

Seven rules for effective teaching in the Digital Age

Jack Santucci

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Effective teaching means keeping students happy while having them learn at the same time. Here are seven rules I follow in order to be effective.

1. Reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic have not left us

The substance of teaching has not changed much in about 5,000 years: decomposing complex texts, writing down complex ideas for someone to read later, and using the rules of empirical evidence. I am clear from the start of any course that grades depend largely on showing progress with these skills.

2. Expect most students to avoid most course readings

There is one bad entry among my teaching evaluations. This seminar course was meant to talk about ideas that explain current party politics. We met only once per week. I thought the readings would be interesting, as the students were interning in Washington, DC. I even said which readings would inform which essay prompts.

It quickly became apparent that roughly three of 21 students were doing any homework. Some of the others were just too tired, since class met in the evening after internships were over. The rest had made a deal not to talk very much in class, and they used a group-text app to enforce it. I bucked that deal, kept pushing for discussion, and got a low evaluation.

3. Divide responsibility for homework insofar as possible

Contrast my bad evaluation with the result from another seminar that started three weeks later. I made 20 percent of the final grade depend on doing *most* readings, at least cursorily. Each week, one student would take the lead in discussing/presenting one reading to the rest of the class (10%). But a few more students would have smart things to add, as I also required each

student to write a one-sentence reaction for 10 out of 18 total meetings, in advance of class (the other 10%). Class discussion regularly took the entire hour and 50 minutes.

4. Put everything needed for B-range grades into the lecture slides

Seminar-style manipulations do not work for large lectures (40+ students). Students show up for what they need to get acceptable grades, plus a bit of entertainment. Therefore, it helps when lecture slides double as stand-alone class notes. Ideally, every slide is titled with a sentence, and those sentences add up to the argument of the day. Slides like these lead to decent essays that at least summarize course material – good enough, in other words, for grades in the B-range.

5. Inspire with a beautiful picture of quantitative data

We live in a visual and quantitative age. An original data visualization does a lot to break the ice: logged executive orders per president, evolution of the Electoral College, and so on. Starting lectures with plots like these leads to three good outcomes. First, students ask immediately about the cause of variation. Second, they start to generate alternative hypotheses. Third, they ask me, “did you make that yourself,” what program I did it in, and about how long it took. Showing data builds quantitative literacy and scientific curiosity.

6. Accommodate the busy people who take online classes

Online courses cater to busy people. The tools that work in face-to-face settings may not work for online students. One could mandate Skype meetings and/or post full-length lectures, but that would gut the point of online learning. Online students want flexibility, especially those who live on-campus and could otherwise take the course in-person. So, I use five-minute video recordings and multiple-choice questions that guide the reading of a text.

7. Accept that student demands are justified

College education now costs roughly three times what it cost me. The economic return has become less certain. Students turn to internships sooner and, by the time they graduate, have completed more of them than my most ambitious peers.¹ Students are stressed out, not lazy. To me, this explains why they want more from professors and less from textbooks.

¹Ideally, we can help them get those internships.