

# Tips for the First-Time Graduate Student Instructor

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Each year, thousands of psychology graduate students teach their first college course. Some are fortunate to receive preparation from their departments prior to being given the assignment (Mueller, Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1997; Myers & Prieto, 2000). Others are not so fortunate (Golde & Dore, 2001). When assigned to teach a course, some graduate students may receive only a copy of the required textbook and last semester's syllabus. In this column, we provide some tips for the first-time graduate student instructor. In our view, the biggest challenges involve managing interactions with students both in and out of the classroom.

## Less Is More

First-time instructors frequently set out to cover all the material presented in the textbook and, sometimes, aim to cover even more. College courses, unlike courses planned for the high school level, cover a great deal of information quickly. There is simply not enough time to cover every topic in the textbook in the typical three-credit college course. As pointed out by Nevid (2006), instructors have a tendency to talk quickly, either because of anxiety or out of a desire to cover more material in a class period. Experienced instructors can attest that talking faster does not usually lead to the students' learning more.

A better strategy is to plan, in detail, how the three hours of class time per week will be used to meet the needs of the students. Instructors should identify the concepts that students can learn on their own and the more challenging concepts that should be discussed in class. Encouraging students to come to class having already read the textbook or handouts will allow one to use class time for review and answering students' questions. In order to motivate students to come to class prepared, instructors may need to offer incentives or reading quizzes.

## Take Ownership of the Class

In situations in which graduate student instructors are asked to teach the class, but do not select the textbook, write the syllabus, or construct the exams, they may inadvertently send the message to their students that the course is not entirely theirs to control. If instructors share this information with students, students may erroneously conclude that their instructor lacks important knowledge or is less competent than those who are picking the textbook, setting the requirements, and constructing the exams. Because of this misperception, students may be reluctant to ask questions about the material, because the instructor has described his or her involvement in making the exams as limited. Ultimately, students struggling with the course material may choose to blame the *incompetent instructor* for their poor performance rather than themselves.

We recommend that instructors avoid discussing the operational details of the course with students. Even if students were told in detail why the department manages the course in the way it does, students

are not likely to understand. One strategy that instructors can use to take ownership of the class is to make a point of using “I” language when talking to students. Phrases such as, “What I want you to think about here is...” and “What I think will help you prepare for the test is ...” can subtly send the message that you are the person in charge, you know what is going on, and can answer their questions and help them be successful in the course. There are some guides that detail in-depth ways in which students’ perceptions of instructors have been empirically measured (see Bain, 2004). These can be helpful and provide anecdotes that can help in preparation for your first time teaching.

## **Set the Tone Early**

In the classroom as well as elsewhere, first impressions are particularly important (Buchert, Laws, Apperson, & Bregman, 2008). As other authors have suggested (McKeachie, 2006; Perlman & McCann, 1999; 2004), the first day of class should serve to break the ice and to establish what will come to be the norm in the classroom. If you want students to contribute to discussions and ask questions, give them an opportunity to contribute the first day. In addition, graduate student instructors may find their students only slight younger than themselves. If young instructors do not distinguish themselves from the students, they may find the students misperceiving them as one of gang.

Young instructors may find themselves discussing with students how difficult it is to keep up with all the reading in classes and how some classes can be quite boring. Students may misinterpret the situation as one that implies that the rules of the class, such as deadlines, are flexible and the grading will be lenient. It is important to set the tone of the course from the first course meeting.

Young instructors can distinguish themselves from the students by dressing professionally and having a positive attitude. A warm, open manner goes a long way in making students feel at ease and encouraging them to regard the classroom as a pleasant, but serious, place to be. Regarding appropriate dress, imagine that someone who was unfamiliar with the class walked into the classroom. They should be able to locate the instructor by sight either because of their professional attire and/or their demeanor.

Instructors can also make sure that all course policies are explained in the course syllabus. For many student questions, the instructor can direct them to read the syllabus.

## **Handling Inappropriate Behavior in the Classroom**

One of the most distressing situations for the new instructor to handle involves students engaging in inappropriate or offensive behavior. One form of inappropriate behavior is students behaving in an overly familiar way with the instructor (e.g., flirting). Some students may do it in an attempt to get a better grade in the course. We recommend that instructors point out and discourage the behavior immediately. If the instructor ignores the behavior, the student may misperceive that he or she approves of it and even enjoys it. If other students in the class see the behavior, they may misperceive the instructor as someone who will not necessarily be fair. Being clear about the inappropriateness of the behavior will send a positive message to the student displaying the inappropriate behavior as well as the other students. In extreme cases, students may continue to produce the unwanted behavior and may even engage in stalking behavior (Morgan, 2008). If the student persists, then you should notify your faculty supervisor and Department Chairperson.

A second type of inappropriate classroom behavior occurs when a student repeatedly makes off-topic or

challenging comments during lectures and/or class discussions. Students may try to distinguish themselves as more intelligent than other students in the class or even the instructor. Some students may even try to embarrass the instructor in front of the other students. In the worst cases, the situation can turn into a struggle for control of the classroom. Instructors have an obligation to all students to maintain the classroom as a positive learning environment. The first step in addressing the behavior is to have a private meeting with the student. The instructor should identify the unwanted behaviors and explain why the behaviors interfere with other students' learning. Most importantly, the instructor should explain the consequences that will occur the next time that the behavior occurs. Most colleges and universities allow instructors, in such situations, to ask a disruptive student to leave the class. Some institutions have student conduct offices that can work with instructors to address problematic classroom behavior. Usually, students will correct their behavior when confronted with a firm request accompanied by clear consequences (e.g., being asked to leave the class). In the rarest of occasions, a student will not refrain from the unwelcome behavior and may even become worse. You must be prepared to follow through with the consequences presented to the student at the initial meeting.

## **Setting Boundaries**

Most universities do not have explicit policies barring instructors from having personal, even romantic, relationships with students; however, many college officials and most faculty members view such relationships as unethical because of the imbalance of power that exists between an instructor and students. According to the APA code of ethics (APA, 2011), the situation would qualify as a *dual relationship* and should be avoided at all costs. For the first-time graduate instructor, navigating the world of student-teacher relationships can be confusing. If a student wants to be a "friend" on an online social network site, should the instructor accept? If a student is having a party and invites the instructor, should one accept the invitation? If a student sees an instructor at a local restaurant and offers to buy the instructor a drink or a dessert, should the instructor accept or decline? If a student asks an instructor out on a date, is there ever a circumstance when it is okay to say yes?

In an environment where a student may perceive a relationship with an instructor to be one of friends, there is the possibility that the student will expect special treatment when it comes to the course grade. If instructors explain their personal policy about relationships inside and outside of the class during the first week of class, they can help students avoid creating an awkward situation for themselves as well as the instructor. An instructor may decide that a relationship could be possible after the semester is officially over and/or when the student or the instructor is no longer at that college or university. In the event that a relationship does form (i.e., one that both parties wish to continue), it is generally recommended that the instructor not continue to serve in a supervisory role over the student. One should seek advice from your department head. It may be possible to have the student transferred out of your section of the course.

## **Responding to Student Requests**

Most seasoned instructors have heard at least one student say, "If I don't get an A in your class, I will lose my scholarship!" Sometimes the story goes, "If I get a D, the coach won't let me play." You might also hear "I had a 4.0 in high school; my parents will kill me if I get an F in my first semester of college!" The first time that one hears these pleas, one is likely to be tempted to provide the student with

additional opportunities to raise his or her grade—opportunities that were not available to other students in the class. Before you decide the best course of action, try to gather more information. It is always useful to ask them about their grades in other classes. One typically finds that the student is struggling in other courses as well. Students may even reveal that they need the higher grade in your class to balance out an even lower grade in another class. Even seasoned instructors have trouble sorting the truth-tellers from the truth-stretchers. It can be useful to develop a formulaic email or speech that you can use whenever you receive the request.

“Dear Johnny,

I’m sorry you didn’t do as well as you would have liked in the class. When I reviewed your grades in the many assignments in the course, you seemed to have lost points on multiple assignments. You also had the opportunity to earn extra credit in the course, which you did not complete. It would not be fair to the other students to provide you with opportunities to improve your grade, which they did not have. I enjoyed having you in class.”

Instructors may also want to take steps to encourage students to be aware of their performance in the course throughout the semester or quarter, such as by providing them regular feedback about their performance on assignments and showing them how to compute their grade (see also Zinn, 2009). If one permits extra credit in the course, it is useful to point out to students that the extra credit opportunity is available precisely to eliminate the need for end-of-semester requests for extra points or special consideration.

On occasion, students may ask the ambiguous question “Is there ANYTHING I can do to get a better grade in the class? I mean, I will really do anything I can to get more points.” The new instructor may find it hard to believe that students may offer to pay money for a higher grade or make other inappropriate offers. Unfortunately, such situations do occur. When they happen, you should be prepared to respond firmly and unambiguously. It is also prudent to report such occurrences to your department head; they can provide guidance about whether the incident should be reported to your institution’s student conduct office.

## **Maintaining Confidentiality of Student Records**

Routinely, friends or family members of students contact instructors. Perhaps, the student is not able to come to class to retrieve a graded assignment. Since the enactment of the federal law called the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (“FERPA;” 20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) in 1974, instructors are not permitted to disclose students’ records to anyone other than the student. If students would like to allow others, such as parents or spouses, to be able to access their academic records, students must submit the appropriate paperwork to the institution’s registrar. If a student has not submitted the proper paperwork to the appropriate institutional office, then instructors cannot, by law, release information to anyone other than the student.

In such cases, when an instructor receives a call from a parent, spouse or friend, the instructor can only politely explain the federal law. Often, the caller will not have heard of FERPA and may be offended by the instructor’s unwillingness to provide them the information that they seek. The instructor should try not to take the caller’s frustration personally. Remaining calm and polite can help keep the interaction

positive. Usually, it is possible for the instructor to direct the caller to ask the student to call on their own behalf to make the needed arrangements for the class.

Instructors should also be mindful of maintaining students' confidentiality in other circumstances. For example, one should not post grades in a way that publically displays students' names, ID numbers, or other identifying information. Also, one should not hand back graded assignments with letter or numeric grades visible to other students who are in the room. Placing grades and feedback on the last page ensures that other students do not inadvertently glimpse classmates' grades. One should not leave students' graded assignments unmonitored, such as in a box outside of one's office. Anyone passing by can view students' names and grades.

## **Make Use of Campus Resources**

New instructors can easily devote all of their free time to meeting with and helping students with various aspects of college life. Because graduate student instructors are typically taking courses of their own, conducting research, and sometimes learning clinical skills, they cannot succeed if too much time is spent dealing with teaching responsibilities. The new instructor may fail to realize that students' requests for assistance can sometimes be met by others. Institutions have a variety of resources available for students. There are likely dozens of trained professionals willing to assist students with a variety of issues. Students, and sometimes instructors, are unaware of these resources. Students may also be reluctant to seek out these resources. If an instructor refers students to the appropriate office on campus, students are more likely to get the help that they need. Instructors should familiarize themselves with the resources that their institution offers and be ready to refer students who could benefit from those resources. For example, most institutions offer help to students who need to improve their studying and writing skills. Students who may suspect that they have a learning disability can also receive guidance at the student disability office. Institutions also have centers where students can receive psychological counseling. Instructors of psychology classes are often perceived as being counselors or therapists, regardless of their academic training. When instructors encounter a student who appears to be in search of this type of help, they can provide them with the prepared list of campus counseling resources.

## **Evaluating Your Teaching and Getting Other Feedback from Students**

Most institutions allow students to evaluate their courses and their instructors. These evaluations can help one gain insight into what aspects of the course is working or not working. Often, instructors do not receive the official course evaluations administered through the college or university until after the following semester has begun. Instructors should keep in mind that one can evaluate one's teaching informally at any point during the semester. Several weeks into a semester, instructors can survey students anonymously about aspects of the class that they like, dislike, and what they would change, if they could. When students see that an instructor considers student feedback and makes some adjustment to the class, however small, students may become more engaged in the class.

When giving feedback, it is important to be clear about why some changes cannot be made. For example, students may request that the exams be provided in a different format, such as all essay questions rather than multiple-choice questions or vice versa. Before asking students for feedback, instructors may want to describe to students the aspects of the class that can and cannot be modified

easily. Instructors may also ask students to provide other types of anonymous feedback. For example, instructors may ask students to identify two concepts from the current chapter that they would like to review again. When the students see that you use their feedback to plan your future class meetings, they may be more willing to ask questions when they need clarification.

## **Conclusion**

New graduate student instructors may assume that the biggest challenge in teaching their first college course will be related to planning and presenting course lectures. In fact, teaching the class may be the least problematic activity during the course. New instructors typically struggle with managing interactions with students both in and out of the classroom. Instructors are encouraged to take time before the class begins to consider how they might describe the course details to the students, distinguish themselves from students who might be similar in age, handle students' inappropriate behaviors, set personal boundaries with students, respond to end-of-the-semester requests for extra credit, become knowledgeable about the campus resources that are available for students, and obtain informal feedback about students' perceptions of the course.