

TEACHING TIPS FOR MORE POSITIVE COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

Teaching Tips for a More Positive Syllabus

- Write it with the student from heaven, not hell, in mind.
- Put the legally required statements in an appendix. Tell your students that everyone must abide by these rules but they have not been authored by you and are certainly not the heart of the course.
- Keep it short and sweet. It should be a concise invitation to learn. Its tone should be warm and conversational, not formal, legal and cool. If your syllabus is a lengthy opus, do not dump it on them all at once; instead, share additional sections of it, as need be, over the first weeks of class.
- In your syllabi reveal your philosophy of teaching and your perspectives on life (e.g., insert a sample of your favorite quotations).
- Support the autonomy of students. A positive syllabus will give students some control and choice on how, when and what to learn. To teach by example, you might even risk asking your students to propose changes in the syllabus itself.
- Describe assignments and learning tasks that are challenging, interesting, relevant and meaningful. Invite them to do important things *with* you.
- Don't ignore your needs: describe a course that you will enjoy teaching but not one that will overly tax your energy. You should not work harder than your students.
- Try to avoid the imperative for covering all of the "required" contents. Add new topics that interest you. Add days to experiment on new ways of teaching and learning.
- Describe more opportunities for formative than summative performance feedback.
- Append copies of the rubrics you will use for grading student performance.
- Include several ways to contact you. Invite students to meet with you face-to-face. Tell students you will invite them to your office if they are too shy to invite themselves.

Teaching Tips for a More Positive Beginning to a Course

- If possible, before course registration, send out announcements describing the course and your philosophy of teaching. Use these announcements to recruit students you enjoy teaching.
- If possible, contact the students who have registered before the course starts. Share your expectations and invite their questions. Create a course listserv or Facebook page. Do what you can to enable their communication with each other.
- On the first day of a class greet students at the door. Welcome them. Shake their hands if this is an authentic expression of greeting for you.

- Before you share the syllabus, begin by introducing yourself as a professional and as a person, but don't get too personal too soon. Send the message that community and people are as important as anything they will learn.
- Take photographs of the entire class. Print them on standard paper. Ask students to write in the name they wish to be called. Study the photographs before and after each class until you have all of their names memorized.
- By using name tags or name tents invite students to identify themselves and reveal to each other who they are as students and individuals. Ask them to interview each other.
- Ask students to write short autobiographies (200 - 300 words) on themselves as learners. Urge them to include reflections on great teachers, peers who supported them, accomplishments, and turning points or times when they showed resilience and grit. Take a couple days to read each autobiography and, with their permission, ask them to read each other's autobiographies.
- Use on-task, discipline-specific ice breaking activities (i.e., avoid using off-the-shelf cute gimmicks).
- Tell stories on past memorable moments in the course. Invite a past student to tell her stories or field questions from current students.
- Conduct surveys on student interests, strengths, and levels of confidence.
- Do goal setting: ask them to rank their top 5 goals in the course; then, reveal what your top 5 are. Facilitate a discussion on the matches and mismatches.
- Be humorous. Use humor to increase intrinsic interest and enjoyment, and decrease anxiety and fear. If you are not naturally funny, consider using the wealth of cartoons and videos available on the internet.

Teaching Tips for More Positive Performance Feedback & Grading

- Invest a lot of your time planning and designing ways to give students useful feedback.
- Be clear about learning objectives: communicate them frequently to your students.
- Don't confuse means and ends. If an important learning objective is to write an accurate summary of a journal article and a student clearly understands the entire article, do not substantially lower his grade for one or two typos. On the other hand, if the primary learning objective is to write well, do not lower a student's grade if she misunderstands one of several theories described in the journal article.
- Use rubrics to grade student performance. Describe all the rubrics and how you will use them to your students early in a course. Require students to use your grading rubrics to do assessments of their own work or that of a classmate *before* it is submitted to you.
- Give formative feedback and allow students to re-test or re-submit work. However, because doing this can be labor intensive, shift much of the burden to students. For example, consider the use of self-paced learning modules that are computer delivered and managed, or form learning teams for students to give each other feedback. Use your grading system to give incentives to students to doing these things earnestly.
- Give growth minded, not fixed minded, feedback to your students. Comment more on the processes for learning than the outcomes of learning. Focus on changeable skills and behaviors, not what you may falsely believe are immutable abilities. For example, if it is

obvious that a student has gone to the library or searched extensively online to read a recent original primary publication rather than merely skimming a googled summary, don't just comment "You're a good researcher!" also say "I know it took more time for you to find original research and read it thoroughly, but doing this has clearly improved the quality of your thinking and writing."

- Grade the learning, not the learner. Distinguish between the act and the actor. Give useful dispassionate specific feedback to a student's performance while avoiding the temptation to give a global evaluation of her character. Be objective, consistent and fair with every student. Students talk with each other about grading.

Teaching Tips for Sustaining a More Positive Classroom

- Use classroom assessment to monitor how and what students are actually learning and how they feel about their learning. Do classroom assessment not just at mid-semester, but throughout the life of a course.
- Use classroom assessment to explore the social processes that assist or impede the learning of students before, during and after a class.
- Ask your students about learning environments that occasion flow experiences. Emphasize social flow because it is this form of flow that will increase your intrinsic interest in teaching.
- Through classroom research discover the conditions that promote upward spirals for learning in your classroom. With the participation of your students, research what causes joy, arouses interest and deepens engagement.
- Talk with a trusted colleague or mentor on the ups and downs of college teaching while a course is in progress. Join a brown-bag discussion group. Seek social support.
- Keep a journal on your teaching. To build upon success, write more about what went right than what went wrong.
- At the end of a course do your own course evaluation. Include questions that are important to you. Be sure to add questions or items on teacher-student rapport.
- When you get the results of a course evaluation, toss out the outlier data. Do not allow the pseudo love or hate of a few students derail your growth as a professional.

Teaching Tips for Colleagues & Students Befuddled by Your Positivity

- You will be the target of the prejudices people have about positive psychology. A few people will assume you are naïve, romantic, soft and dim-witted. Especially the colleagues who do not take the time to read about research in positive psychology will surprise and disappoint you. Shower these skeptics with the interesting research findings and provocative new theories in positive psychology. Give the credentials of the leading researchers in positive psychology. Help them see that positive psychology is behavioral science at its best.
- You will have conflicts, overt and latent, with colleagues who deny the role of emotions in learning or who believe human suffering defines rigor. They will say your course is "too easy." Challenge these colleagues by asking them for the assessment data that support their assumption that students learn more in a "rigorous" environment.

- You may arouse cognitive dissonance in those grade-obsessed students who use downward social comparison to establish their intellectual status. Grade-obsessed students will say your course is “cake” because the “less intelligent” students they usually dominate in other classes are doing surprisingly well in your class. Remind these students that success in life, by any measure, is only weakly correlated with grades; therefore, you are more concerned with their learning and development than their GPA.
- Colleagues who believe that “giving” high grades is a bribe for receiving high instructor evaluations will perceive you as a threat and then denigrate your competence as a professional. Invite them to experiment with formative feedback, growth minded feedback and assignments that arouse more interest and deepen student engagement and only then decide if these practices cause grade inflation.
- Students who are not used to receiving ungraded formative feedback will anxiously wonder how they are doing. Although formative feedback enhances learning more than summative feedback and it more precisely gauges learning level, nevertheless, some students will demand to be given a traditional grade. Remind these students that the best lessons of life and the most important things they have ever learned were never graded.



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