

Teaching a Course You Feel Unprepared to Teach

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Life in higher education is full of surprises. Like everyone else, sooner or later you will probably agree to teach a course you do not feel well prepared to teach. This might be in an area where you have no formal training, a topic just outside your disciplinary training, or even a course very different in format from how you have taught before.

There are a number of reasons why you might need to cover such a course. This article should provide some guidance and advice to those faced with such an assignment.

Where to Begin

You have been asked to teach this course and although it makes you a bit nervous, the chair has assured you that you will do a great job. Accepting such an assignment may test your nerves, but will allow you to learn an area of psychology new to you.

Find out why you are being asked to teach this course. If it has been taught before, why is the instructor no longer teaching it? If the past instructor obtained permission to give up teaching the course because of a grant or other opportunity, talk to that instructor and find out why this particular course was released. It may well be that it is a scheduling issue, but it could also be a course that burns people out. Do not accept the assignment if the course has moved from person to person and each vows never to teach it again. Also keep in mind that the moment before you say “yes” or “no” is your best time for bargaining. Consider asking for a graduate student to help you with searching the literature, grading, or even helping with some class sessions as a teaching assistant. Overall, I would suggest always taking a day or two to think about whether or not to accept this assignment.

Let us assume your situation allows you to accept this new assignment. Let us also assume the best-case scenario: You have a few months before your class is scheduled to begin and the freedom to construct or design the course as you see fit. Three major areas will serve as good places to start: gather as much information as you can about how the course has been taught in the past; make decisions upon which you will build your course; and monitor your class closely once it begins. If you have only days to prepare, and/or the components of the course are already selected (syllabus, text, course schedule), skip the first two sections and proceed to the last section on monitoring your class and being ready to adapt.

Gathering Information

General course information. Check out the college catalog and find out as much about this course as you can. Read the course description and any objectives that are listed. Is it a required course, and if so, must students take that course or is it an option in a list of courses from which students must select? Find out if prerequisites are listed for the course. I once accepted an assignment to teach a research methods course and was told prior knowledge of statistics was required. When I looked, the college catalog did

not state what I had been told. I went back to the chair and he said statistics was strongly encouraged, which students often interpret very different than “required.”

Talk with colleagues. Your best resources are instructors who have taught this course at your institution in the past and those who teach the same topic at other institutions. If you find information on the Web, e-mail questions to instructors. New collegial friendships will emerge. Also, consider contacting instructors from the university where you completed your graduate and undergraduate work.

Obtain course syllabi and materials. Course syllabi allow you to see how the course was structured, assignments and exams used and the weighting given to them in establishing final grades, types of extra-credit assignments (if used), relevant films and videos, original sources for reading, ideas for guest speakers, relevant Web sites, the pacing of the course, and course objectives. Textbooks assist in identification of whether the course was taught from a theoretical or applied orientation, the number of core concepts per chapter and module, applications to students’ lives (the one-page “boxes” many texts use), and the reading comprehension level of students.

Determine what tasks and assignments you can require such as service learning, group projects, computer assignments, poster sessions, or homework assignments.

Learn about typical students taking the course. Talk with colleagues regarding students’ motivation and ability level. Do not assume that students are enrolling merely because the course may be required. Required courses are the backbone of any program and motivated students may understand well that the material is vital to an understanding of the discipline. Ask prior instructors how students feel about the course and whether students have the prerequisite knowledge they are supposed to possess.

Exams and grading. Copies of old exams may be helpful. These exams will indicate the level of difficulty, degree of discrimination of concepts expected of the students, and coverage of material. Regardless of the information requested, delicately inquire as to what worked well, and what did not. Be respectful of the person who has agreed to help you. You may be amazed (both positively and negatively) at what you hear and see. If you do not agree with something done when someone else taught the course you are preparing, thank the faculty member for the input and keep those opinions to yourself as you design your version.

If available, examples of good and inadequate work in papers and essay exam responses exams are helpful in assessing the ability level of the students, as well as the commonly accepted grading practice for the course. It may prevent an awkward situation of you agreeing to teach what is viewed as a challenging course and ending up assigning a great number of “A” grades. Likewise, you do not want to fail or give many “D” grades in a course in which students typically do well.

Foundational Decisions

Once you have basic information regarding the course, you need to make decisions regarding your course goals. Design the course with a minimum number of specific course content areas you will cover, and then teach them very well.

As mentioned in the previous section, it is helpful in determining content coverage to review copies of

previously used syllabi and texts. Stick closely to what has worked before. This is not the time to design the “perfect” course. If you feel the need to personalize a syllabus, but are not sure where to find resources, check Web sites. For example, APA’s Society for the Teaching of Psychology has a program called “Project Syllabi,” found online at www.lemoyne.edu/OTRP/projectsyllabus.html. You can easily obtain a number of syllabi for about any undergraduate course. Thirty course categories are listed, and 22 syllabi are currently available for “Introduction to Psychology.”

Too much content is the antithesis of good teaching. When making decisions about content, resist the urge to add more to what has been done by other instructors. It will always seem like a good idea, before the course starts, to cover chapters that others deleted or to assign two term papers instead of the one. But remember, your goal is to teach the course as well as possible, and to do this you will need more time to prepare for each class session. Extra material and assignments will make your job much more difficult.

Share your course planning with others. Once your syllabus and descriptions of course assignments are drafted, you should show them to others who have taught this course; also, you should talk with your chair. Colleagues and chairs will appreciate your collegiality and may offer valuable feedback.

The text. Once you decide on the major content of your course, you need to select a text. If the text is already selected, plan your content around it. You may certainly have to adjust the course content based on the text, but it is preferable to design your course and then select the text, as opposed to allowing the text to drive the content. That said, be sure to adapt to the text, to some extent.

If you can select your own text, it is a good idea to use the same one that has been used previously. This continuity allows you to ask those who have taught the course specific questions as the semester proceeds, and may even allow an opportunity for that faculty member to cover a course session for you. Of course, if the text used in the past does not fit you, select one of your own. One source to evaluate texts is www.facultyonline.com. This site lists many options by subject areas. In addition to linking you to Web sites of publishers (allowing you to order desk copies online), it also lists top selling textbooks and the faculty who use them.

Request desk copies of several competing texts for the course. The books will help you understand the material and give you ideas for discussion topics, and you may well end up teaching the course again and decide to switch books. Look for textbooks with lots of practical examples, great short summaries of pertinent research, and descriptions of applications.

It also is a good idea to locate a handbook in the area in which you are teaching. The handbook will summarize key research studies and offer insight into important areas of the field. This is much less time intensive than digging through original research and comprehensive textbooks in the area of study.

Ancillary materials. Pay close attention to the ancillary materials for the text you are going to use. Good ancillary materials include classroom discussion ideas, tips for covering certain topics, and even collaborative learning ideas. Ask the textbook representative if additional resources are available: videos, Web resources, transparencies, and other support.

Do not shy away from use of guest speakers. Use of guest speakers can be critical in enriching students’

experiences in a course where the instructor is trying to accurately present the basics in an interesting manner. Be certain these speakers have the correct areas of expertise and ask others in the department for suggestions. For example, if you are teaching developmental psychology, a college daycare worker might come to your class to talk about early child social development. If done well, your students will learn a lot, you will learn a lot, and you will save hours of additional preparation time. Another excellent choice for a guest speaker may be the person who regularly teaches the course.

It is important to invite only a few guests. Students *do not* respond well to guest speakers for every class, and might conclude that you are having others teach the course for you.

Class presentations. Consider using student presentations in class, even if you don't normally use them. Meaningful class presentations are not to be done as filler, but to give the students a chance to prepare some material on the topic and to give you a bit of a break. Consider having these presentations midway through the course, not at the end, allowing you to cover critical components missed during the student presentations and bring closure to the class.

At this point you have a syllabus, goals, a text, resource material, and potential resource people lined up to help you in creating a positive learning environment for your students. Now it is time for the class to start.

The Course Begins

Start the class the way you would any other. One important consideration is whether to tell your students the course is not in your major area of study. To do so is to be completely honest with the students and will be beneficial if you struggle with some content areas. However, this information may invite students to question your ability to teach the course well. I would suggest you decide based on your personality. If you have great rapport with students and tend to see class as a learning environment for everyone it would be beneficial to tell them of your situation and build a "we're all in this together" feeling. If your classes are typically designed such that you are the expert in the course and students are to see you as a resource, then it might be wise to not go into detail about the fact this course is outside your traditional area of expertise.

Get feedback from students. Once the class is underway, get information frequently from the students about how the course is progressing. Classroom assessment techniques, or CATs, allow you to assess what the students know, think, and feel at any point in the semester (Angelo & Cross, 1993). The one-minute paper is vital. This assignment, typically done at the end of a class session, asks students to write for exactly one minute about what is working well in class and what is not. It will take you about five minutes to go through 40 to 50 responses. Be certain to address the main points in the next class session, or students will stop writing. Although I recommend CATs for every course, it is much more important for you to adapt to a course you are teaching for the first time.

Consider asking students for their peeves about the course one-third and two-thirds of the way through. If you use student evaluation and opinion forms, use them at the halfway point instead of the end of the course so you can make meaningful changes for the rest of the semester. Some faculty even request a few student volunteers to meet periodically and every week or two provide feedback on what is working well in the course and what might be hindering learning.

Keep it basic. A common mistake of instructors teaching a content area for the first time is to prepare too much information. Over-preparation will cause you to rush through the class, lecture too much, and be more concerned about teaching than learning. Prepare a solid amount of material and then stop. If you incorporate class activities with students working in groups, you will not get through as much material as you expect. Also, if you are teaching in a 75-minute block and run out of material at 65 minutes, spend time talking to the students about the material in an informal dialog for 10 minutes. Or talk a bit about how the class is going and what can be done to better facilitate their learning. That is time well spent.

Summary

Keep the course simple. Many aspects of teaching a course you are not prepared to teach are the same as the courses you have taught many times, but no one expects everything to work perfectly, and you will have to adapt. If something goes badly, tell the students you are disappointed that it went badly and what you expect to do to prevent that from happening again. They know when things do not go well and appreciate your honesty. That said, consider that some things will not be as bad as *you* fear. Do not over-apologize.

There will be times you will regret having agreed to teach a course you may not feel prepared to teach, but keep in mind the beneficial aspects of doing so. You will be introduced to a new area of psychology, and, as we all know, you learn best when you teach something. Allow your excitement of learning to be transmitted to the students. Having your students and yourself excited about learning something new together may be the most positive aspect of teaching a course you are not prepared to teach.