Teaching Tips: Course Structure

The structure of a course lets students know what they will be learning, how you’ve organized the learning and the type of activities that will accompany the learning. It enables the students to understand your expectations so that the course will run efficiently and smoothly. Being explicit and clear with the structure of your course alleviates any confusion and instead, maintains student motivation and enriches the classroom experience.

1. Course Materials
   - Be mindful of the high cost of textbooks and choose textbooks and/or readings that are as much in line with your views as possible and fit your objectives.
   - Help your students use your textbook effectively. Allow time during the first week of class to introduce the materials and outline your strategy for its use. Encourage your students to use the text by asking them questions that require higher-order critical thinking skills drawing on and extending its material, methods, or examples.
   - Tell students about current journals and books related to the course. Use a variety of texts for a course. If another text besides the required one does a better job with a particular point, provide a reader.
   - Expose students to a range of perspectives. Assign articles and shorter texts that espouse different points of view. To help students understand that the textbook is not a final authority on a topic, you can pose occasional counterarguments and other interpretations.
   - Change the pronoun in your handouts and cases to reflect diversity. Texts and readings should be gender neutral and free of stereotypes. If you assign readings where only the masculine pronoun is used, point out the shortcomings and give students an opportunity to discuss them.
   - Explain to your students the features that led you to choose the textbook for the course. Describe how students can learn from it most effectively.
   - Pick three or four concepts. See how the text explains them. Will the explanations be clear to the students and address the learning outcomes?
   - Select a mix of current text and articles. It is always the best to have a combination.
   - Utilize the free Haas subscription to the Financial Times and assign students to bring in relevant articles.

2. Teaching Tools
   - Use bCourses to collect and return assignments. It saves class time, ensures confidentiality, and is green!
   - Take advantage of the survey feature on bCourses for midterm survey checks and then share the results with the class. It gets students engaged and creates buy in for the course.
   - Make sure that your slides pass the “glance factor” test, the ability of the reader to get the key messages in 10-15 seconds.
   - Use PowerPoint effectively by including visuals such as diagrams, photos, tables to help explain the point or concept you want the students to learn—don’t put too many details or read from the slide.
   - Use animation in presentations to focus attention on specific parts of complex slides.
   - Never read your slides. Use the slides to highlight your talking points or headings. Reading slides aloud, as though from a teleprompter, is perhaps the single most boring thing an instructor can do in the classroom.
   - Do not talk while students are reading the slides. Address the material you just presented after a few minutes so they can digest what they just read.
Be economical with texts. When students are reading a slide, they are not listening to you. Text should run no more than a sentence or two headline.

**IClicker (Audience Response Systems)**

- Allow clickers to transform your teaching. Many instructors have found that clickers have helped them shift from a "sage on the stage" approach to a "guide by the side" approach; that is, class time becomes more of a time for discussion and less a time to deliver a lecture. An instructor might, for example, assign a reading in place of a lecture; at the beginning of the next class, the instructor might then test the students on the assigned reading (to ensure that they have completed it); class time can then be devoted to discussion, with the discussion being fed by clicker questions and answers.
- Establish clear goals for using clickers in class and explain those goals to students.
- Make sure clicker use is fully integrated into how you run the class, not just as a few added-on questions. Use the clickers as a way to get at student thinking, not simply whether or not they get the right answer.
- Develop a pool of thoughtful and effective clicker questions for each lecture. Questions that ask for conceptual thinking or critical thinking in any class are particularly effective.
- When using clickers to diagnose students' understanding, be sure to comment on or explain student responses, give students another question on the same topic if needed, or adjust lecture pace and sequence as needed to clarify confusion or misconceptions.
- Vary your clicker use. Doing so will help integrate the clickers into your course, so that they seem central to it rather than a mere add-on. Three or four clicker questions per contact hour might be a reasonable rule of thumb.
- Don't use clickers to simply take attendance. Students will resent having to pay money for a device that merely helps to monitor them.
- Don't use clickers for high-stakes assessment such as mid-terms. Doing so will merely increase the likelihood of academic dishonesty, such as students peering at one another's clicker buttons, students collecting their friends' clickers and answering on their behalf, and so on. Ideally, clicker questions for the entire course should count for about 5% to 10% of the final grade.

### 3. Supplemental Teaching Tools

**Role Playing/Simulations**

- Plan roleplaying in advance. Role plays work well to bring principles to life or to help students clarify vague ideas.
- Specify the teaching objectives to be served by the role playing and then plan the game to highlight features that contribute to those objectives. The chief advantage of games and simulations is that students are active participants rather than passive observers. Students must make decisions, solve problems, and react to the results of their decisions.
- Start role playing simply by dividing the class into pairs and have all the pairs work for five minutes on the same situation.
- Create a compelling scenario where a pertinent issue or problem can be solved only through negotiation or analysis and action. The situation should include choices, decisions, and conflicting motives and perspectives.
- Use video effectively. Prepare your students to see the video. Explain why you are showing the video and what you expect your students to learn from it.
- Provide guiding questions while students watch the video. This procedure is more effective than pausing a video in order to pose comprehension questions to class.
- Facilitate a follow-up activity. After the video, engage students in assessing the meaning of what they have seen and its relationship to the course content, and possibly where this fits into their experiences.

**Readings**
- Assign only readings that contribute substantially to learning and that are critical to success in the course.
- Provide questions on readings. At the outset of the course, provide the students with a set of one-liner questions, two for each assigned reading. They help focus student attention as they read. They also serve as jumping off points for the lecture.
- Do not rehash the readings in class. You can spend class time answering questions on the readings, elaborating and extending them, and leading activities that make students think about and use the knowledge.
- Frame and suggest an approach for assigned reading, etc.-“As you read the assigned text, please keep in mind these three key questions we will be discussing next time…”
- Give students questions that make them think about the material. For examples, have students post their answer to a thought and have others comment-keeping a stream of thoughts on the topic. In many courses, textbook assignments and lectures are independent parts of the course, sometimes overlapping, sometimes supplementary, but often not perceived as interdependent.

**Cases**
- Use cases that illustrate the learning objectives, as they challenge students and invite engagement while students are put in the role of making decisions.
- Ensure that you give your students class time to ask questions about the process and make sure they understand the problem presented.
- Look for emotional as well as intellectual engagement. In the best case studies, students identify with the characteristics and the problems that befall them. If part of the appeal of the case is that it represents “current events”, try to select a situation that is no more than five years old.
- Facilitate the discussion that ensues from student/team reports. You should listen, question, clarify, challenge, encourage analysis and problem solving, and test the validity of generalizations. You will want to keep a running summary of points established, additional information needed, and possible ethical or value considerations. Don’t forget to include the evidence supporting alternative approaches.
- Utilize Case studies as a part of your course or let them serve as the central method for learning. Cases allow students to analyze, synthesize, and integrate information; to develop reasoning and problem-solving skills; to learn how to collaborate with peers; and to form judgments, weigh pros and cons, and critically evaluate solutions.
- Determine how students will work on the case. Research has shown that students feel they learn more and like it better when they work on cases in groups than when they work alone.
Search for a range of protagonists in your cases that vary in age, gender, nationality and organizational level. It is extremely important. You want students to find role models in the cases, and you owe it to them to offer a range of examples.

Provide a structure that motivates students to come prepared. Some examples:

- Divide the class into small groups and ask them to review the case before the next session, ask students or groups to submit a brief memo.
  - Ask students or groups to submit a brief memo, due at the start of class, outlining recommendations for action.
  - Assign each student to be prepared to either present the facts of the case or to critique the actions in the case.
  - Assign students to be responsible for taking the part of the specific characters or interests in the case.
  - Select cases that can be completed within a single class session.

Prepare yourself to lead discussions. Decide how you will begin the discussion and draw up a set of questions that highlight key points. Try to anticipate spots where students might get sidetracked or confused, and decide how you will respond.

Make sure that airtime is distributed equitably if not evenly, among the course participants. All students should be given an equal opportunity to contribute to discussions.

Write down the various points that students come up with about the case. Use keywords, drawings, tables, or whatever method works best.

Take notes, it will not only guide discussion, but provide a shared overview of what students have been discussing. This capturing keeps things on track; if you don’t do it, you will quickly find that the discussion becomes repetitive and the number of non sequiturs rises dramatically. It helps students remember and understand much more about the case than they would if the discussion were just verbal.

Summarize the key points and help students understand what they have learned. Highlight key points and explain how the case relates to earlier or future topics in the course.

Reveal the real-life conclusion for a real-life case.

Have students write about the case. Assign a short in-class writing exercise or a longer analysis for homework.

Ask students to evaluate the discussion. Find out what best captures his or her experience in the discussion.

Plan out how you want the board to look at conclusion. Many students snap a photo of it for reference.

**Guest Speakers**

- Bring in experts in the field so that the students can see how an expert analyzes the case, and also ask questions about what really happens in practice.

- Engage guest lecturers who are from a different ethnic and cultural group, which will help to enrich your class. Systematically critique each point of view to indicate alternative perspectives and invite a colleague to class who has a different opinion on an issue and argue that issue in front of class.
○ Invite a colleague to class who has a different opinion on the issue and argue that issue in front of the class.

○ Make sure the speaker you invite to your class is credible and an effective presenter. Invite speakers who will challenge your students and provoke discussion.

○ Communicate clearly with guest about what the objectives of the class are, where the students are in the overall curriculum, and how the guest’s appearance in your class intersects with what the students are learning about that week. Encourage the guest expert to tailor her remarks toward specific learning goals that the students are actively pursuing. Provide your guest expert with a copy of your syllabus, as well as with a brief summary of presentations given by other guest experts who have addressed your class.

○ Establish expectations about the length of time that the guest expert will speak. Do not ask a guest to stay for the entire class period. Experts should limit the lecture phase of their presentation to 30 minutes or less. Ideally, there should be time both before the guest’s presentation for the students to prepare to meet the guest, and then afterward for the students to discuss their observations and responses.

○ Encourage guest experts to teach, rather than simply to speak. Instead of asking them to simply talk about their area of expertise, ask them to speak with the students about what the students are learning. Guest lecturers ordinarily want to prepare comments, but their contributions to your class might actually more meaningful if they come simply expecting to respond to questions from the student and teacher. In addition to making the guest expert’s time in your class interactive and engaging, a more student-centered approach to the expert’s presentation will ensure that the guest expert is speaking directly to the concerns of the class.

○ Have students research the guest expert’s background or area of expertise and prepare questions to ask of the speaker, particularly questions that relate the course content to the guest’s area of expertise. Always allow time for a class discussion in which the teacher and the students can develop ways of connecting what the guest has said to key concepts of the class.

○ Have questions on hand for the incoming guest speaker.

○ Use the time before and after the guest’s appearance to establish connections between the guest’s area of expertise and the learning objectives of the class. Give students a specific task that encourages them to take notes while the guest expert talks (for example, compile a list of the three most interesting things the guest said).

○ Videotape the presentation, with the guest’s permission, and make the recording available to the class. Compile electronic copies of any handouts, or ask for a copy of the guest’s PowerPoint presentation. Keeping a record of the guest’s appearance will make it possible for the class to continue to refer to the expert’s comments throughout the term, and it will allow future classes to benefit from the guest expert’s contribution as well.

**Additional Tips**

○ Be explicit with students about the reasoning behind your pedagogical choices. Share findings from studies about research on the efficacy of active learning, engaging students in reflecting on how they learn, and establishing expected student behaviors during class.

○ Be explicit with students about your pedagogical choices on the first day of a course, as well as throughout the duration of the course term. Regardless of when they are used, these strategies
from different sources all encourage instructors to metaphorically “pull back the curtain” on teaching and reveal for students the reasons behind the teaching choices being made. Not only might this practice provide students with a rationale for why their classroom experience in a course is the way it is, it may also cultivate a partnership with students in the teaching and learning process. By explaining pedagogical choices to students, we treat them as colleagues, discussing with them—the same way you might with another instructor in your department—how you plan to teach and why you think this method will help them learn.

4. Clear Expectations: Syllabus, Grading and Workload

- **Syllabus**
  - Make sure that your syllabus contains the plans to your course with assignments correlated with topics to be discussed in class. Like a contract, a syllabus should help students understand both their responsibilities and yours and is a pertinent resource for any discrepancies.
  - Give students time to read and discuss the syllabus. Give them a chance to have input and be sure that they understand what you expect.
    - Help the students understand how grading and testing are tied to course goals through your syllabus.
    - Consider making your syllabus a living document, which means you can change the content of the course as you are teaching it.
    - Ask students for feedback on your syllabus. Try this, wait until three or four weeks into the course and ask students to take out the syllabus and in a five-minute free write tell you anonymously what they think about it. Or, ask them to describe their ideal syllabus.
    - Go back and take a closer look at the learning outcomes for your course once you create your syllabus. As you read through the outcome, write a discussion question related to the outcome. Can you embed your discussion question for the learning outcomes somewhere in your syllabus? Once you embed your discussion questions, think about how you want to integrate the discussion questions into your first day of class.
    - Give students a sense of what the course will be about, what they will learn, and how their academic progress will be evaluated in your syllabus. Here are some ideas of what to include (but not limited to the following).
      - Give an overview of the course’s purpose
      - State the general learning goals, objectives, or outcomes. This clarifies what they will learn and be evaluated against. List five to eight major objectives that you expect all students to strive for.
      - Clarify the conceptual structure used to organize the course as students need to understand why you have arranged topics in a given order and the logic of the themes or concepts you have selected.
      - Provide a course calendar or schedule. The schedule states the sequence of course topics, preparations or readings, and the assignments due.
      - Estimate student workload. Give students a sense of how much preparation and work the course will involve.
○ List assignments, term papers, and exams. Indicate how the assignments are related to the course goal. Give the examination dates and briefly indicate the nature of the test. Try to keep it evenly balanced throughout the course.

○ State how students will be evaluated and how grades will be assigned. Describe the grading procedures, including the components of the final grade and the weights assigned to each component.

○ Schedule time for gathering feedback from your students. Set a time midway through the term when you can solicit from students their reactions to the course so far. You might also include an example or two of how student feedback has improved the course.

■ Grading
  ○ State your grading procedures in the syllabus, and review the information in class.
  ○ Be specific about your grading criteria. Examples of previously graded work may be helpful. Students are most motivated when they feel they can achieve success with reasonable effort and when they believe grading is fair.
  ○ Provide many opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know. By giving student many chances to show what they have learned, you can obtain a more accurate picture of their abilities and avoid penalizing a student who has an off day at the time of a test.
  ○ Distribute grading criteria along with the assignment, when possible.

■ Exams and Tests
  ○ Point out useful problem sets, review sections, and the kind of questions the students will be expected to answer.
  ○ Make all exams reflect concepts directly from coursework.
  ○ Design tests that emphasize what you want students to learn. What students remember (and what they forget) is also influenced by the kind of material that appears on test. Cumulative tests-those that touch on all the topics already covered in the course, not just the most recent ones-are extremely effective because they require students to continually review and integrate the course material.
  ○ Give exams that call on different cognitive skills.
  ○ Give students practice exams, develop test items that reflect the course content, tell your students what you expect them to learn or be able to do, and discuss the structure of the test.
  ○ Encourage students to make up their own questions as a means of reviewing. Tell them that you will consider the questions that they write as possible exam questions.
  ○ Post old exams. Reviewing past exams gives students clues about what to study.
  ○ Schedule office hours before a test and encourage study groups to visit during these extra hours.

■ Workload
  ○ Set clear and realistic expectations for the time required to complete large assignments (e.g., take home exams).
○ Be explicit with your students about what you expect them to do with the time that should be allocated for your course. Being explicit will help you to make realistic demands and will help students to see what is expected of them.
○ Distribute the workload evenly throughout the term ensuring to pace the assignments, so that students do not have massive amounts of homework.
○ Give students realistic estimates of how much time is appropriate for them to spend on assignments, readings, and study groups.

■ Align Objectives
○ Discuss learning outcomes in each class. Weave these in consistently.
○ Make sure that learning objectives are not lists of topics to be covered. Learning objectives differ in specifying not the material and issues to be covered, but how students are expected to change as a consequence of taking the course.
○ Tape your statement of aims and outcomes above your desk where you won’t lose sight of it. Let it serve as a generalized map to keep you on track as you plunge into messy specifics.
○ Integrate the lecture with the agenda written on the board.
○ Discuss the objectives of the course. Tell your students what you plan to accomplish and why, and ask what they want to learn from you. You can also ask your students to list the goals they hope to achieve by taking your course.
○ Articulate goals for the course, but also for specific lectures, discussions, and assignments. Use concrete, student-centered language.
○ Students will be more motivated to work if they know what goals they are working towards.

SOURCES:


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