Classroom Management

On the Cutting Edge: Preparing for an Academic Career in the Geosciences: Workshop for Graduate Students and Post-Doctoral Fellows
Friday, July 30, 2010, 10:00 to 10:50 am

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Moving a class towards a shared goal can often come with obstacles that challenge the best of us.

In this session, we will review strategies for dealing with common problems of the classroom, including:

- handling emotional students
- motivating poor performers
- helping students perform at their best

Establishing a sense of progress, accomplishment, and structure in the classroom

- Keep expectations high and then help students achieve them
- Have a good syllabus and keep to it
- Be consistent with rules and expectations
- Keep the class on track (find a way to address off-topic questions outside of class or save them for extra-time days)
- Incorporate a basic flow to the week, so the class has some predictability (you can specifically set aside times to be flexible).
- Have goals (class objectives) that students can clearly identify and check to see where they are and where they've been (examples: weekly – or topical – study guides or question sheets)
- Recognize and encourage sharing of the experiences and skills your students bring with them – don't underestimate them
- Study sessions led by mentors on content + key skills like studying for exams, reading the chapter, taking notes, and more.
- Office hours
- Tutors

Teaching with authority

- Be willing to edit and evaluate your performance, but not IN the classroom
- Keep your standards and policies consistent
- Practice confident speaking skills
- Project your voice to the back of the classroom
- Use eye contact – talk with and to the students
- Try to relax and think of the classroom as a discussion amongst colleagues
- Get feedback from colleagues on your speaking style (to identify and eliminate, for example, overuse of the word "uh" or speaking to the board)
- DEMONSTRATE THE SKILLS YOU WANT YOUR STUDENTS TO LEARN
    - Memorize names and facts
    - Grade right away and thoroughly
    - KNOW your stuff
    - Say "I don't know," when it's true (and then find the answer)
    - Expect good behavior

Finding resources

- Research college programs and services
- Network with colleagues inside and outside your college
- Look within your student body – use the top students (former and current) to set models for current students and to tutor
- Use your students to help with projects
- Go on-line to SERC and other websites for help with curricula
- Review the materials of teachers who have taught the classes before
- Choose a good textbook – one the students will actually read (and maybe even enjoy!)

Handling difficult students

- Keep your standards and policies consistent.
- Expect good behavior – think the best
- Refer the student to tutors and on-campus counselors and programs. Likely the student is a problem because they're not fully prepared for this class. Help them to see they may need to take some other classes (study skills, English, Math) before re-enrolling in your class.
- Avoid making things personal -- keep the goal always on the education of each student in the room (one student shouldn't disrupt the education of the rest)
- Ask difficult students to see you in your office after class – be sure to have the tough conversations OUTSIDE the classroom and not in front of other students. (If you are really worried, you can have someone else be present.)
- Jump on problems RIGHT AWAY. Otherwise they get worse!
- Remember: you're the boss. If a student fails to follow your in-class policies, they are likely breaking college rules. Be consistent, and if they balk, refer them to a department chair or campus dean.
- Know your campus resources (police, policies, and Dean of Students) – alert them right away if you think the safety of you or your students is at risk

Handling emotional students

- Be patient and compassionate – show them you care
- For some students, your class might be their first science class. As they encounter an entirely new challenge, advise them that they are not alone – that science classes are different and therefore different study skills are necessary – it might take awhile to adjust, but resources are available.
- Develop a policy that has some room for flexibility or emergencies and then let students know that their emergency is already accounted for (thus you can avoid the need for excuses and having to choose which is real and which isn't).
- Assume your students are adults and making the best choices for themselves – but recognize that those choices come with consequences (which might just mean retaking the course when their life situation is better).
- Keep your standards and policies consistent.

Handling cheating

- Have a policy stated in the class syllabus, and stick to it! Make the consequences real and important
- During exams try to seat students so they can't see the papers of others
- Set rules for tests: no programmable calculators, cell phones – books and notes out of sight. OR make tests open book, open notes
- Create multiple versions of the same exam
- Keep past exams (give students class time to review their exams – and return a cover page to them with their grade – but do not allow exams to leave the room)
- If assignments are easily copied, don't assign grades (or make them a minor participation grade)
- Keep your eyes open during exams
- When cheating is suspected, always pointedly invite student the opportunity to fess up first

Setting expectations

- Make a clear syllabus
- Follow it, and be consistent
- Provide resources to help them achieve your expectations (tutors, office hours, worksheets, study guides, etc.)
- Avoid curving to the students in the class – let an A one semester mean the same as the next (this is easier when you keep and use the same exams – it is difficult to do your first few years, when you are setting your standard, but it is a good goal for future years)
- Set expectations based on the classes that come next in the sequence and what students should know in those – thus giving you a strong support system when questioned by students
- Use homework and in-class activities that encourage efficient, effective studying. Get students to:
    - Read and review and use weekly checks: quizzes, homework, or projects
    - Write out answers, in own words
    - Explain answers to other students
    - Practice, practice, practice
    - Complete chemistry/math/physics review handouts
    - Complete study sheets prior to exams

From those of us who teach…

Most Motivational

1. Students are engaged and asking questions
2. Subject matter personally interesting
3. Teacher is motivated – enthusiastic, enjoying herself, professional
4. Textbook is interesting
5. Feeling like I accomplished something (good grade is one example)
6. Can participate in class
7. Topics are explained well
8. Efficient and a purpose
9. Class is required
10. Class is a chosen JOY!!!
11. If information is useful to my life – can see the connections.
12. Rewarded/recognized for progress…

Least Motivational

1. Wasted time
2. Topic I don't care about
3. Too easy
4. Busy work
5. Too hard (unprepared)
6. Instructor doesn't stick to their own expectations
7. Too early
8. Instructor overestimates audience level
9. Instructor disorganized – no plan!
10. Instructor disinterested.
11. Learning for a grade (grade focused)