

Teaching a Night Class

March 29, 2013

“I’m facing the challenge of a one-session section of Intro, evenings from 6:30 to 9:20...I have a sense of the sort of suggestions I might hear, but I am interested in any insights on how to keep folks engaged until 9:30 at night.”

Great question! Teaching a night class can be challenging, even intimidating (at first), but with sound preparation and some unconventional strategies you can succeed. In fact, you may even find you prefer a night class to one taught during the day.

I have taught evening classes for the past 15 years, and what follows is a summary of my wisdom on the subject:

1. Class Time: Beginning and Ending

First of all, if the class starts at 6:30 pm, you should not feel obligated to keep students until 9:20 pm. Let’s say you taught this class during the day, three times a week. Each class period would span 50 minutes, totaling 150 minutes for the entire week. Therefore a class that starts at 6:30pm could justifiably conclude at 9:00 pm. Further, you will not lose time reintroducing topics or making the same announcements over several lectures.

2. Scheduling a Break

However, it is inadvisable to teach for two and a half hours without taking at least a short break. Therefore, you should plan (or discuss with your class) the length and timing of a break. My experience with students is that they will need a break, but are willing to settle for a very short break (five minutes) if it gets the class to finish earlier than expected. In the case of a 6:30 class you could even negotiate for a short break, and still finish by 9:00 pm. Resist the temptation to dismiss the class earlier than 9:00 pm, because once you let them out early they may expect it each week thereafter.

I recommend scheduling the break past the halfway point of class. So if you start at 6:30, I would break closer to 8, that way when you resume, you have a shorter “act two.” This occurs a lot in the theatre and is generally better for your “audience.” Students will be more energized knowing the remainder of class is shorter than the initial segment.

3. Taking Attendance

Most of your students, hopefully all of them, will come back after the break, ready to finish the class strong. However, it is my experience that on occasion a student or two may sneak out during the break, hoping you do not notice. Therefore, I recommend you take attendance before class, and then again after the break. Make sure students know that you are doing this. You might even consider giving a brief quiz

at the end of the evening, or using that time to hand out an assignment for the following week.

Since I began taking attendance after the break, and making it obvious to the students, it is rare for someone to leave after break. Moreover, when a student has left during the break, s/he has approached me before class for permission to do so.

4. Missing Class

One problem with attendance is that when a student misses your night class, that student has missed class for an entire week. Ideally classes should be rewarding enough so that students would not want to miss (Forsyth, 2003), particularly a class that meets only once a week. Further, students may not be able to call your office or email you ahead of time if there is a legitimate reason for being unable to come to class (e.g., some students take evening classes because they work during the day, and may get stuck in traffic or detained at work), therefore you will need to consider how to handle unexpected absences.

Some of your students are likely to be older students, with children, and may choose to bring children to class (e.g., babysitter cancels on them) rather than miss. You can set your own policy assuming the university does not have a policy prohibiting children and/or non-enrolled students visiting class. Whatever policy you decide to enforce, put it into your syllabus and discuss it during the first class. In my evening class, there is enough room for a student's child to sit in the back and avoid being a distraction, but in some classes this may not be practical. The size of the room may prove difficult for a child to keep from distracting the class; further, the content of the class may at times be inappropriate (e.g., I used to teach a health education class at night where some of the curriculum would have been inappropriate for younger children).

5. Assignments

When choosing assignments for your class, there are a few challenges to consider. One challenge pertains to examinations. Since a night class usually meets just once a week, it is hard to schedule more than one examination during the semester (not including the final exam). Here is the problem – most students will want more than one exam, so that they have an opportunity to earn as many points as possible (Wambaugh, 2008), and be able to perform better on the next exam. However, if you schedule an examination, when do you give it? Do you use the entire class time? It is not practical to do this more than one time, given that you may only meet 13-14 times in a semester. On the other hand, if you give more than one exam during the semester, but you do not wish to use the entire class time, you face a different challenge. Give the exam at the beginning of class and after the break your students may be more fatigued than usual. Give the exam after the break and your students may be fairly anxious during your lecture, not to mention it's not practical to test them on the material from that evening.

In my experience, I schedule a mid-term exam and a final exam, and the night of the mid-term there is no lecture or any other class activity (although one could assign take-home exams to free up that lecture time). To handle students' concerns about earning points, I assign homework on a periodic basis. These assignments allow students an easier and more frequent method to earn points compared to an exam; further, the assignments have the dual purpose of encouraging students to attend each week (i.e., you can have a policy that assignments are not accepted without an excused absence).

6. Structuring Class Time

Let's get back to the issue of how to structure the entire evening. After the break, when class is ready to resume, I recommend beginning with something particularly interesting and/or enjoyable – a short (and funny) video, a debate, a group activity – something that gets the class energized. Otherwise, students can quickly become distracted or inattentive, which purportedly is already more of a problem for instructors these days (Flaherty, 2011).

Lecturing, particularly heavy lecturing, should occur early in the evening. At the beginning of class students are almost always more focused and able to retain information. I start my lecture with an overview of the current chapter, using PowerPoint slides for about 75 minutes. Further, I establish a set time (give or take five minutes) for the break, so that students can become accustomed to a consistent timeframe.

7. Physical Environment

On a less important note, but still integral, you should examine your classroom before you begin teaching in it. For example, I ran into a problem with lighting – I had taught in a particular classroom during the day, and found it adequately lit; however, upon showing up at night, it was immediately clear the classroom lighting was inadequate in the evening, making the room almost “gloomy.” For tired, hungry students, this created a real obstacle. Therefore, never underestimate “optimal classroom ecology” (Myers, 2005). It may even be necessary to request a different classroom setting for your particular class.

8. Safety

Next, we should examine the issue of safety. Your class will start in daylight, but will likely finish after sundown. Further, if your class meets in the fall semester, it will eventually be dark when the class begins. Therefore, all students, especially female students, should be encouraged to utilize safety guidelines in traveling to and from class. This should be addressed the first class meeting, but you may also want to put something in the syllabus (e.g., university police contact number).

This past semester, something occurred that was new for me – a thunderstorm began to pick up shortly before my evening class was to begin. Since it was after hours, students were unable to call my office or the department to find out if class had been canceled. Further, some students chose to drive or walk to the class, and waited around, not knowing what to do. In the future, I plan on saving each student's cell phone so that I can create a group message in the event I have to notify students after hours of any reason class has been postponed or canceled.

I also think it is important to remember that when a night class ends, your class may be the only ones left in the building. My class is composed primarily of female students, so I am even more mindful of being in a classroom at night by myself. In the event of a post-class conference, I use a designated area near the classroom and out in the open, in close proximity to other classrooms and even building custodians!

9. Office Hours

Notwithstanding safety concerns, you always need to make yourself available to students, particularly to those students who are not on campus during the day and can only meet with you before or after class. Holding office hours is essential for your students (Barry, 2008), but there will also be students who only wish to confer around class-time. Plan on spending some time with students after class. Most nights there is no drama and everyone is anxious to get home, but you must also be prepared for a student who needs to talk after class. I have always had a policy that I am available for a brief conference before or after class, otherwise longer conferences (in person or over the phone) need to be scheduled at another time.

10. Food and Drink

Depending on student habits and appetites, there are some students that may be accustomed to eating dinner during your class time. Some students may be coming straight from work and unable to stop somewhere to eat. In my syllabus, my students are given guidelines (e.g., the noise must be kept to a minimum, students are responsible for cleaning up after themselves) for eating and drinking in class. I have no problem with food and drink, especially if it energizes the student, as long as it does not interfere in any way with normal classroom learning and activity.

11. Changing the Start Time

My last piece of advice is to consider starting before 6:30 pm in order to get out even earlier. Of course that is only if all of your students are willing, you are able, and there is no problem from your department chair with doing so.

Conclusion

Teaching a night class is a unique challenge, but it can be a rewarding experience for both the instructor and students. Today, with an increasing number of nontraditional students returning to school (American Council on Education, 2005), we are challenged to develop creative and innovative ways to make our classes work for them and to make our course material relevant to their daily lives. Evening classes, which afford these students flexibility and convenience, are one way to meet their needs. Success in a night class requires not only many of the same skills we use in traditional classrooms, but to understand the unique nature of an evening class and what unique steps can be taken to have a successful experience.