



White Board

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Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Reflections on Teaching: Mistakes I've Made

I STARTED TEACHING at American University at the age of 56 after a rewarding career as an environmental and wildlife film producer. That was almost ten years ago, and I'll be the first to admit that I really didn't know what I was getting myself into. I had never taught before and I wasn't even sure where to begin. I had no teaching philosophy beyond some vague, unarticulated feeling that I wanted my students to do well. And so, I started asking lots of questions.

First, I asked my three daughters, who at the time were either in college or recent college graduates. They gave me sound advice from the students' perspective. Once I arrived at AU, I asked my new faculty colleagues for their best ideas. Again, the answers and guidance I received began to shape the kind of teacher I aspired to be.

Although all this advice helped me to survive the classroom, I still made many rookie mistakes. I was repetitive, talked too much, and gave grades that were too high. I embarrassed students by brazenly pointing out their mistakes in front of the rest of the class, sometimes failed to allow a class discussion to blossom while at other times lost control of the class during discussions.

I allowed verbose students to talk too much and did not properly listen to what students were saying. I was boring, ran out of material to teach, and was scared of being challenged by a student and not knowing the answer.

I also made the mistake of rushing through material. I thought it was important to cover everything, not realizing that "getting through" all my notes had little to do with whether my students were learning.

Occasionally my students described the homework I gave them as "busy work" and



criticized me for wasting their time.

I would sometimes say "Any questions?" to a roomful of silent, nonresponsive students. Usually, they were not asking questions because I hadn't explained the issue well and they were afraid to look dumb. I mistakenly took their silence for understanding. I would get on such a roll with my ideas that I would forget I was talking to students, many of whom were being exposed to the information for the first time and would benefit from a little context.

On some weeks, I was slow to return student papers, and when I eventually did return them, my comments on the papers were glib and superficial because I had 30 papers to grade and was sick and tired of doing it.

I hated it when students obsessed over grades. "Professor, why did I only get a B on this paper?" Incessant questioning along these lines verged on harassment. I was sorely tempted to rid myself of the problem by agreeing to raise the grade, which would have been yet another egregious error on my part.

Over time, I learned from these mistakes. I continued asking my colleagues for advice, pursued professional development opportunities, and studied some excellent books on teaching, such as McKeachie's Teaching Tips.

I also learned from my students. Every four weeks, I asked them for feedback. I gave

out a blank sheet of paper and said to them, "On one side tell me what you like about the class and what you want me to continue doing, and on the other side write what you don't like about the class and find unhelpful or missing. Make your comments anonymous so please be as brutal and candid as possible."

One day a student wrote, "You are not pushing us hard enough. I want to get as much out of this class as possible. Please teach us everything you can. I want to learn more."

This feedback hit me hard.

Professor Chris Palmer is on the full-time faculty at the School of Communication at American University.

Chris Palmer; Reflections on Teaching: Mistakes I've Made; Faculty Focus; November 7, 2018; [<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/reflections-on-teaching-mistakes-ive-made/>]
November 29, 2018.

Classes End - Dec. 3
Reading Day - Dec. 4
Exams - Dec. 5-11
Grades Due - Dec. 13
Commencement - Dec. 18
Holiday Break - Dec. 24-31

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First Monday of the Month

September 3	March 4
October 1	April 1
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Reflections on Teaching: From Surviving to Thriving

I HAD KNOWN it all along at some level, but now it suddenly became glaringly obvious to me. Deep down, sometimes out of conscious reach, students want to be transformed and their lives made more useful, productive, and powerful. I added the following new goal to my personal mission statement:

“My goal is to be a wonderfully inspirational teacher, always available to my students, and constantly encouraging, supporting, and challenging them. I intend to provide my students with a life-changing experience. I want to be renowned for my exceptional teaching skills and for getting my students actively engaged in their own learning.”

Now with this goal in mind, I now strive to follow three main principles of teaching.

My first principle of teaching is that the professor must care deeply about the class and be fully invested in the students' learning. To show my investment, I show up early for class, respond quickly to emails and phone calls, and try to give substantive feedback on students' work. I learn my students' names early on. I intentionally convey my passion and enthusiasm through my words and my body language. I work hard to avoid being that clichéd professor who drones on and on, as bored by the material as the class is. I tell my students that I expect to learn as much from them as they from me, and I ask for their input on how to improve the class. In everything, I try to remind them that we are there to make massive progress on their intellectual and professional development.

That leads me to my second principle: the importance of encouraging complete student engagement and empowering students to take ownership of the class. At the beginning of the semester I lay out the purpose of the class, what the expected outcomes are, and how grades will be calculated. As the semester goes along, I ask for feedback every month via anonymous questionnaires and adjust the class according to the needs of the students. I have learned that even when students are doing fine with the material, they appreciate the opportunity to weigh in and have their opinion heard on how the class is going.

I have found that some seemingly pedantic aspects of teaching make a significant difference in the quality of student involvement. Many professors believe it is

the students' responsibility and choice, as adults, to attend class or do the homework. However, we have to remember that students have many valid obligations fighting for their time. If attendance is not mandatory, sometimes students will make the choice to skip. If reading is never referred to, sometimes students will not get around to opening the book. If I want my class to be truly rewarding, I need to set high standards for attendance and study habits.

My third principle is the importance of encouraging students to work together and learn from each other. I met so many of my lifelong friends and developed numerous relationships important to my career in school that I wanted to give my students every opportunity to do the same. Ice breaker exercises, encouraging students to learn each other's name, and having frequent class discussions create an environment in which students feel comfortable working with each other. They learn the essential skills of networking and collaboration while also engaging with the material of the class.

Of course, even with these three principles, challenges always remain. But keeping these in mind helps me strive toward the goal in my personal mission statement. I am now much more comfortable running a class and encouraging student involvement. It is a pleasure to teach when the students are engaged and interested and when they speak up, ask questions, and even make arguments.

Here are my favorite specific tips from peers, students, and pedagogical experts for creating a positive learning experience for your students:

- 1. Syllabus.** Make the learning outcomes as specific and clear as possible, and relate these to the assignment and to your grading metrics. Spell out expected student behavior, including professionalism (meet deadlines, show up on time, participate in class, etc.)
- 2. First Classes.** Make a serious and obvious effort to learn your students' names. Ask your students to address each other by name, rather than “he” or “she.” After you introduce yourself, ask your students to introduce themselves. Have the students fill out a questionnaire about themselves, including goals, interests, passions, and expectations for the course. Meet one-on-one with all students within the first two weeks of the semester and discuss

their responses to the questionnaire. Some of the best teaching is done outside the classroom.

- 3. Classroom Atmosphere.** Convey your passion and enthusiasm for the subject and your willingness to provide individual help. Foster a sense of belonging and respect. Encourage high performance and promote active engagement. For a small class, give the students a sense of community by sitting in a circle. Create a safe, nurturing environment in which students feel free to experiment and fail.
- 4. Classroom Specifics.** Show up early for class, take attendance, and end class on time. Start class by asking a student to summarize the main points from the last class, and end by summarizing what was accomplished. Write the plan for the class on the board. Have students stand up and stretch, occasionally play brief games, and, when possible, take field trips as a class.
- 5. Classroom Interactions.** Make the class as interactive as possible to transform the students from passive observers to active players. Constantly call on individual students by name to answer questions without first asking for volunteers. This keeps the whole class alert. Encourage the shy students to speak; don't allow long-winded or loud students to dominate the conversation. Listen to students actively during discussion.
- 6. Beyond the Classroom.** Manage your office hours: encourage students to drop by even if they don't have specific questions; have a sign-up sheet on your door so students don't have to wait. Reach out to students who miss a class. Be responsive to emails and calls from students and give students meaningful and meaty comments on homework assignments.

If you would like to receive a more detailed list of ideas for inspiring students to be enthusiastic and motivated in the classroom, please e-mail me at palmer@american.edu with “Handout” in the subject line.

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