American University's Center for Teaching Excellence

WORKSHOP HANDOUT

INSPIRING STUDENTS TO BECOME ENTHUSIASTIC AND MOTIVATED LEARNERS

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To develop a vibrant, productive and memorable course, professors must continually work on inspiring students to become enthusiastic and motivated learners. Such students are engaged, active participants in their own learning.

Below, you'll find suggestions in the following six categories:

I. Syllabus
II. First Classes
III. Classroom Atmosphere
IV. Classroom Specifics
V. Classroom Interactions
VI. Beyond the Classroom.

Some of the suggestions may not work for you because of the size or content of your class. Classroom management strategies must be shaped around the maturity and expectations of the class and the individual teaching style of the professor.

By the end of the workshop, participants should have tangible ideas on how to engage their students. To evaluate this learning outcome, we will discuss these techniques as a group. Each participant should be able to state a technique from this handout and explain how they will incorporate it into their course next semester.

I. Syllabus

1. Devise Specific Learning Outcomes: In the syllabus, make the learning outcomes as specific and clear as possible, and relate these to the assignments and to your grading metrics. Prof. Lyn Stallings recommends stating outcomes with a comment about how you propose to assess each outcome. For example, in Prof. Stallings' math class, one of her outcomes is, "By the end of this course, you should be able to communicate (written and spoken) mathematically using appropriate terminology and notation." Her methods of assessing this outcome are "corrections, test communication questions, board work, reading journal."

2. Describe Class Format: Describe in your syllabus the class format. For example: "We will strive for class sessions that are lively, engaging, fun, creative and informative. Our format will combine discussion, presentations, guest speakers, case studies, in-class screenings and analysis."

3. Spell Out Expected Student Behavior: Describe in your syllabus the behavior you expect from your students. For example: "Students are expected to come each week prepared to contribute their knowledge and insights with their colleagues. We will all learn from each other. All reading and written assignments must be completed before coming to class, and written assignments must be free of spelling and grammatical errors. There will be extensive peer review and interaction. More than your physical presence is required in class. I am looking for attentiveness, vitality and enthusiasm during class. Participation in class will raise your grades. The give-and-take of information, ideas, insights and feelings is essential to the success of this class. Thoughtful, informed, balanced and candid speech is most helpful, especially when critiquing each other's work."

4. Describe Expected Professional Behavior: You might even want to go a step further and add a paragraph to your syllabus describing the professional behavior you are looking for from your students. For example: "Students are expected to act in a professional manner, meeting deadlines, solving problems, cooperating with classmates, and generally contributing in a positive way to the class. Working in the real world often means searching for solutions in a group context. Teamwork, listening, empathy, enthusiasm, emotional maturity, and consideration of other people's concerns are all essential to success. Please bring these qualities and values with you to class. It is as important to 'practice' these interpersonal skills as it is to learn new intellectual content. Students will be evaluated on their professional demeanor in class."

II. First Classes

1. Learn Students' Names: Make a serious and obvious effort to learn your students' names within the first one or two classes. Learning students' names and having students learn each other's names creates a warm environment that encourages learning and participation. Use their names when speaking in class. Ask your students to address each other by name, rather than "he" or "she." It makes a big difference in forging bonds between them. Methods to learn names quickly include creating "name tents" placed in front of each student or having your TA take pictures of everyone and create a handout.

2. Introduce Yourself: Many students will be interested in your background and experiences — allow students to ask questions about you [McKeachie 23]. Robert Magnan suggests play "Meet Your Teacher" and distribute the syllabus and relevant handouts, give students time to read everything, then divide the class into groups and have them decide on questions to ask you [Magnan 5]. Some professors include a brief bio in the syllabus to give students a way to talk to

parents and friends about the instructor. (And of course, faculty bios can also be found in the department or division website.) During the semester, look for opportunities to tell your students more about your professional experiences, relating them to the learning out comes for the course. They can learn you're your success and especially from your mistakes. Students should know their professors are human.

3. Ask Students to Introduce Themselves: During the first class, have students introduce themselves and say something of substance about themselves. For example, a goal they have, or what they plan to do after completing their studies [Chicago Handbook 22]. Or you could have students interview one another and briefly present that other person.

4. Fill Out Questionnaire: Have the students fill out a questionnaire about themselves, including contact information (name, phone number, AU e-mail address), goals, interests and expectations for the course. Questions might include: Why are you taking this class? What do you hope to learn? What are your career aspirations? Can you give me any hints about teaching/learning strategies that work well for you? What is your greatest hope for yourself in this class? Discuss the students' answers when you meet with them one-on-one. A questionnaire like this helps you know more about your students and helps the students feel cared for. If a student doesn't want to answer some of the questions, that's fine — no big deal. With regard to their e-mail addresses, Prof. Rose Ann Robertson makes sure students understand that she doesn't use personal e-mail addresses, and that if they do not use their AU e-mail account on a regular basis that they are responsible for forwarding their mail.

5. Write a Letter to the Professor Dated the Last Day of the Semester: Ask each student as part of his/her first homework assignment to write you a letter, dated the day of the last class, describing how they performed outstandingly in your class and the kind of person they became because of it. This helps them begin the class with the end in mind. Return this letter to the students on the last day of class and discuss what they learned from the exercise. This may not work for, say, a basic science course.

6. Meet One-on-One with Students: Tell your students that they have to meet with you within the first two weeks of the semester. (I thank Prof. Rick Rockwell for this idea.) In these meetings, learn more about each student, including their backgrounds, interests and life goals. Your goal is to treat every student as an individual. Make an effort to get to know individual students' interests and concerns and to acknowledge their individuality. Learn about their hopes and dreams. For large lectures where the professor cannot meet with everyone individually, invite in groups of three or four, or assign students to meet with a TA or other faculty mentor. There is a line beyond which the conversation might be perceived as prying, so watch out for that.

7. Learn from Your Students: Prof. Ann Ferren recommends that you say in the first class that you expect to learn from your students, not only during class discussions, but also from their research and papers. Prof. Darrell Hayes does this and then gives a short anecdote of what he just learned from a student.

8. Establish Standard of Grading: Prof. John Douglass says it is important for students to understand what your standards of grading are. He recommends you build in assignments, quizzes or other gradable events early in the semester so your students can judge your reaction to their work.

III. Classroom Atmosphere

1. Convey your Passion: Convey your passion and enthusiasm for the subject and your willingness to provide individual help. Your whole body language and voice must convey the message, as Prof. Patrick Allitt says, that there is nowhere else you'd rather be. Many professors like to walk among the students, be physically active and animated, and have their whole body and voice reflect their great fascination with the subject matter. Classes can be much more engaging when teachers are moving around and not sitting still or lecturing from a lectern. When students see their professor's passion, they want to participate.

2. Create a Welcoming Environment: Effective teachers create welcoming classroom environments that motivate students to thrive. They are committed to excellence in teaching. This manifests itself in enthusiasm, responsiveness to students' e-mail and office visits, and willingness to go "beyond the call of duty."

3. Foster a Sense of Belonging and Respect: Students want to feel as if they belong in the class and that they have friends there. They want to feel safe, respected and cared for. The atmosphere must be inclusive and trusting so students feel their views are heard and valued.

4. Encourage High Performance: Students should take risks, and teachers should challenge students with more work than they think they can handle, encouraging them to develop high-level critical and analytical thinking skills. Demand that your students push themselves further than they normally do.

5. Promote Active Engagement: Lecturing may work sometimes, but even dynamic lectures can be tedious for students. Most students learn more when they are actively engaged in their own learning through reacting to lectures with questions and comments, participating in class discussions, and through active learning exercises. [McGlynn 79, 86}

6. Sit in a Circle: For a small class, give the students a sense of community by sitting in a circle. This provokes dialogue and provides space for intentional and respectful engagement.

7. Make Every Class Writing-Intensive: Make every class writing-intensive. Include a variety of writing assignments throughout the semester, informal and formal, in-class and out-of-class, "thinking" pieces, interpretive essays, research papers, reports and journals. Writing has a major role in student learning and engagement, and in promoting critical thinking and intellectual curiosity. As Prof. Chris Sten at GWU says, students not only learn to write, but they also write to learn.

8. Manage Large Lecture-based Classes: If you have a large lecture-based class where many of the above ideas are irrelevant, you might try the following ideas. Chat informally with students before class and try to learn the names of some students. Set out a box by the door for feedback — questions, thoughts, suggestions, ideas, opinions, commentaries, critiques, etc. Begin or end your lectures with items from the box [Magnum 27]. Announce at the beginning of the lecture that you will ask a student to summarize the lecture at the end of the class. Or less threateningly, have students spend three minutes at the end writing up the main points, or have them write the most important thing they learned [McKeachie 61]. And have students stand up and stretch in the middle of class, no matter what the size. Make eye contact as you lecture and try to make eye contact with each student equally. Don't give the impression of teaching to the front of the room or only to a select group or population of students.

IV. Classroom Specifics

1. Show Up Early for Class: Show up early for class so you can connect with your students. Greet them warmly and engage them in conversation. Arrive meticulously prepared, including having backup plans and extra magic markers or chalk in your pocket.

2. Take Roll: Some professors believe it's the student's responsibility, as an adult, to attend class. There's merit to that argument, but I've found that students are more likely to attend class if they know I take roll. Most students prefer their professors to care enough that they want their students to attend. This helps you and the students to learn names and helps build a sense of community.

3. Start with Student Summary of Last Class: Start class by asking a student to summarize the main points from the last class. This provides continuity (and helps students who were absent), and also helps students feel comfortable with oral communication. Let your students know you plan to do this so they can prepare.

4. Write the Plan for the Class on Board: Write the plan for the class on the board before students arrive. This helps the students know what to expect and encourages participation. Mention where you are on this plan as the class unfolds. This gives you a chance to recap and answer questions. You don't have to cover everything in the plan. Remain flexible. The goal is to focus on student learning, not necessarily cover every detail in the outline on the board.

5. Have the Students Stand Up and Stretch: Sitting for over two hours (or even 45 minutes) is too much for anyone, so once or twice during the class, ask all your students to stand up and stretch to break things up a bit and to help keep them alert.

6. Play Short Games: For long classes, occasionally play a short game (sometimes called ice-breakers), especially early in the semester. Such games, which last no more than a few minutes, help the students get to know each other, to remember each other's names, and bond. They are a fun break from the intensity of the class and help to build a sense of belonging and community. Students' motivation and desire to learn are increased. Attached are some examples of different games.

7. Have Field Trips as Part of the Class: Prof. Kiho Kim recommends that whenever possible, have field trips and excursions. He finds interacting with students in a non-classroom environment more engaging because the students tend to feel more relaxed.

8. Invite Parents and Siblings: Tell your students that if their parents or siblings are ever in town, they are welcome to sit in on the class so they can see what a typical class is like.

9. Complete the Class: At the end of each class, summarize what was accomplished. Reinforce and underscore the two or three key messages or learning points you'd like the students to come away with. Go over the homework due at the start of next class, providing a typed handout, so there is no confusion about what you are requesting. Another idea at the end of the class is to have your students write a "minute paper," asking them "What is the most significant thing you learned today" and "What question is uppermost in your mind at the end of today's class" [Davis 56].

10. End the Class on Time: End the class on time to show basic consideration for the value of the students' time.

V. Classroom Interactions

1. Make the Class Interactive: Make the class interactive and do everything possible to transform the students from passive observers to active players. Get the students out of their seats frequently to work in twos or threes on analyzing an issue. Students learn more and retain more when they are actively involved, whether by taking notes, asking questions or making comments. Prof. Richard Linowes uses dyads (pairs) at the start of every class to "get all brains in the room operating at the same time," rather than just the brain of the person who happens to put her hand up. He uses dyads to comment on the news, report on developments with their investment portfolio, state their recommendations for the case study under discussion that day, etc. In this way, everybody does their own thinking about an issue, not just those who raise their hands. It also gives students

a chance to practice what they want to say before Prof. Linowes calls on them. When students share their thoughts with another student first, the class discussion will be of a higher quality.

2. Call on Students Constantly to Answer Questions: Constantly call on individual students by name to answer questions without first asking for volunteers. This keeps the whole class awake and alert. Never go for more than three or four minutes without getting one of the students to speak. Never let your students get overly comfortable and lethargic. You want them to be on their toes and fully awake, knowing that you might call on them at any time to answer a question.

3. Reassure Students You Will Come Back to Them: If two or more students raise their hands at the same time, reassure those students not selected that you won't forget to come back to them for their questions in a moment.

4. Find a Student's Strength: Prof. Amy Eisman says that if one student is particularly adept at a particular skill set, point it out and have an expectation for the student to be the "expert." This raises the student in the esteem of classmates and encourages the student to stay abreast of the topic. Try to find a dozen students like this in your class for a variety of topics by being specific in your praise. Don't just say, "That was a well-written paper," but indicate exactly what about the ideas, or wording, or structure of the paper you felt made it stand out.

5. Encourage Shy Students to Speak: Protect the soft-spoken and encourage shy students to speak. Don't allow long-winded or loud students to dominate the class conversation. For example, you might say, "Thank you, Susan. I want to hear more from you, but first I want to hear from others in the class." Call on those who don't speak much so everyone is heard from. I had one student who was shy and hated to come to the front of the class to talk. At the same time, she was an excellent student and wanted to overcome her fear of public speaking. I worked out a plan with her to allow her, for the first few times, to present from her seat instead of coming to the front of the class. This helped and she made great progress talking in class. Another idea is to pose a question and give a few silent moments as time for students to think — this can help shyer or slower students participate because they will know what they want to say before the discussion begins [McKeachie 34]. Prof. Leena Jayaswal says that when a student writes a particularly good paper and he is shy in class, she often mentions his name during class discussion, saying, "Well, Fred brought up a great point in his paper when he mentioned X. Fred, do you want to add more?" Prof. Jayaswal says this helps build confidence.

6. Listen Actively to Students during Discussions: During discussions, maintain strong eye contact with the student speaking so he/she has your complete attention. Students want to be heard. By nodding, smiling or otherwise acknowledging the student, you show that you are totally committed to listening and understanding what each student has to say. Give critical feedback, but look

for ways to compliment the student for the observations so the student feels encouraged. Guide class discussions so they don't wander too far off-mission.

7. Incorporate Peer Review: When students make presentations, which they should do frequently, encourage peer review. Get students to teach each other and to learn from each other. It engages them more than the professor doing a solo act.

8. Play in the Spotlight: Occasionally play "in the spotlight," in which a student comes to the front of the class and you interview him/her about his/her life or the current assignment or the in-class discussion topic in a non-intimidating and friendly way for a few minutes. The purpose is to have the student practice oral communication and to have the class get to know the spotlighted student better. Tell your students, particularly grad students, that the class may well contain future creative or business partners and so getting to know each other is important. Questions can be related to class material, or can be more general, such as, "Can you tell us about a turning point in your life?" or "What would you like to be doing in five or ten years?"

9. Do a Networking Exercise: In some of the early classes in the semester, give students a three-minute "networking" exercise. Before it starts, stress the importance of networking (making contacts and meeting key people) to their careers. Then tell them to stand up, move around the room and find a student they don't know or know very little. Give them an exercise (such as a question relevant to the class or finding out something unique about the person) and then have them report back to the whole class on what they learned from each other.

10. Ask Early for Feedback from Students: One month into the class (about the 4th or 5th class) ask for feedback. Ann Ferren recommends asking the students to answer three questions in writing: What is helping you learn in this class? What is getting in the way of your learning? What are your suggestions for the rest of the semester? Give them a leisurely ten minutes of silence to write their answers. Tell them they are welcome to hand the answers anonymously if they'd prefer. Repeat this exercise about two months into the class. It will give you valuable information about what is and is not working, allowing you to change, modify or tweak what you are doing. Always report back to the class on what you learned from the feedback and the changes you intend to make as a result. Make it clear that you welcome candid and constructive feedback from students and make sure you implement the changes you promise to make. As Angela McGlynn says, this exercise will empower your students and send the message that you care about how they are doing in the course, and that you are open to making changes for their benefit.

VI. Beyond the Classroom

1. Manage Your Office Hours: For your office hours, encourage students to drop by even if they don't have specific questions. Leave your door open during office hours unless you are discussing a personal issue with a student. Have a sign-up sheet on your door so students don't have to wait.

2. Reach Out to Students Who Miss a Class: Contact any students who don't show up to class to find out if they need help. Prof. Darrell Hayes says that if a student misses a class for any reason, he asks that student for a three to five-page analytic paper on a topic related to the missed class, showing that the student can apply the concepts covered in the class to a case or issue.

3. Be Responsive to E-mails and Calls from Students: Respond promptly (within 24 hours or less) to all student emails and messages. Add your home, office or cell phone number (wherever you prefer to be called) under your name at the end of the e-mail so that students can call you if they want to. If you can't fully respond right away, write a brief response saying you will do so in a few days. Prof. Rose Ann Robertson suggests keeping electronic copies of all e-mails with students and the faculty responses for at least one semester after the class has ended to keep a record in case of any disagreements.

4. Give Students Feedback on Papers: Provide meaningful and meaty comments on homework assignments. Students want rigorous, critical and detailed feedback in a constructive and encouraging manner. The more critically encouraging your comments, the better. Prof. Amy Eisman says that renowned professor Ed Bliss used to say, "Criticize the product, not the person." So a critical comment on a piece of homework might begin, "This paper misses the point" instead of, "You missed the point."

5. Permit Homework Counter-Offers: Let your students take more control of their own learning by allowing them to counter-offer when you give a homework assignment. For many assignments, this won't be appropriate, but where it is appropriate, allow a student to say to you, "Professor, instead of homework assignment X, would it be possible for me to devote an equal amount of time, if not more, to assignment Y because this will be more helpful to me in my future career." On the syllabus/assignment sheet, note which few assignments this may be permissible for with an asterisk.

6. Include Broader Career Questions: As the semester winds down, occasionally add into the homework some broader questions about future careers, such as, "What is the job you'd ideally like to be doing in five years, and what steps are you taking to achieve that goal?"

7. Submit Short Proposals Early: Ask students to submit short proposals about papers and projects well before due date and offer extensive feedback on the proposals to make sure they are on the right track.

8. Call the Parents of Outstanding Students: Toward the end of the semester, select the top half dozen students in your class, and ask their permission (that's very important obviously) to call their parents so you can tell them how well their son or daughter has done in your class. Once the student gives you permission, call their mom and dad and tell them that they can be very proud of their son or daughter for the diligence, creativity and tenacity they have shown in your class. The parents will be delighted to receive this call from you, and are likely to respond how proud they are of their son or daughter. This, in turn, is a message you can convey to the student. For a few of them, it may be the first time they have heard their parents say this of them. The downside is that you diminish the notion that students are independent adults, and could even embolden parents to contact you over say, a disputed grade.

Thank you for attending this workshop

For Further Reading

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McGlynn, Angela Provitera (2001). *Successful Beginnings for College Teaching*

McKeachie, Wilbert J (2002). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers.*

Palmer, Patrick (1998). *The Courage to Teach.*