-staff/faculty/index.html](http://drc.ucsc.edu/fac-staff/faculty/index.html)). DRC service coordinators are available to consult faculty and staff on disability-related questions, including DRC referrals and inclusive design. The DRC is also available for presentations on a variety of topics, including UDI, stigma and bias, disability identity, working with DRC students, and more. Please contact DRC Director Rick Gubash by phone at 831-459-2089 or by email at rgubash@ucsc.edu if you have additional questions.