

# What I've Learned About Teaching...So Far

Presentation Outline

AAEA Annual Meetings July 2011

Pittsburgh, PA

Hayley H. Chouinard

Washington State University

### Slide: What I've Learned About Teaching...So Far

This presentation will address the things I incorporate into my teaching that I believe contribute to a relatively effective teaching program. I will concentrate on presenting ideas that may help others place their teaching responsibilities in the context of all the other demands on their time, and provide specific examples of how I approach teaching. My focus here is on undergraduate teaching, with a range (large (200) to small (15)) of student enrollment, for relatively new faculty members. My comments will most certainly not be new, but I'm hopeful that the audience may find a few ideas they will want to incorporate into their teaching program

### Slide: 5 Important Aspects of Teaching

These five aspects of teaching (intention, organization, respect, engagement in the classroom, and beyond the classroom) have helped me consider the role of teaching in my career, how to set teaching related goals, and how to work to achieve these goals. I will discuss each aspect individually.

### Slide: Intention

I believe teaching is too important and demanding to not approach it with a plan. I have formulated a teaching agenda. This has helped guide my choice of activities and time allocation. In the first step of developing my agenda I identified two sets of goals for my teaching activities. My first goal is the level of economic content I expect the students to be able to attain from each activity. My second goal is for students to enhance several skills through their experience including: critical thinking, writing, speaking, developing an understanding of different cultures and how to view themselves as a member of a global community. I recognize that each activity will contribute to different aspects of my goals, so I view my activities as a portfolio that provides students with opportunities to learn and gain skills that I have prioritized. In an attempt to meet these goals I am intentional about the points of contact I have with students including: classroom time, assignments and activities beyond the classroom. I now understand that these activities require effort (mostly time) in the form of decisions about content, delivery of material, administration of delivery, activities outside the classroom, and more. I try to be intentional about how much time and effort I dedicate to each activity. I also know that I need to constantly update my goals and activities so I intentionally review my work and interact with students and other faculty in an attempt to make my teaching agenda more effective.

### Slide: Organization

Students dislike uncertainty. Providing an organized experience for students helps them focus on the material and helps me administer my courses more efficiently. I believe it is well worth expending effort upfront to provide a well organized course. I often repeatedly teach the same course or use much of what I set up for another course, which increases the value of the upfront effort. These are some ideas to help develop an organized course.

I provide information via a course website. I include the course syllabus, assignments, readings, and exam reviews. I have all of this material posted on the website before the first day of class. This allows students to know all the important deadlines from the start. This eliminates uncertainty and is great for me to refer to when students have questions. I can say “You knew from the first day of class when X was happening.” Usually I don’t get many of these questions because students quickly learn that all this information is on the website and I will just direct them to the website. This is especially useful when you have a large enrollment.

My syllabus contains the general info (my office, email, office hours, etc.), the objectives of the course, a listing of all the assignments including the due date and the contribution of each to the final grade, a brief discussion of the exams including dates and contribution of each to the final grade, the grading scale, a description of disabilities accommodation, a brief discussion of academic honesty, a link to the university website on safety procedures, and a detailed course outline. The course outline is a table with the each day of class listed with the topic to be covered, the assigned reading for the day, and anything that is due that day. Again, I refer to the course outline when students have questions about what is going on in the class. The first time I teach a class I am somewhat uncertain how much time I will need to cover each topic. Sometimes I set up a course outline that covers each week of class instead of each day.

I believe it is important to be organized during the class time. I write a list of topics we will cover each day on the board before class starts. I also list the reading for the next class as a reminder. I then review the list at the end of class once we have covered the material. I begin each class with some combination of the questions “What did we discuss last time? Why are we discussing that? How does the topic from last class relate to X?”

I develop all the course assignments and determine the due dates and post them on the website by the first day of class. Again, this eliminates uncertainty for students and they can see exactly what is expected from the beginning. This is vital for large enrollment classes where trying to manage every student’s plan to miss class can be impossible. This has also been important for me when I have large numbers of international students who particularly don’t want to work on assignments that involve writing or speaking. They can make an informed decision to stay in the class during the first week.

During the first day of class I have a discussion about the expectations for the class. I begin with what I expect from them which include that students: come to class every day and come prepared, turn in assignments on time, respect me and each other, do not text, play computer games, read the newspaper or engage in other distracting behaviors during class, and that they will engage with me during the class. It should be noted that I don’t provide points toward their grade for attendance and I don’t give pop quizzes. Students can miss any class (except exams) with no loss of graded points. I prefer students to come to lectures by choice. After we discuss what is expected of them, I discuss what they can expect of me: I will be organized, available, and will engage with them during the class. By setting up the expectations on the first day

students will expect that the course will involve in class activities in which they will need to participate. When my students are reluctant to participate, I remind them that I told them they should expect me to engage with them and I expect them to engage back. I try not to overuse this reminder, and students usually react with nods and become more likely to engage.

Slide: Respect

I try to treat my students as individuals that I value. In my classes with enrollment under 60 I learn every student's name, and in my larger classes I learn at least 50 names. It takes me some time, but eventually I learn them. I ask students their names when they offer to answer a question in class, when I chat with them before or after class or in office hours, and I pay attention to names when I pass back assignments. It can be a challenge, but students often remark how much they appreciate that I make the effort. I believe it fosters an environment of respect, and may even motivate some students to exert a bit more effort in the class.

Additionally, near the middle of the semester I ask students to write on a scratch paper (without their name) answers to what they like best about the class, what they like least about the class, and what they would most like to see changed about the class. During the next class period I discuss the comments, why I can't make some changes, and explain the changes I will make due to their comments. I think this helps students to feel some ownership over the class, and has helped me make many positive changes in my classes.

I always try to provide students with my expectations. When I discuss an assignment, I always discuss why doing the assignment is important. This discussion will relate back to my goals for content knowledge and skill development. I also provide a grading rubric so students will understand how I value each component of the assignment. I explain the expectations for exam answers. For my essay exams, I use specific verbs in the questions that I discuss with the students prior to the exam. For example, "list" means simply enumerate, "describe" means provide a discussion of the topic, "graph" means to graph and completely label, "provide an example" means to describe a situation related to the question, etc.

I attempt to administer my courses efficiently. I plan in my schedule (which doesn't always happen) for assignment and exam grading. I think it is an important signal that you respect what students do and the timeliness of their work by returning graded assignments and exams as quickly as possible. This means I have to plan ahead to get the grading completed.

I find that students appreciate faculty that are available to answer questions and engage with their comments. I often arrive to class 10 minutes early and stay 10 minutes after class to talk with students about course related issues or just about what's going on with them. I also have office hours, or tell students to send me an email to set up an appointment. Email can be a great way to address questions, but may become a burden with large classes. If I get the same question numerous times via email I address the question in class.

In classes which encourage student engagement, some students may act (usually unintentionally) inappropriately. I think it is very important that the instructor always maintain leadership of the class. If one student always answers questions without giving other students an opportunity, I may talk to the student before or after class telling him or her that I appreciate their engagement, but want other students to step up. If a student becomes disrespectful during a discussion I view it as my job to immediately suggest that we focus on the issue and not on unfriendly judgments.

Slide: Engage Students in Classroom – Rules

When I design activities for my classroom, I try to make certain that they directly relate to the material I am covering. I believe a fun classroom experiment loses its impact if students don't understand the point. When appropriate, I explain why we are going to do an activity, and I always go over what I want students to take from the activity when it's completed. I try to have some sort of engaging activity in each lecture, but it might take just a few minutes. Also, I take very seriously the accusations that some activities are simply about trying to win a "popularity contest with students." I intentionally bring every activity to my classroom to meet a learning goal.

I learned the hard way to never make a student look foolish. If you have an activity that requires a student to look silly, either don't do it, make yourself the one who looks foolish, or describe the activity to a student you think will be ok with it beforehand and ask if they are willing to participate. Even asking permission may be tricky if the student feels obligated to participate. I have had students I thought would be fine with a silly activity have hurt feelings. I learned that it's important to be very careful with student involvement in these cases.

Slide: Engage Students in Classroom – Ideas

I choose to not use power point in my lectures. I believe it provides a more engaging experience for students if we work at the same pace during the class and they copy what I write on the board. Students nearly universally appreciate not having power point presentations every day.

I bring several props to class to help illustrate concepts. I have a large elastic band from a Pilate's class gone bad that I have two students stretch when I discuss elasticity. I have 8 cards with various products on them that I hand out to 8 students that have volunteered to stand in the front of the class. Then the class directs the students to line up in order from most elastic product to most inelastic product. I find these sorts of student involvement, that doesn't put students on the "intellectual line," are particularly useful toward the beginning of the semester when students are still uncertain about the environment of the class. I bring two cans of salt, one Morton's brand and one store brand, to discuss product differentiation based on consumer perception and branding as the chemical compound is identical in both products (check the label to be sure this is true.) I hand out Oreos prior to discussing the concerns with palm oil production, a major component of Oreo stuffing. I give students a choice between regular corn chips or organic chips once we've discussed GMOs. Many students will gladly take the regular chips, but many

are a little uncertain after the discussion. It doesn't matter what the students do as long as they understand the point I am making with the prop. It should be noted that I try very hard to not reveal my own preferences with respect to these issues. I never tell students if I would take the regular or organic chip or if I would feed my kid Oreos. Students often press me for my view, but I always tell students that my job is to make them think not to give them my answer.

Music can be a very powerful teaching tool. When I find a song that relates to my course material I will play the song as students are entering the classroom. Then I will put the lyrics up for them to see and discuss how the song relates to a course topic.

Case studies, newspaper stories or personal stories can provide vivid and to the point illustrations of a topic. I include these materials as reading assignments or as examples during lectures. I work to be certain the example is directly related to the topic of the day.

Asking questions can be an excellent way to involve students in the material. I often ask questions and then call on a student volunteer to answer. I always try to remain positive no matter what the answer. If an answer is incorrect, I will try to figure out why the student gave the answer and explain how I understand why they gave that answer, but make it clear that it is not correct. If an answer is incomplete I will thank the student for getting us started and ask if someone else has something to add. I often will ask questions and then ask students to vote for an answer with a show of hands. More "technical" instructors use clickers, but I haven't used these. Students don't feel so exposed with this strategy and then we can go back and talk about why some folks choose each of the answers.

I use several games and experiments in my class. I tend to use simple versions of these activities in my class more often, instead of doing one experiment that takes all day. I have used the public goods game, the fishing to extinction game, and others in my classes. I often use games that require only 8-10 students. I set up the game so everyone can see the action and then ask for volunteers. When the game is completed I discuss with the entire class their expectations of what was going to happen, the actual outcome, what was the point, etc.

I incorporate several team (group) projects into my lectures. I may write up a paragraph to set up the situation and then give the students 2-4 direct questions to which they must provide a group answer. For example, I provide a detailed description of a poor community and ask each student group to decide how best to allocate some level of economic aid. After the groups discuss the issue for 15 minutes and determine an answer, I will either return to lecture and later ask each group for their answer or directly go around the room to hear the group suggestions. I may ask if any of the groups would change their proposal now that they've heard the other groups and/or the lecture material. I also use in class groups to provide feedback to students. If I have a writing assignment I may have a class day where each student explains to a small group their research question and plan of analysis. The group then provides suggestions to each student. I always walk between groups and help keep the discussion going and on target.

Sometimes I find short, interesting readings or cartoons that I photocopy and have students read during class (depending on the length I sometimes project the reading onto the board.) Then I ask students to answer 1-2 questions related to the reading. I may ask students to report their answers to the class or to a small group. We then discuss how the reading is related to the class.

In class writing assignments can be very useful to understand student progress. I ask students to write an answer to a question I know is often difficult for students and then have them pass their answers (with no names) to me. Then I will read some of the answers to the class. As a class we can discuss the completeness and correctness of several answers. I follow the same procedure, but simply ask students what class material confused them in the last week. I also ask students to write two exam questions with answers and review some with the entire class.

#### Slide: Beyond the Classroom

In order to meet some of the goals I have for my teaching agenda, I have elected to participate in some teaching activities beyond the standard classroom teaching. It should be noted that if you are considered a successful teacher, you will get many offers to participate in activities beyond the classroom. I only participate in the activities and events I believe will significantly contribute to my goals. Additionally, I have become very careful with the level of involvement to which I agree. For an activity I highly value and believe I can make a significant contribution, I am willing to take the lead. For other activities, I may limit my contribution.

The two activities I have been most involved with are serving as advisor for the Alpha Zeta Honor Society and as a co-director of the SES Italy Study Abroad Program (semester long, 13 credits). These two activities have been very time intensive, but have had significant impacts on students. I recognize that I will not receive complete professional “compensation” for my efforts with these activities, but I choose to participate anyway. Students involved with the study abroad program describe it as the most impactful event of their college career and often of their lives. I am willing to forgo professional recognition to be part of this experience for students.

If you are interested in participating in a study abroad experience contact the International Programs office at your university. They may have several different alternatives, which will vary in their demands on faculty resources.

#### Slide: Conclusions

1. Develop a teaching agenda with goals for student outcomes and your career.
2. Recognize the effort required to meet your goals.
3. Prioritize your resource use to meet your goals.
4. Seek input from other faculty and students.
5. Self evaluate, ask for a peer evaluation and pay some attention to student evaluations.
6. Make changes to your agenda and the activities you engage in to best meet your goals.