

# Voices from the Field

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## **Introduction**

Experience may be the best teacher, but it is a slow and often difficult one. *Voices from the Field* is designed to give teaching assistants who are just beginning their teaching careers the benefits of many years of teaching experience. Rutgers faculty members were asked to consider the ideas, techniques, and practices that they have developed over the years and to share those that would be of most value to teaching assistants just starting their careers. The information contained in this booklet was distilled from the many generous responses received. Some advice was repeated again and again, across the disciplines, indicating its almost universal usefulness to teachers. Other suggestions, however, contradicted the standard advice, attesting to the variety of methods employed by different people in similar situations. No single right way of teaching emerges, and that is as it should be, for, finally, teaching is a creative and personal act. This booklet, then, is not a “how-to” book; rather, it offers TAs numerous alternate models of successful teachers, speaking in their own words about what seems most important to them. By listening to these voices, and deciding which ones are speaking to them and their style of teaching, TAs can, perhaps, more quickly find their own voices as teachers.

## **The First Day**

### **Breaking the Ice**

The first day can be a challenge, an opportunity, or a trial. Carefully planned, this day can lay a solid groundwork for the entire semester. Use the first class as a way of easing into the semester.

Tailor your own first day exercises to reflect and potentially enrich the content of the course you will offer. Several teachers suggested having students conduct interviews with each other so that they know at least one person in the class and begin to feel at home. First day exercises also allow you to gather needed basic information about the students and will help you to begin to learn the students' names.

*On the first day I ask the students to break into groups--4 or so. They must put together a set of instructions for someone--a Martian, someone from a very different culture. The task is to be a physical act, such as opening a car door or brushing teeth. One student acts as the model for the group--the first position [to be described] is the human anatomical position. When all groups are finished we join together as a class and I then follow the instructions of each group, very literally. Through interaction and physical movement the students learn about the consequences of ambiguity and the importance of detail. Good ice breaker, good for morale too.*

*In small classes, students do self-introductions on the first day of class, as a way of getting to know each other. They break into pairs, and each student in the pair takes five minutes to interview the other member of the pair. After ten minutes, we go around the room and the students each introduce to the class the student they interviewed. (Topics covered include name, where they came from, what year they are in, why they are taking this course, their major area of interest, etc.)*

*For classes of about 40 or fewer, I have always found it helpful to do an introductory activity. What I do is to pair the students for the purpose of interviewing each other. I ask them to find out where the other person is from, why the person is taking the class, what his or her concerns about the class might be, and some interesting—but not embarrassing—personal information. I then ask the students to introduce one another to the class. At the same time, I learn who the students are and I am able to ask specific questions about their background for the course. The process is not at all threatening and winds up being a fun experience which takes a full class period. While this may seem like a lot of time which is not directly instruction, I have tried to conduct classes without taking the time for this activity, and it is always a mistake. [This activity] gives the class cohesion; it provides each student with an instant friend; it lets all the students know what kind of competition and support is available from their peers.*

### **Establishing Groundrules**

Many of the faculty echo the teacher who insists that it is essential to distribute the ground-rules on the first day to clarify expectations and establish class requirements. It is simply not fair to keep students guessing or to change the requirements as the course progresses.

*Some of the most useful advice I was given prior to teaching was that the first class sets the tone for the semester--in order to "set the tone" for active participation, I plan "exercises" for getting students involved early on. In teaching group dynamics and research (re: family functioning), I've asked for "brainstorming"—i.e., name some groups you've been involved in or know of; how would you operationalize family functioning? What is a family? How do you know if it's functioning well or poorly? I write the results of the brainstorming on the board, thus I model active participation as well as validate student input. I've found this very useful in creating a dynamic atmosphere in which students are engaged in an interchange of ideas from the beginning of the semester.*

*I set the "tone" for the class within the first 2 weeks. It is easier to be "hardnosed" at the beginning of the semester, then ease up later, than the reverse . . . I let students know clearly and concisely my expectations. I tell them during the first class what it takes to "make it" in my course.*

*I present the students with course outlines and make sure course requirements are clear. At the first class meeting, I discuss where students may meet with me, should they wish/need to do so. After discussing the overview of the course, the course requirements, and office hours, I plunge right into the course material so that the students don't feel that their time is being wasted. It helps to show them that I am approaching the course seriously and that I expect the same from them. I think that this sets a tone for the rest of the course .*

*..*

*I try to set high but not impossible standards for my students, then empower them to meet those standards.*

## **Getting Organized**

### **The Syllabus**

Preparing a detailed syllabus forces you to structure the material efficiently and to clarify teaching goals for the semester. Distributing a syllabus during the first class gives students a sense of what to expect from you and what you expect from them in the semester to come. Doing all this now will prevent problems later.

*Always provide students with a course syllabus which states in clear instructional language the course objectives; methods of evaluation and weight for each evaluation; assignments and due dates as well as penalties, if any, for lateness.*

*Develop syllabus concerning topics, readings, assignments for each class meeting for each of 14 weeks of semester.*

*Set up file with 14 sections, one section for each week of semester.*

*Put on file ideas, news media articles, reprints, etc. which relate to weekly topics.*

*Develop expanded "syllabus for teaching" with 3 categories:*

- *lecture*

- *classroom activities*
- *materials to be distributed/assignments*

*This syllabus will detail in outline fashion what the content of the class will be for each of the 28 class meetings. I find it is better not to distribute this expanded syllabus to class but to use it as my teaching plan.*

### **Planning or Overplanning**

Students feel secure when a teacher appears to be organized and in control of the class. Providing students with a strong sense of structure can also help them to master material that might otherwise be overwhelming or confusing.

Planning should be an ongoing process, with the teacher evaluating the success or failure of present methods to determine future ones.

*Try to project a sense of order in every class. Students often have difficulty in comprehending the organization of a lecture--they generally view the materials as rather chaotic. Coherent lectures with an introductory outline for the chapter will convey to the student the feeling that you yourself are prepared. Write objectives for the present class and requirements for the next on the board in the same place every week.*

*I find organization very important in presenting ideas to students. Before I begin class, I write a brief outline in the corner board of what will be covered in that class period. This comes from my notes and helps the student in organizing their notetaking as well as studying outside of class. This sounds like a small thing to do—however I have had positive comments from students who say that it also helps them to anticipate what will come next and organize their thoughts during the lecture. It also requires that the presentation be organized in the first place in order to write the outline on the board!*

Relying too heavily on the same plans year after year can be the road to disaster.

*Be prepared and well organized and clearly show the student what the organization of the material is [in order to] reduce anxieties. Well organized class lecture notes bolster my confidence. General outlines work*

*better than memorized talks. Spell out objectives, general and specific, for every class. As soon as class is finished, note what worked and what didn't and make next lesson objectives immediately.*

*I write out (should be on computer) all my lectures in full detail or as very extended outlines--update each year. That way, I don't lose my place, forget things, or mix up the order . . . and easy to review next year. But don't read them--just glance at them-- I don't get as nervous that way.*

Effective teaching requires faculty involvement in research.

*The surest way to go dead in the head and lose your enthusiasm is to teach the same course from the same lesson plans over and over again. The students are pretty sure their professors are dead below the necks, but try to keep yourself alive above. The more times you teach a course, the better it should get--new books, new pedagogical techniques, etc.--just never business as usual. No reason not to connect it with your current research, leave titles and schedule slots open for the students' suggestions, picking up what student eyes are seeing, ears are hearing. If teaching isn't a ball, a gas, a high for you--if on-the-job satisfaction doesn't more than compensate for all the other stuff you have to put up with—then go for the \$\$ elsewhere. And absolutely, without fail, before they leave you get in writing from them their evaluations and suggestions for that better class next time.*

For some, overplanning for every class is one way of bolstering confidence.

*I always "overplan," so that I can switch gears, depending on the nature of the group. . . I plan for more than can be covered, so that I never run short of material. This also helps clarify in my mind where the class " will be going" for the coming week.*

## **Encouraging Student Participation**

### **Active Learning**

Active learning is possible only when students feel they have a voice in the class, that they are factors in determining the direction and tone of the class.

*Let students choose the ordering of tasks; let them have choice in assignment topics, oral presentations, etc. whenever possible. It generates more enthusiasm for tasks and material being taught.*

*Try to give options, i.e. student choice, in meeting course assignments.*

*Design hand-outs describing problem (i.e. acid rain effects on recreational lakes), role(s) description, and guidelines for insuring that major points are explored. Follow-up: a representative from each group shares "solution(s)" with class, defending their reasoning . . . discussion ensues.*

*Avoid being too dictatorial in the conduct of your class.*

*Use role-playing as a means of forcing your students into a more active role in the classroom.*

Create a set of rules for yourself that will enable your students to steer themselves through the most difficult material.

*I try to make comments on students' assignments whenever possible. I want to establish a dialogue with each student. I have been having writing conferences with students in my writing class rather than just relying on their interpretation of my written comments on their papers. They have given me excellent feedback and seem to enjoy these conferences. I have also been experimenting with cassette evaluation, whereby the instructor explains comments orally on the cassette and the students can listen at home or in the lab. Some of my quiet, methodical students say they have enjoyed this approach because they can listen again and again and go through their composition step by step as I discuss it.*

By acknowledging the fears and anxieties of your students, you can find ways of relieving them.

*I have students going to the board whenever possible, putting examples up (from homework, class assignments, etc.) so the class can discuss/evaluate them. This keeps everyone awake, is a painless way to involve quiet students and provides an opportunity for those who tend to "hide" in the back to come to the front.*

### **Asking Questions**

To get students to participate, it is necessary not only to ask questions but to make sure that questions are open-ended rather than close-ended.

The quality of the response is directly related to the quality of the question; a well-chosen question, one that builds upon what the students already know, is the first step to thoughtful responses.

*Encourage their questions. Pause and ask for questions, even if mostly not having any effect.*

*Ask occasional questions of them. Don't make them look too stupid if they're wrong! Show the correct answer, without saying much about their wrong answer.*

*An easy way for you to ask a question which might start a continuing discussion is to ask "what is an advantage of [the subject of the lecture]?" Or, "What is a disadvantage?" Students can easily think of these, and often other students will argue with them.*

*Encourage student participation by posing questions or problems that some students should be able to answer or to which they can contribute part of the solution. This can easily be done in the course of what would otherwise be a straight presentation of a method, a proof or a problem solution, etc. Students' minds become more engaged when students are asked to solve problems while learning material. It is extremely important that wrong answers be treated gracefully, perhaps with a comment that the wrong answer suggests another, better, approach, or brings up a subtle or interesting point.*

### **Controlling Space**

The physical set-up of the classroom is an important factor in encouraging student participation in a class. Whether students participate is not purely accidental; although no one can force students to speak, careful planning can result in an atmosphere conducive to dialogue.

Create a friendly atmosphere in your classroom.

Even in large classes, it is possible to get students involved.

*Don't be afraid to arrange classroom seating. Circular or semi-circular arrangements allow you to keep an eye on everyone, yet include them in a group feeling.*

*I often move the furniture and have students work in small groups. It is also interesting to note how some students stake out territory and tend to sit in the same places for every class. We often discuss material in a semicircle so that I can see everyone. (No one reads the Targum in my class!)*

*Learn the names of your students, call them by name in class, and they will participate more.*

*Simple but not obvious to those who haven't taught before—don't speak when they're talking—no matter how many times you have to stop and start again.*

Helping your students' to feel free to participate does not mean giving them the license to disrupt the class. Set limits on student behavior.

*I find it improves attendance at large lectures to include short projects, activities, etc. which involve students with each other. Some of these are:*

- *Interview each other as to attitude, learning, confidence, etc. regarding some or part of lecture content. I often take hand count and tabulate on black board for all to see.*
- *Try to explain concepts, ideas, etc. to each other. Take poll as to problems, etc. and material and tabulate on board. (This is done with dyads, groups of 3 or 4.)*
- *I let students know early what bothers me during class. I don't make generic announcements about misbehavior; instead, if someone is popping gum, talking while I'm lecturing, etc. I look the offending student in the eye and tell him/her/them what they are doing bothers me and the other students--firmly, bluntly and briefly, then move on, so my objections do not become an argument.*

## **Enabling Students to Learn**

### **Making Difficult Subjects Easier**

Ideas and concepts that may seem obvious to you may not be so clear to the students.

Don't show off your knowledge and vocabulary at the expense of your students' learning.

Reinforcing difficult material by presenting it to the students in various ways can increase their understanding.

*If possible, give examples from one's daily life, thus connecting an abstract concept to real facts. Students can then see the practical aspects of their learning . . . give students a chance to ask questions—once in a while check if the students are following your reasoning—question them.*

*Use non-technical, colloquial language and examples to introduce technical principles. Example: "Here's a recipe for the (chemical) compound."*

*Put your notes online to complement the lecture and for absentees.*

*[Assign] weekly short writing assignments based on specific readings. Students are to read the assigned paper, write in their own words what the main ideas are, and also their critical reaction to these ideas (documented). This assignment gives lots of practice in writing and reading, ensures students are prepared for class discussion, enables teacher to give feedback on students' thinking/ writing styles--without overwhelming the teacher. (Longer papers are also assigned; they serve different purposes.) Students soon begin to appreciate the efforts they and the teacher are engaging in--especially as the papers begin to accumulate. I also review progress at the end of the semester by looking at the whole collection of papers with the students. Usually there is some progress--in ideas or expression or both...*

*I had a guest lecturer who gave an assignment which was not on the syllabus. He presented the task orally, and it was quite complex. The students clearly did not understand, nor did they know what to ask since this was their first contact with the professor. I suggested to him that he write the assignment on the board. This forces him to be precise about what he wants and enables the students to question more explicitly. Alternatively, the assignment should be written out on paper for distribution.*

Create a set of rules for yourself that will enable your students to steer themselves through the most difficult material.

*Break explanations down into small steps or "bite-size pieces." Pause a lot and ask if there are any questions, partly to let them absorb that one small section at a time.*

*Use diagrams a lot...they help understanding.*

*Emphasize important stuff--repeat it, or at least review it later. (Also, emphasis keeps them awake and interested.) Often, important stuff is worth summarizing at end of class.*

*Speak slowly(!). Speak loudly! Pause to organize your next thoughts (that's perfectly OK!).*

*Teach what you least understand, that way you'll learn something.*

By acknowledging the fears and anxieties of your students, you can find ways of relieving them.

*Teaching a math course, I find that students are usually very anxious, perhaps more so than in other courses. I try to reduce their anxiety in a number of ways. One way is, during lecture, to say, "If you don't understand this right now, that's all right. This subject can be hard sometimes, but I'm sure you'll understand it soon." Another is to be clear on a written syllabus about how grades will be computed, when exams will be, and when I have office hours. If all the classroom management issues are dealt with up front, then the class and I can spend more time concentrating on the subject matter.*

*Remember to be flexible. It's essential.*

### **Making It Relevant**

Like everyone else, students are more interested in those subjects that they perceive as having some direct impact on or clear relationship to their lives. Your students' common experiences at Rutgers can help motivate them to become active participants in their own education.

*Relate classwork's goals to current societal problems, e.g. pollution, greenhouse effect, longevity, poor construction of buildings and bridges and houses. (NOTE: This has only limited effect on the majority of students who cannot think about the future or the past!)*

*Bring out political implications of larger issues especially and whenever it is an issue that impinges on students lives--in the university. Especially on education quality: class size, tuition, "world class scholar"*

*attendance, poor advising, physical equipment deficiencies, RU screw cases. Help and empathize and give practical suggestions, encourage students to organize for their needs and rights.*

Show your students the world beyond Rutgers. Send them out into the world or bring that world to them.

*Announce at the beginning of each class relevant lectures and exhibitions in the area, professional meetings and job openings.*

*Interview experts in the field. In teams of 2-3 (or alone) students locate experts in agency, government officials, local representatives to congress etc. who they believe are knowledgeable about areas of their studies. They prepare a list of questions, carry out the interviews, and take notes during the interview. Information gathered may be reported to the class, and/or included in their own papers. Students learn how to assess the validity of sources of information, and gain knowledge about community leaders as well.*

### **On Being Human**

Let your students know that you are interested in them as individuals, that you respect them, and that you enjoy your time with them.

*Treat students like people, not just student numbers.*

*Make class fun. Connect [the] subject with [some] humorous aspect...*

*Be unfailingly polite and kind.*

*Smile a little, whenever it seems natural, even if for no particular reason.*

*I learn as many students' names as possible, even in classes of 150-200...I invite student participation--get them to answer questions or discuss issues. (This is how I learn their names; I ask them to introduce themselves as they speak.)*

One simple but amazingly effective way to show your students that you do indeed see them as individuals is to learn their names.

Honesty must be the basis of all student/teacher relationships.

*Be informal—laugh a little, pause when appropriate, invite questions...Willingly admit that you don't know; if you try to fool your students, they will think you a fool...Treat your students with respect. Care about them. Then you will be a good teacher.*

*The most important rule of good teaching is to be completely honest with the student. Almost all students sooner or later detect and dislike phony PR words. A smooth but phony approach may work at times and may avoid unpleasant confrontations momentarily but students do not respect a teacher who uses this approach. Unpleasant truths about their studying, performance on exams, etc., if communicated gently, fairly, and firmly, are respected by them and eventually accepted.*

*Confidentiality is also important. The TA must gain the confidence of students and be willing to assist with problems arising in the course. The TA must not berate a student...The TA should...follow the "3F rule" i.e., be fair, firm, and friendly with students.*

Always bear in mind the diversity of your audience and take care not to exclude or insult anyone inadvertently.

*Make sure every sentence you speak is clear in a multi-cultural context--(and, of course, unbiased).*

*Find your own teaching style—one that you are comfortable with. A method that works for one teacher may not work for you. Don't be afraid to experiment—with lecture, discussion, student reports--and concentrate on what feels right for you as teacher.*

### **Varying Class Material**

Students learn in different ways, so there is not single "best" way to teach a class. Some students may only need to read the text to master the materials; others may need further explanation or examples before they "get" it.

*Integrate media with lectures.*

*Field trips. I plan a series to permit my students to visit special collections and meet with distinguished curators.*

*Visiting lecturers. I try to bring 1-2 specialists per year to lecture--bookbinders, collectors, etc.*

*Fictional works are a good way to study people's problems, life-crises. Students (class as a whole, individuals or small groups) select books from an approved list for this learning experience. Works well with use of current literature.*

*Time permitting, do demonstrations--ask questions. (A picture is worth a thousand words.)*

*When using films or videos, which can be excellent learning tools, prepare essay assignments based on the films (and on other readings and lectures as appropriate). Give these assignments in advance of showing the film or video so that students know "what to look for." Resulting "film essays" are often very well done.*

*Benefits include raising student interest in carefully viewing films.*

## **The Lecture Class**

### **Making Your Point**

Reasonable limits must be placed on the material for any one day.

*Don't try to cram too much into a lecture--3 or 4 major points in an hour--all the rest explanation of those points.*

*One of the most difficult lessons for a beginning lecturer to learn is not to try to teach the students everything you know. If you do, you run out of time; you blur the organization of the material; it's too much for them to digest; and their questions will go beyond what you know, making you appear unprepared. It is much better to pick 2 or 3 main "take-home lessons" that you want them to remember, and focus yourself on these, building on them in only as much detail as time permits and the audience seems to grasp.*

*Organize lectures. Start class by summarizing what you will cover; make sure you do cover all topics; summarize at the end. Give study guide questions.*

*Intersperse review segments with lecture parts, introducing new concepts to link the known with the new.*

### **Making it Interesting**

The lecture class, when it is nothing more than the sound of one voice droning, can be deadly. Be willing to hand over some of your performance time to your students.

*Teaching is a two-way street. Ask specific questions (at random) to the students and check their responses. This keeps them alert.*

*First and most important is variety and movement. I have been complimented many times on the fact that I use a variety of teaching tools in one workshop session (slides, video, overheads). Additionally, I try to move away from the front or podium and establish eye contact with people or groups of people sitting in different places around the room.*

*My personal pet peeve is to listen to someone who shows no enthusiasm and drones on and on in a monotone at the front of the room. It puts me to sleep. It is necessary to practice interpretative reading and speaking in order to avoid boring the group to death.*

Vary the pace and method of presentation in the classroom to keep the students engaged.,/p>

*Changing pace is quite effective. If every class is predictable, it is boring for the students and the instructor. I also have students going to the board whenever possible, putting examples up (from homework, class assignments, etc.) so the class can discuss/evaluate them. This keeps everyone awake, is a painless way to involve quiet students, and provides an opportunity for those who tend to “hide” in the back to have to come to the front. Try to avoid having a class that is always teacher-centered. Try also to set up the dynamics of the class so that the students become trained to listen to one another and do not only tune in when the instructor is speaking. This may, at times, require a diplomatic cutting-off of students who may become long-winded or who waste time.*

*Better to convey information by asking questions and eliciting responses, rather than by straight lecturing, where possible. [This method makes it] more interesting for everybody--I learn more that way, too.*

*I like...to ask an "opinion"/policy question or set a verbal problem and ask students to discuss it in groups of four/five for about 10 minutes. This gives them a chance to actively think and talk about the topic of the lecture. I debrief by asking a few groups what they came up with and perhaps asking for a show of hands in agreement/disagreement with a position. Although it "takes" 15 minutes from lecture time, it prepares students to listen with more interest and to be more critical of my "reading" of a situation. It also means students get to know each other a bit and sets a tone which says its OK to speak out in a large lecture. I'll sometimes use this in the middle of a class period when I sense attention flagging.*

Do not be the sole provider of information. Make the students think and work along with you. 80 minutes is a long time to listen to anyone. Avoid the teacher-centered class.

*If lecture you must, make it a conversation: insist on being "interrupted" with questions and comments. Better yet, plan your class with change-ups that will respect their attention spans (which are not 80 minutes long): walk the aisles, fill the blackboards, do housekeeping chores in the middle instead of the beginning or end, assume dramatic roles and voices other than your own, catch your thought on the wing and show the relevance of your digressions, let the campus and larger world in, and give way to the occasional student who wants to perform. On the other hand, never fall whole hog into the trough of democratic "discussion:" they're not paying to hear pauses of uncomfortable silence among their confused or hesitantly stumbling peers: kick-start them and keep those mind motors revving! The misbegotten pedagogical principle of "everybody's opinion is as valuable as anyone else's" will only leave them muddled and never get the job done. It's an extended, friendly, high flying family in there, and you're the user-friendly intellectual cheerleader.*

Establish a basic routine to give students a sense of the shape of the lecture.

*Tell students what you will cover. Put short ("closed list") outline on blackboard [to] raise expectations and make interesting (curiosity). This shows students that it's limited--not going on forever. An outline forces you to put it all in logical order, which is easier for students to understand.*

*Use examples as much as possible (usually it's easier to understand real examples).*

*Put some of your experience in from your current research, to make it more real, relevant and human, which makes it more interesting.*

*Try to put some humor—if possible—in your lecture.*

## **Testing**

### **Academic Integrity**

The problem of academic dishonesty must be kept in mind when a teacher is designing and administering a test. Students should be encouraged to read *Rutgers' Academic Integrity Policy*, available at <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu>.

*Before the first class, TAs should discuss with the professor what they should do about any possible cheating that might occur.*

*For exams, I recruit graduate students as proctors (I have no TAs), use multiple forms at the exams and state explicitly that any form of cheating will not be tolerated. Though this approach seems draconian at times, most students (who are not into cheating anyway) feel protected from the few who might try to exploit them.*

*I try to avoid all multiple choice questions and try to incorporate the short answer/short essay types of questions whenever possible.*

### **Preparation and Design**

Students should never be taken by surprise on a test. They should know beforehand whether the focus of the test will be the lectures, the text, the lab, or some combination of these elements. Teach students how to prepare effectively for exams.

*Students should know specifically what will be covered on exams (study guide questions help).*

*In large classes where objective examinations are necessary, undergraduate students often are misguided in their preparation. When they get a poor grade, they then come to the instructor and say: "But I studied hard*

*for this exam. "A new instructor may not know how to respond to the "I studied hard" complaint. The answer may be that the student studied long...but wrong.*

*It helps to coach the entire class early in the semester. I do it by handing out a guide that suggests ways to take notes and study for my large lecture course that is required of majors. I try to point out what my style is, and how the students can fit their studying style to my style of presenting information.*

*When a student comes in to review an exam, I have a copy of the handout, and I review it before I review the exam. Often the student realizes that the problem lies with faulty preparation on his or her part, and that improvement can be made by following my guidelines.*

*Before a test, review the most important material for them.*

*After a test, go over answers. (This imprints [the correct answers] in their memories). On essay questions, rewrite some parts of their answers on the exam book, in better English composition form.*

Encourage students to study together in groups.

*Two weeks prior to an exam, I provide the students with a list of the topics covered thus far, in the form of review questions. I divide the class into small groups, each with the same list. These study circles are both popular and effective.*

*If tests are used they should be linked to course objectives. Never assume that the test is a valid measure of the objective until you have sufficient data. Questions should be weighted according to the production skills required. If multiple choice tests are used then analysis with discrimination should be done. Get results back by next class. Essay tests should have specified criteria with weights.*

*Never give up on students; no matter that they have given up on themselves. Urge them to study for and take the final.*

## **Grading**

Effective grading practices measure the extent to which students have learned the material.

*Read exam papers “blind” (with student identification on the last page) to reduce inadvertent bias.*

*Grade horizontally! When grading exams for a large class, grade one question at a time (for all students) rather than one student at a time. This allows you to be consistent in your grading.*

*Discipline and encouragement--hard and heavy in the marginal comments, easy on the grade. Read and mark before grading, picking from your essay pile those you suspect are the bellwethers for the herd; thus, temper your expectations and standards to the actual performance of the class’s personal best. And YOU take the blame, not they and their grades, for any widespread errors that indicate you didn’t teach it right. Then modify right there your lesson/lecture plan for the next time the course is taught; otherwise you’ll forget and mess up again.*

*One of the constant difficulties instructors face is complaints about examination and paper grades. For example, “I didn’t feel well,” “There’s a problem with my roommate,” etc. Students in general feel better if they perceive the grading as “fair.” Therefore, I often use a system of “shifting weights” in compiling final grades. For example: the grades for the course will be based on a midterm, a final, a paper, and a few small quizzes. I would then announce that the quizzes are 10% of the final grade, the best of the remaining scores is 40%, the weakest is 20%, and the middle score is 30%. This shifting weight will make no difference for consistent students regardless of the level of performance. It does, however, very much forgive one very poor performance and gives some additional weight to one very good performance. It tends to mean that students who do well early have some cushion and students who started weak have hope on the final. It also allows the instructor to reassure a student who is pleading for consideration of some problem on one of the exams without forcing the instructor into a re-examination situation.*

*Convert all student raw scores into **appropriate Z scores**. The Z-scores provide a useful and objective way of assessing the rank of each student. It will provide the instructor with a ranking of each student on each exam.*

*Give credit for assignments completed on time, i.e., more credit for one-time solutions; give extra credit for problems on the board.*

*Use a competency based approach: for each project completed, you get an increase in the letter grade. If it is "inadequate" you must resubmit. If it is very exceptional, you get a "+". For example, answering one of four essay questions, pass or C; doing a community assessment, B; developing a community plan, A. I give detailed instructions on the contents of a competent project.*

*In giving feedback to students and in grading students I find it helpful to them and to me to spell out specific criteria I use to grade them. My comments on the paper address these criteria. In certain courses I even distribute to each student the set of criteria I use and enter the number of points earned on each. The total of points becomes the basis for the grade.*

## **Office Hours**

Consulting with students is part of the teaching process. This can be done in-person and virtually.

*It is important for the students to feel that the instructor is available for help and does not have to be "caught" as he/she is running out of the door at the end of class. Many students have commented to me that I am so "accessible," which I guess is an important thing in their minds.*

*Schedule them at their convenience, not yours—and publicly and loudly lament if they don't show up.*

A publication of the  
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