

Teaching Tips

8/1/18 | Rich Lyons

- (1) **Outline each lecture on the corner of the board.** A brief outline on the board provides students a road-map and a backbone for their notes. It also provides a sense of position as you refer to it during the lecture, which a slide that opens the session and then disappears cannot.
- (2) **Review the 7 key ideas of whole course in the last lecture.** These are the ones I expect the students to remember a few years out. A key-ideas review provides over-arching perspective on the material that might not otherwise be provided and sends the students off with a sense of accomplishment.
- (3) **Close the course.** The closing comments in the last lecture/session deserve some effort. Put the course in its larger context. Why do you feel the material is important? Might you have some inspirational words to impart? (Evaluations are not a bad way to follow a good close.)
- (4) **Provide questions on readings.** At the outset of the course I 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.
- (5) **Structure the course with modules.** I find that 4 modules works best (about 7 lectures per module). More than 4 is too fragmented to generate any coherence. Fewer than four can feel more like mini courses than parts of a single whole. Students thrive on structure.
- (6) **Provide periodic reviews.** I do two optional reviews (each covering two modules) outside of regular class. Each is videotaped so those who can't make it will not feel left out. In the first class I announce the review dates to defuse future scheduling complaints. The reviews: allow me to move faster through material in lecture, reinforce the modular structure, and pay for themselves in reduced office-hour use.
- (7) **Assign one problem set per module** (if problem sets). This further reinforces the modular structure and maps cleanly into the module reviews.
- (8) **Balance written and spoken.** If you lecture, it will be clear after any given session whether it was too board-intensive. When this happens I typically prepare a handout for the next time I do the course. This allows me to deliver higher-level material (since students are not madly scribbling what I've written). If you use slides, a natural risk is becoming too slide-intensive. Keep yourself at center stage, not the screen.
- (9) **You cannot speak too loudly.** Turning up the volume turns up people's attention. It also gives you room to vary your volume when appropriate.
- (10) **Hand out articles to open each lecture.** This one is more labor-intensive. I collect articles (one-page max) that feed into my lectures. Each lecture I pass one out and open the lecture with a 5-10 minute discussion. This both motivates the lecture (or touches on a past lecture) and provides an interactive start to the session. Before I have them copied for distribution I draw boxes around key paragraphs.
- (11) **Introduce the students to your research.** It helps establish a connection. It also helps convey your passion for the topic (an energizing effect).
- (12) **Observe other teachers.** We've all observed gifted teachers. But few of us have attended lectures with the express idea of bettering our own teaching. This is a wonderful way to pick up better practices.
- (13) **Send email to top performers.** After grades are submitted, send a quick, personal email to the top, say, 10 percent of your class. The message can be as simple as "Your performance was among the very best in my class. I appreciate the effort."
- (14) **Students always:** Send an article to your class *after* grades are in – this sends a powerful message.
- (15) **Beyond yourself:** Call out student behaviors that "lift" others.
- (16) **Question the status quo:** What powerful questions animated critical turning points in the field/area?