

# Tips From a Self-Taught Teacher

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If you are anything like me, your graduate program gave you the right training to become a researcher but did little to prepare you for teaching. Yet every college and university expects (if not demands) excellent teachers. Even at large research universities, a record of quality teaching is usually required for tenure and promotion. I am a self-taught teacher, meaning that virtually everything I know about teaching has come from my own experiences in the classroom. Looking back, this was a tough and quite painful way to become a teacher, but I am proud to have reached a point where I have received teaching awards and consistently achieve high evaluations. I would like to share some of the most valuable lessons I have learned — things I would have appreciated knowing sooner rather than later in my teaching career.

## Start the Semester Off Right: “Sell” the Course to Students

When I was an undergraduate student, almost every instructor I had (good and bad) spent the first day reading us the syllabus. I didn’t question this when I first became a teacher; however, all of that changed when I had the opportunity to teach at Harvard for a few years, where, in comparison to other universities, students have few required courses. Harvard students largely get to choose their own curriculum. During each semester’s “Shopping Week,” students attend as many classes as they can in search of the most appealing ones. Instead of carefully reading and reviewing each section of the syllabus, successful instructors typically spend the first week introducing students to actual content, making the case for how and why this course will change students’ lives, and drawing students in with engaging demonstrations and activities.

Adapting to this was not easy for me, but the challenge truly made me a better teacher because I had to learn how to captivate students from the moment they set foot in my classroom and really think about how to communicate the practical value of the course material. This approach is supported by research, too: A novel and engaging exercise on the first day can dramatically increase how many students look forward to taking your course (Bennett, 2004). I encourage you to give this a try next semester and see if you agree.

You may wonder how I communicate things like cell phone/laptop policies and the grading breakdown to students without using classroom time to exhaustively review the syllabus. The answer: I treat them like adults. We simply make an agreement on the first day that if they decide to take my course, they will bear the responsibility of familiarizing themselves with the syllabus, just like they will be responsible for learning the rules and regulations at their future places of employment. That said, I do reserve a small amount of time for addressing key aspects of the syllabus during the first class, such as requirements that might be unique to my class, or common misunderstandings and misconceptions about the course. You should not completely ignore your syllabus; there is demonstrable value in clearly communicating important expectations to students at the first meeting (Iannarelli, Bardsley, & Foote, 2010). Also, I should caution that entrusting students with the responsibility of learning the syllabus on

their own is a strategy that may not be equally effective for students of all levels or across all university settings.

## **Master the Material**

Telling you to know the material you will be teaching might sound obvious, but many instructors do not truly *know* their stuff. I learned this lesson the hard way: The very first class I taught was Health Psychology. At that time, I had never actually taken a course on this topic, and my knowledge was strictly limited to the textbook I adopted. I read the book as I was teaching the course and tried to stay a couple of chapters ahead of the students. Needless to say, the class was a disaster on multiple levels.

True mastery, allows you to fully and accurately answer student questions, start insightful and meaningful in-class discussions, and deliver coherent and organized lectures. Mastery usually requires you to do some independent reading and learning, and that means a lot more than just reviewing the books and articles you ask students to read: It means consulting the original journal articles of the studies you will be describing, keeping abreast of current research in that area, thinking about how material is connected across the course, and explicitly making those connections for your students. Mastery takes a lot of time, especially when you teach a brand new course. However, this investment will pay off immensely every time you teach the same class in the future. With this commitment to knowing the material, I have seen my evaluations improve considerably.

Of course, complete mastery is not always feasible, especially in cases where you may only teach a given course once or at very unpredictable intervals — or where you teach courses in multiple areas of psychology. However, if you will be teaching the same course regularly throughout your career, mastery is well worth the extra effort.

## **Draw Students in With Novel Examples**

In my undergraduate psychology training, the same examples — Little Albert, Pavlov's dogs, Skinner's pigeons, Milgram's obedience studies — were repeated time and again. As a teacher, I have moved away from a focus on the classics to covering other interesting but lesser known studies. I still mention classic studies when they are relevant; I just do not address them in great detail in more advanced courses. My incorporation of "hidden gem" studies is one of the most frequent things students praise in my evaluations: Students want to get a broad sense of research in this field, not just learn a narrow subset of studies conducted several decades ago.

Beyond picking innovative research examples, choose novel and relatable real-world examples that help students apply the concepts they have learned. Tailor these to each cohort of students, reflecting the technologies they use, the types of media they consume, and contemporary world events. Updating and changing your examples can help you appear more relatable to students and demonstrate your enthusiasm for teaching. In addition, research suggests that popular-culture-enhanced instruction increases student engagement with the material and may assist in retention (Springer & Yelinek, 2011). You must work to understand your audience and figure out what will resonate with them if you want your students to succeed. If that means forcing yourself to watch some fad TV and following some controversial celebrities on Twitter and Instagram, so be it.

## **Collect Early Feedback and Periodically Assess Comprehension**

Sometimes, it is difficult to gauge how a class is going and whether your students are keeping up. Like me, perhaps you once thought a class you were teaching was going well only to be disappointed by poor course evaluations. Working hard at teaching the material in the classroom but ending up with high failure rates on an exam can be equally distressing. To combat these problems, I now collect early feedback from students a few weeks into the semester. I give them an opportunity to provide numeric ratings as well as answer several open-ended questions about what they like/dislike about the course and suggest changes. I compile all of this information, present it to the students, and then make concrete changes on appropriate issues where there appears to be student consensus. If students suggest changes that cannot be made, providing a rational explanation shows them that you took their concerns seriously. Along with this early feedback, I periodically conduct informal comprehension assessments such as in-class discussions, online quizzes, or sets of questions answered with clickers at the end of lectures. Assessing comprehension before you give an exam can clue you in as to what might be worth reviewing and in how much detail.

## **Finish on the Right Note**

Making sure each semester has an appropriate finish is just as important as getting off to a strong start. Many “last classes” consist of a fairly routine lecture that probably could have appeared at any other point during the semester — the only difference being that the instructor says “have a nice break” as students walk out the door. When I was an undergraduate, that kind of finish left me wondering why I had spent the last 15 weeks taking the class. But even as a teacher, I failed to address this habit until a student noted it on one of my end-of-semester evaluations. I then realized I owe it to my students to sum up the course and show them what they can do with the knowledge they have gained, beyond just fulfilling some class requirement or prerequisite for graduate school. What practical skills have they learned? How can they apply this knowledge in employment settings? In my view, the most powerful sign of teaching success is when students tell you that your course changed their lives in some way or when a former student contacts you to thank you for the class or for the information you taught them. These things will not happen unless you actively demonstrate the value of the course material.

## **Conclusions**

Teaching is an incredibly difficult job for which most psychological scientists receive far too little training. Many of us are blindsided when we discover just what a monumental task it is to teach — and to teach well. I sincerely hope my observations are helpful to those of you who are just beginning your teaching careers and that they make things just a little easier for you.

## **References**

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