

Common problems - beginning teachers

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From: tomorrows-professor-bounces@mailman.stanford.edu on behalf of Rick Reis [reis@stanford.edu]
Sent: Tuesday, March 03, 2009 11:23 AM
To: tomorrows-professor@mailman.stanford.edu
Subject: TP Msg. #926 Your First Semester of Teaching - Week Twelve: Common Problems

Remember-you are in charge. As Bujega concludes at the end of his essay on inappropriate technology in the classroom, "despite digital distractions, large classes, decreased budgets, and fewer tenured colleagues, professors still are responsible for turning students on to learning. To do so, we just may have to turn off the technology."

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Folks:

The posting below, a bit longer than most, looks FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) most common problems beginning teachers find with their students, followed by advice on just a handful of other common problems with teaching for the first time. It is from Chapter 12, Common Problems, in the book: On Course - A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching, by James M. Lang Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, England 2008, ©copyright 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. Professor Lang can be reached at [ang@assumption.edu].

Regards,

Rick Reis
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UP NEXT: Imminent Changes in Higher Education and its Delivery

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

----- 3,766 words -----

Your First Semester of Teaching - Week Twelve: Common Problems

Q: You make it all sound so easy, Jim. Will I really be able to follow all of your suggestions and have the perfect first semester?

A: No.

You won't, because students are human beings, and human beings never do what books tell you they are going to do. So what follows is a FAQ section on the most common problems you will find with your students, followed by advice on just a handful of other common problems with teaching for the first time.

Q: How do I handle rude student behavior in my classroom-talking, laughing, getting up and down during class?

"No experience of new faculty as teachers," writes Robert Boice, "is so dramatic and traumatizing as facing unruly, uninvolved students-especially in the large, introductory courses traditionally assigned to newcomers" (81). Undoubtedly true; equally troublesome, with the omnipresence of laptops and wireless-enabled classrooms, are students spending class time shopping for shoes online, rather than taking notes (see following question).

Two major points here. First, rude student behavior often comes about because of what's happening at the front of the classroom. If students are talking and reading the student newspaper during the lecture, sending e-mails, or IMing their friends, your lectures may be boring. If students are chit-chatting with each other during the discussion, you may not be asking interesting questions. A well-taught class is the best preventive measure you can take to counter what Boice calls as "student incivilities." His research on this issue suggests that newcomers face student incivilities at much higher rates than highly rated teachers with years of classroom experience (81-98). Fortunately for you, you are doing the work right now to become a highly rated teacher, and following the prescriptions of this book-and other preparatory work you do for your first semester-will be the best measure you can take against poor behavior.

However students, like the rest of the population, can be just rude idiots, so sometimes your best teaching efforts won't be enough to eliminate such behaviors. You won't always know about students surfing the internet in class, but you will certainly know about noisy and rude students. When that happens, you can either shame such students by calling them on the behavior in front of their peers, or you can find ways to discuss their behavior with them in private. My non-confrontational personality, coupled with a dozen years of teaching and raising children, have convinced me that the latter route is the better one for correcting poor behavior. When identifiable students are acting uncivilly in your classroom (however you may define such activity), you can stop them after class and give them the standard lines you would expect to give-that such behavior makes it difficult for you and other students to concentrate, and so on. You can also ask them to come see you in your office, and discuss it there, if you think they require a more serious dressing down. A third method that I have used is to append a P.S. to one of my final comments on their papers, addressing the behavior and asking them to improve it or to come see me in my office. Calling them on the behavior privately like this has always worked for me. If you try this and it doesn't have the desired effect, check with your chair; seriously persistent and disruptive behavior should be observed by a senior faculty or administrator so that you won't suffer for it in your teaching evaluations (and they may be able to intervene with the students).

Q: Students have their laptops, cell phones, PDAs, and what-have-you on in my classroom, and whenever I step out into the seats I can see that half of them are shopping for shoes or downloading music or text messaging their friends. Some students have cell phones going off in class. What can I do about this?

A: This is probably the most annoying problem we will all face in the future, so best to consider it now and decide how you want to handle it. The solutions seem to me different for different sized-classes. In small classes, twenty or thirty or less, you need to have a strong physical presence in the classroom. You should be using interactive teaching methods in classes that size, of course, and such methods give you an opportunity to move out into the seats, work your way around the classroom, and let students know that at any given moment you will be standing behind them, seeing whatever they have on their desk or laptop. Do not isolate yourself in the front of the classroom; you command the entire space of the classroom, and you need to make yourself felt at every desk. You don't need to be in constant motion, of course; student awareness of your mobility will go a long way towards keeping them on task.

In larger lecture classrooms and auditoria, you can still do some of this, but the problems will be worse here. So you have two choices, and neither of them are ideal: learn to live with a certain amount of technological distraction, or ban the technologies that are disrupting your classroom. If you choose option one, it doesn't mean you should do nothing. At the very least, you should discuss the inappropriate use of technology in the classroom at the beginning of the semester, and perhaps even include on the syllabus a technology warning like the one cited by Michael Bujega in a Chronicle essay on this subject:

If your cellular phone is heard by the class you are responsible for completing one of two options: 1. Before the end of the class period you will sing a verse and chorus of any song of your choice or, 2. You will lead the next class period through a 10-minute discussion on a topic to be determined by the end of the class. (To the extent that there are multiple individuals in violation, duets will be accepted).

Whether you use humor in such a warning or not, including an admonition on the syllabus gives you an excuse to discuss the use of technology with students in the classroom, and to help the conscientious (but perhaps clueless) students see how to comport themselves more appropriately.

However, if you are teaching in a large wireless classroom, facing a sea of laptops, and you are convinced that the vast majority of the students are not listening to your scintillating words, then don't hesitate to ban laptops, either outright or for specific parts of the session. No student has a constitutional right to bring a laptop to class, so you have every right to forbid them (you might announce that you will make special provisions for students with disabilities, however). Don't feel bad about it; students have been taking notes with pencil and paper for many hundreds of years; it won't kill them. A less stringent option would be to allow or encourage laptops for specific activities in class-asking students to join you in reviewing a website or program you have scouted for them in advance, or working with them on a program or problem-but then asking them to close the laptops for the fifteen-minute lecture module you have planned for the end of the class, when you will be summarizing the main idea of the day.

Remember-you are in charge. As Bujega concludes at the end of his essay on inappropriate technology in the classroom, "despite digital distractions, large classes, decreased budgets, and fewer tenured colleagues, professors still are responsible for turning students on to learning. To do so, we just may have to turn off the technology."

Q: Students are not coming to class, or they come late. Do I leave those choices up to them, since they are adults, or do I become an enforcer and start each class with a daily quiz?

An article on poor attendance in college and university courses, which appeared in the spring of 2007 on insidehighered.com and provoked a massive outpouring of responses, offered a bleak picture of this issue. The article included the following statistics on attendance and tardiness patterns:

A 2005 survey of first-year undergraduate students by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles showed that while a majority of college students spend 11 or more hours in class per week, 33 percent reported skipping class and 63 percent said they come to class late "occasionally" or "frequently." A similar survey showed that the proportion of students who report coming late to class has jumped from 48 percent in 1966 to 61 percent in 2006 - evidence, one could argue, of a growing indifference to class in general.

I'm going to start sounding like a bit of a skipping CD here, but the first principle is to ensure that you are creating a classroom experience which students could not duplicate by copying someone else's lecture notes, or by listening to a recording of your lecture. Students, in other words, should play a role in the classroom. If you are giving students a

role to play-through discussions, group work, in-class writing, problem-solving, and so on-then you have every right to say that the success of the course depends upon the presence of the students, and to require that presence. If you are standing in front of a podium and lecturing for fifty minutes, then I'm with the tardy and missing students on this one-why should they come to class, when they can get the same material more efficiently, and in the comfort of their dorm rooms, from other means?

As long as you are offering a class worth attending, which depends upon students for its success, then you should not hesitate to drop the hammer on late and absent students. Take whatever measures seem appropriate to you, from locking the door at the start of class to giving daily quizzes at the opening of class, from calling tardy students to the carpet as they walk in the door to penalizing students who miss more than three classes on their final grade. Consult the article on insidehighered.com for more ideas on combating this problem, and especially the responses that follow.

Q: I have trouble remembering the names of my own children; the prospect of remembering the names of several sets of twenty or thirty or forty undergraduates each year just seems impossible. Can I call on them as "red baseball cap" or "kid who plagiarized" or "crewcut" just to keep things simple for me?

A: I did know a teacher who managed this successfully, actually. At the beginning of the semester he hit upon some aspect of a student's appearance or mannerisms, gave them a nickname linked to it, and then referred to him or her in that manner in class. He pulled it off because he was eccentric and had a great sense of humor, and did not use offensive or embarrassing nicknames (i.e., no one was nicknamed "baldie" or anything). The potential ways in which this practice could go bad are so numerous, though, that I really wouldn't recommend it.

Mary McKinney, a clinical psychologist who counsels academics on career issues, addressed this problem in an essay for the online academic news site insidehighered.com, and described there more than a dozen techniques for learning the names of students-her list is worth consulting, and is available online for free (see below for reference). The one that I like best, number twelve, may be the simplest. Every time a student asks a question or speaks in class, ask them for their name; repeat the name somehow in the answer-"Jane asks an important question here . . ."-and if that question or your response to it comes up in class again, associate it once again with her name: "You'll remember that Jane asked us this question last week . . ." The more times you repeat the name, the more likely you will be to remember it. This technique has the bonus benefit of affirming the importance of student contributions in your classroom, making visible to them how their ideas are woven into the fabric of the lectures and discussions. Classes of fifty or more obviously do not require you to learn everyone's name, but don't abandon names altogether. Learn any names you can, but don't fret about not having comprehensive coverage.

Q: I have a student who flirts with me, or who asked me out for coffee, and I find him/her attractive, and we're only a few years apart in age. Can we date, either now or when the semester is over? Or does finding my students attractive make me a horrible person?

A:I doubt anyone will get through thirty years of teaching 18-22-year olds without finding at least some of them attractive, and finding a smaller few both attractive and interesting and worth a few hours of idle daydreaming about. So no one should feel bad about this; we are sexual beings, and so are they, and they are young and like to wear skimpy clothes to attract their fellow students-and occasionally we might get snared in webs that were not intended for us. Sometimes, though, those webs are intended for us, which makes the situation especially difficult.

While you have no reason to feel guilty about sexual attraction to a students, you also should follow a clear policy on this: no sexual relationships with any student, including a

graduate student, who is enrolled at an institution at which you are teaching. Not just enrolled in your class-enrolled in the college, even three years after you have taught that student. Is such a relationship ethically wrong? I believe it is, for a variety of reasons, but I know thoughtful people who disagree, and my recommendation here is not based on ethical concerns. It's very practical, and I have said it once before: as a graduate student, adjunct, or tenure-track faculty member, you are vulnerable. Do not do anything that will jeopardize your career, and sleeping with students, however far removed from your classroom, will jeopardize your career. You may not see anything wrong with sleeping with a graduating senior, but plenty of your colleagues might, and those colleagues will make decisions about your career. You also will be amazed at how quickly word of a sexual relationship between a student and a teacher can spread around campus. A rumor like that one has the potential to follow you for the remainder of your career. So steer far clear of acting on any normal sexual impulses you have for your students; sublimate them into wholesome activities like painting Civil War figurines or learning to play the recorder.

Q: What special teaching secrets do I need to know for teaching labs or teaching online courses?

A: The sources I consulted about teaching in these special situations all relied upon the same basic information and ideas about teaching and learning that I have been relying on throughout this book. This means that while you certainly may have to manage technical parts of these teaching situations differently than you would a large lecture or a discussion course, the basic principles remain the same. In other words, you still need to orchestrate these kinds of classes according to the same theories about student learning, about designing and responding to assignments, and so on, that operate in more conventional classroom situations. In some ways, both these special teaching situations provide more opportunities for one-on-one (though not necessarily face-to-face) interaction with the instructor, and hence may prove effective than other kinds of classes. That said, the technical parameters are indeed different, but you will probably be familiar enough with those from your student perspective-since no one will be teaching labs who has not spent lots of hours as a student in the lab-to get you started. Beyond that, you will have to think creatively about how to translate the fundamentals of good teaching into those situations. For more concrete help in those technical areas, and links to other resources, begin with McKeachie's chapters on these situations, referenced below. More specifically, online teachers can consult Ko and Rossen; scientists who will be teaching in labs should consult Rick Reis' book, which covers not only teaching, but many of the specific elements that new faculty in sciences will confront during their academic careers.

Q: I tend to get stage fright with public speaking, and so I am massively nervous about the first day. Like, going to have a nervous breakdown kind of nervous. I'm afraid my hands will shake, or I'll faint, or my heart will explode, or something terrible, and students will lose all respect for me.

A: I had these kinds of nerves going into my first interview on a morning news program, after my first book came out, and what really helped me was a technique I recommend to everyone: spend the evening before your first day watching the comedy *What About Bob?*, in which Bill Murray plays a man paralyzed by every fear you can imagine. Watching him "baby step" his way into self-confidence by the end of the movie did wonders for my own confidence.

If, however, this doesn't seem like an adequate strategy for you, the best thing you can do is to ease your way into the first class, so that the moment of initial exposure to the students is a muted or more gradual one. For months before the class begins you will be building up in your mind to that moment when the students are tiered before you, rows of unfamiliar faces, and you open your mouth to begin the long adventure of the semester. The prospect of that moment is what terrifies you. So, prepare to eliminate that moment. Get to class early and dissipate the unfamiliarity of the students by walking around and handing out the syllabus, greeting the students by name. Or begin the class simply by handing out the information sheets, and asking them to fill one out. You may even begin with a group activity, like the exercise that Michael Gennert recommends on having students work in groups

to read the syllabus and ask questions about it. The ten to fifteen minutes that this exercise will buy you, or the time that students spend filling out information sheets, will enable you to settle more easily into your first day of teaching and will tone down your anxiety considerably.

Q: You keep telling me to consult my chair about this or that, but I've discovered that my chair is insane/out to get me/incompetent/a potential serial killer. I've learned this from a colleague/all of my colleagues/my amateur sleuthing, the techniques for which I picked up while watching reruns of *Murder, She Wrote*. I love Angela Lansbury!

A: Me too! The possible causes and responses to this situation are endlessly variable, so following any advice I might give here could actually turn the situation worse. Just remember the following general principles:

1) If your own observations and/or a chorus of your colleagues agree that the chair is a problem, remember this: You have no power. Unless your chair is doing anything illegal, or borderline illegal (such as inappropriate sexual comments or subtle harassment), you won't be able to do much to stop him or her, and you have to remain on the chair's good side, or you will end up teaching all 8:00 am classes in a windowless basement. You also will have a hard time getting tenure. Fortunately, chairs come and go (in my department, we elect or re-elect them every three years), so patience and martyrdom are your best bets. For advice and consultation, you can sometimes find a reliable chair-substitute in a senior faculty member who has held the position of chair in the past. Walk around the hallways looking sad and pathetic, and a former chair might take pity on you. As Jay Parini argues in *The Art of Teaching*, if you can get your hands on an emeritus faculty member, they can prove excellent mentors as well-folks who have long institutional memory, and plenty of wisdom, but who will not sit in judgment on your tenure case (96-104).

2) One person complaining about another person, including a faculty member complaining about the chair, does not tell you anything you can trust about either of them. For all you know, the complainer is the insane serial killer, and the chair is handling this person the best way she knows how. So be careful of becoming the person to whom a disgruntled faculty member likes to vent, whether it's about the chair or anyone else. Smile and nod, and don't be committal about anything until you figure out what's really going on. Anyone that buttonholes you continuously to complain about other faculty members, or about anything at all, should be avoided as much as possible (this holds true in life as well).

3) If you get into a situation in which it seems as if the entire department is against you, and are not treating you fairly, and you find you have been in this situation before . . . well, I'm going to be the one to be honest with you here. The problem, my friend, may be you. Consider a major personality overhaul.

Q: Any final advice for me, Professor Lang?

A: Hand lotion. Nothing dries out your hands like chalk, especially during the wintertime. Keep some lotion in your desk, and apply it liberally. My departmental assistant would be much grateful, I'm sure, if I followed this advice myself, and stopped borrowing hers all the time.

Q: Do those ten questions really cover all of the problems I might have in the classroom?

A: Yes. OK, no. But rather than continuing to fish, I am going to teach you to fish on your own. An excellent resource for getting and giving advice on just about any teaching question you can imagine is the Forum section of the online version of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which you can find here: <http://chronicle.com/forums>. Look in particular at the thread "In the Classroom," but you will find advice and discussion about teaching in lots of places. This particular forum has its share of idiots, like every place in the world, but many thoughtful and interesting people post messages seeking and dispensing advice on the

boards, and you will find a thread there-or you can start one of your own-on every vexing problem you are likely to encounter in and out of the classroom.

Resources

Boice, Robert. *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimus*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000. See especially chapter eight, "Moderate Student Incivilities," for Boice's research on this issue and his advice on how to prevent and respond to incivilities.

Bugeja, Michael J. "Distractions in the Wireless Classroom." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.21 (26 Jan. 2007): C1.
<<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2007/01/2007012601c/careers.html>> 29 Jan. 2007.
An interesting article about the problem of student use of the internet in wireless classrooms, with a few suggestions for how to combat it. Available online.

Ko, Susan and Steve Rossen. *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003. A comprehensive guide to online teaching.

McKeachie, Wilbert and Marilla Svinicki. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 12th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. See these chapters: "Laboratory Instruction: Ensuring an Active Learning Experience" (266-277), and "Teaching by Distance Education" (288-297).

McKinney, Mary. "What's Your Name Again?" *Inside Higher Ed*. 13 Feb. 2006
<http://www.insidehighered.com/workplace/2006/02/13/mckinney>. 3 Jan. 2007.
McKinney's article is followed by an interesting discussion among readers about the importance of learning names, and offering other techniques for doing so.

Parini, Jay. *The Art of Teaching*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Parini's book contains a very wise argument about the respect we should give to our emeritus/a faculty members.

Powers, Elia. "The Elephant Not in the Room." *Insidehighered.com* 1 May 2007.
2 May 2007 <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/05/01/absent>. The piece about absenteeism and tardiness, with a long following thread of debate and advice.

Reis, Richard. *Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Careers in Science and Engineering*. New York: Wiley-IEEE Press, 1997. A good preparatory guide for new faculty in the sciences; Reis went on to write a column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on this same topic for a few years, and then founded the *Tomorrow's Professor* listserv.

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