

7: Teaching Strategies to Enhance Student Learning

In the previous two chapters, we discussed concerns and anxieties that international instructors may have about communication skills. In this chapter, we move on to more general issues of teaching that face all new instructors. Perhaps the biggest question any new teacher has is, “What will I do in the classroom?” When we think about teaching for the first time, we tend to focus on ourselves and worry about our own performance.

Perhaps a better question to ask yourself is, “How can I help my students learn?” which puts the emphasis on the student. Not only for international instructors, but indeed for all teachers, good teaching builds on who the students are and what they need to learn. Therefore, in helping you plan what you will do as a teacher, this chapter will start by focusing on the students.

Student Learning

Most of us have lots of experience as students, and we can use this to help us understand the learning process. However, it is important to remember that your students are probably not like you in many ways. Not only may you have been educated in a system very different from that your students experienced, but you probably also have higher levels of expertise and interest in your field. Keep in mind that what worked for you as a student may not work for your students.

In Chapter 3, you learned specifically about who Ohio State students are. There are also some general principles about student learning that will help shape your teaching strategies. Throughout this chapter we will discuss examples to illustrate the following principles of learning.

Novice learners often do not know the structure and organization of knowledge in a field. As experts, we have learned to see the patterns of information and how concepts connect to each other, and so we often assume that students will do the same. But research into how people learn demonstrates that those new to a field do not necessarily see these connections. Therefore, part of our role as teachers is to make the organization visible to students.

Most undergraduate students tend to be concrete thinkers.

Most people who choose to pursue postgraduate degrees are abstract thinkers. Conversely, the majority of U.S. undergraduates are concrete thinkers. What does this mean for us as teachers? Whereas our first instinct may be to start by explaining abstract concepts and principles, it may be more useful for students if we start with some concrete examples. It is also important that we give students plenty of opportunity to practice and apply what they are learning.

The average adult attention span is around 15-20 minutes.

Since most classes are at least 48 minutes, and some much longer, students will not be able to focus nonstop for the entire class. This does not mean they are stupid or lazy, just that they are human. If we want to maximize student learning, we need to break up the class time by using a variety of methods.

Students have different learning styles and preferred learning strategies.

People are different, and they learn in a variety of different ways. For example, perhaps you are someone who learns best by listening to a lecture, but your friend might prefer to look at a graph or diagram. As teachers, we need to use a variety of styles and methods. (For more

information on learning styles, see Chapter 2 of *Teaching at The Ohio State University*.)

Students learn best when they are actively engaged in the course.

Many of you may come from classroom experiences that were primarily lecture. The teacher talked; the students listened and took notes. While this method works for some people, cognitive researchers argue that knowledge is not simply passed intact from teacher to learner, but rather is actively constructed by learners. Learners draw on their previous knowledge, cognitive capacity, and personal experience to integrate new information into their existing knowledge base. Based on this research, national reports on student learning have advocated actively engaging students in learning through the use of a variety of teaching strategies, such as writing, discussion, case studies, and problem solving. (For more information on active learning, see Chapter 5 of *Teaching at The Ohio State University*.)

Students are more motivated to learn in classes where they believe the teacher cares about their learning.

As teachers, we often focus on content, but there is more to teaching. Several studies have shown a connection between student learning and the students' perception of how much a teacher cares about their learning. Therefore, building rapport is an important part of good teaching.

Teaching Strategies

With these principles of learning in mind, the following are some strategies that may help you facilitate student learning in your classes. While these strategies demonstrate good teaching in general, they may be especially useful to help with the specific concerns of international instructors discussed in Chapter 6.

Make Organization Visible

As stated above, novice learners often do not see the structure of knowledge in a field. Whereas you, for example, may immediately see the patterns in information, students often see each fact as separate. It is therefore useful to illustrate for students how ideas fit together.

You might start by creating an outline for each class period. Doing so will help you plan for class and organize the material. Furthermore, if you share the outline with the students (perhaps by putting it on an overhead or the chalkboard), they will have a better understanding of how ideas relate to each other. The outline can structure your lesson like the headers in a textbook.

Using visual aids in general is an effective strategy for making the organization visible. Whether you are leading a recitation, teaching in a laboratory, or teaching an independent course section, writing key terms, formulas, and equations on a chalkboard or overhead transparency can make the material more concrete and help to clarify spoken words. In some instances, major points can be illustrated with diagrams, flow charts, or outlines.

Similar to the importance of signaling lecture organization verbally (see Chapter 6), undergraduate students report that international instructors who use multimedia to augment their presentation are very effective. Multimedia can include overhead transparencies, videotapes, chalkboards, flip charts, printed diagrams or illustrations, audiotapes, computer presentations such as PowerPoint, slides, or models. These multimedia sources can be used in a variety of ways to emphasize subject matter and help you present and make clear course concepts, particularly if you are introducing new material that is difficult for you to pronounce. If you are using visuals, it is important to explain in detail what is being

displayed. Some tips on describing visual aids are illustrated in Appendix B.

Although visual aids are not meant to be the presentation, used wisely and effectively they enable students to understand how you organized the material for presentation. Their use also helps to facilitate student notetaking and listening skills. Multimedia can serve as a tool for making lecture material clear as it helps to emphasize major concepts and processes. International instructors often find it easier to complement their explanation of course material and technical terms with the help of prepared multimedia.

In preparation for a lecture or discussion that uses a lot of technical terms, it might be helpful for you to select these in advance and prepare visual aids you will use. For example, you might think of drawings or gestures that help to clarify your explanation.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, another advantage of using visual aids is that they reinforce what you are saying verbally. If students have any problem understanding what you are saying, the visual may help.

Provide Examples

As teachers, we often start with the abstract theory and then illustrate it with a few examples. Because students tend to be concrete thinkers, however, they often need a vivid example to anchor a new abstract concept in their minds. They find it very difficult going from the abstract to the concrete unless they have an anchoring example to begin with.

People learn by connecting new information to something they already know. The research says that the best thing we can do to help people make a connection between what they don't know and what they do know is by using examples.

In teaching first-aid classes our goal is to change our students' behavior in emergency situations. I found out that the real-life application of a topic like 'control bleeding' can easily get lost if I front-load my lessons with lectures about abstract physiological knowledge. Students are more likely to appreciate and remember such theories if we start out with their own encounters with injuries including bleeding. And most importantly, basing learning on their own experiences or that of their peers we are more likely to affect a change in real-life behavior.

– Gonzalo Bravo, ITA, Physical Activity and Educational Services, Chile

Use a Variety of Teaching Methods

As you begin to teach for the first time, you may find yourself relying on the method that worked best for you as a student. If most of your classes were lecture-based, you may lecture for the whole class period. If you are more familiar with discussion, you may rely solely on that. No one teaching method is best or worst; it is generally a good idea to use a variety. By doing so, you not only break up the class time, but you also accommodate different learning styles.

So, for example, you might lecture about a concept for 10 or 15 minutes, and then have the students work a problem that applies the concept. A simple strategy such as this has a number of benefits: it organizes the class period into manageable segments, it allows students to try some concrete application and practice, it lets both you and the students see how well they understood the concept, and it gets students actively engaged in the class.

From my own education I was used to listening to lectures. When I started teaching, I mostly relied on lecturing as well. From my new perspective as a teacher, I could see how the students paid less and less attention as I went on. Now I realize how important it is to plan a different activity every 15 minutes or so. Our library and the public library had some great videos I use as illustrations in my sport history lessons. I also try to make sure that we spend part of each lesson on discussions where the students do the talking.

– Lars Dzikus, ITA, Educational Policy and Leadership, Germany

Encourage Students to Ask and Answer Questions

Another simple technique for engaging students is to ask and answer questions. Some instructors might be uncomfortable with this kind of interaction; however, eliciting questions from students during lectures, recitations, labs, and discussions promotes an active classroom environment conducive to learning.

For international instructors, this skill is especially important if English is not your first language. Ask questions to see if students understand the basic information being presented. Students may be reluctant at first, but they will expect some opportunity to ask questions. In classrooms where questions are regularly asked and answered by both students and instructors, students learn that they must be prepared for class, they feel that the instructor cares about whether or not they are learning, and they show pride in grasping difficult material. These are all factors that contribute to the motivation of your students.

An easy strategy to elicit student questions is to pause frequently to check student understanding of course material. You might simply say, “Are there any questions?” to give students the chance to ask for clarification of material previously presented, or you can ask more specific questions to gauge how well students understand the material. For instance, one international instructor has found it useful to invite students to repeat the key concepts of the lesson in their own words and to provide examples from their own experience.

It is a good idea to count slowly and silently from one to ten before restating the question or providing the answer yourself. Sometimes you will have one or two students who will rush to answer a question before other students have time to even think of an answer. While it may be tempting to rely on these students, it is important to allow everyone a

chance to answer questions. You may want to say something like, “Why don’t we hear from someone who hasn’t talked yet today?” This sends a clear message without singling out or embarrassing the talkative students.

Classrooms in the United States can be very informal when compared to the structure of classrooms in other countries. This extends to the way in which students will answer and ask questions. Students may raise their hands and wait for you to acknowledge them, either verbally or through eye contact or a nod of the head. However, it is not uncommon for students to speak without permission from the teacher or without raising their hands. Both methods can be considered appropriate in the U. S. college classroom. When you have a large class, a domineering student or two, or an exciting or controversial topic about which everyone wants to speak, you could try something like, “I’d really like to give everyone a chance to speak, so if you would all raise your hands I will call on you individually.” You may also try this strategy if you find you are just not comfortable with the lack of structure. Students will usually respect this request, although you may have to say it several times during the first few weeks.

If, on the other hand, you find that the class is not responding to questions, you may want to call on specific students by name. However, be careful not to call on the same students all the time, and be aware of patterns in your communication (e.g., only calling on men, favoring one side of the classroom, etc.). Students in the United States are very uncomfortable about being singled out from their peers, either for excessive praise or for punishment, and may be resentful of differential treatment if you call only on the brightest students. If the class is not responding to a question, you may want to rephrase it. However, remember to pause long enough for students to think of the answer before you restate. Remember, too, that U.S. students can be very uncomfortable with

silence and will usually say something (hopefully related to your question) to fill the conversational lag.

Even though the U.S. college classroom may seem quite informal to you, you are still regarded by students as an authority figure. In this role, you have the opportunity to help students to formulate clear arguments in support of their opinions, as well as to encourage hesitant students to elaborate on their answers. Sarkisian (1997) suggests giving students credit for their contribution when they articulate a point particularly well. This strategy helps the student feel valued and intelligent, as well as creating a positive environment in the classroom. You could say something like, “Thank you, Kristine, that is an excellent point” or “What Peter has said allows us to consider this from another angle.”

Remember, every time students answer a question, they risk embarrassment or ridicule. Sarkisian (1997) suggests allowing students who give incorrect answers to see where their mistake occurred and accept other ways of thinking without losing face. Even when you disagree with students, it is important to be polite. When responding to these kinds of answers, be sure that the student knows you value the attempt they made in answering the question, then address how the answer could have been better. This also is true of answers that are simply wrong. If you state your disagreement in terms of the idea, rather than in terms of the student, it will seem less personally critical. Some tips on how best to respond to correct and incorrect student answers are included in Appendix C.

Sometimes you may need to ask students to clarify a question they’ve asked. If English is your second language, don’t automatically assume that the problem is with your English speaking ability. Some students have a difficult time articulating questions. If you did not hear the question, simply say, “I’m sorry, I didn’t

hear you. Could you speak up (or more slowly?)”. Smith, Meyers, & Burkhalter (1992) and Wennerstrom (1989) also give several suggestions for asking students to rephrase the question. You may simply ask them to repeat it, or you could say “Sorry. Could you ask that in another way?” or “What are you asking me to explain?” It may be helpful to restate the part you did understand, then ask about the part that was unclear (e.g., “You said Hamlet’s tragic flaw was what?”). Another option is to focus in on a particular aspect of the question that you did not understand. You might say, “What does ____ mean?” For more tips on how to phrase questions that will help you check on your students’ understanding, see “Checking and Clarifying” in Chapter 6 of this book.

It is also important to remember that it is perfectly acceptable to admit that you do not know the answer to a question. In this case, you can offer to provide the information in the next class or ask the students to bring the answer. For more information on asking and answering questions, see Chapter 5 of *Teaching at The Ohio State University: A Handbook*.

Build Rapport with Students

Rapport is a relationship of trust between you and your students. Although this rapport is not directly related to the content of the course, it is an important element of student learning. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, students are more motivated to learn when they believe that the teacher cares about their learning. Having good rapport with students will also make teaching a more enjoyable and rewarding experience for you.

I think it’s important to let the students know that you are there to help them. Everyone makes mistakes the first time they teach, but I’ve found that students are willing to give you a chance if they can see that you are genuinely interested in helping them out, and trying to learn at the same time.

– ITA from India

Building rapport with students in the classroom is challenging, especially if there are language and cultural differences. International instructors who have experienced success as teachers identify several tips and strategies that they have used to develop successful rapport with students.

Learn students' names

Ohio State is very large and students are often “lost” in large lectures, so students are very appreciative of instructors who take the time to know their names. Students are generally very personable and approachable and welcome any opportunity to bridge the cultural distance between you and them.

A good start to learning students' names is to have them introduce themselves on the first day of class. To help you and other students learn names, you may want to bring name tags to class the first few days, or ask students to write their names on index cards and tape them to the desk. It is also helpful to have students address each other by name during class discussions. When you return papers, consider calling students by name and handing papers back personally. This allows you to connect names with faces. One instructor asks students to attach a copy of a picture of themselves to the information cards he collects on the first day of class. That way he can study their faces and names and pull the picture up if he receives an email from the student.

In the U.S. college classroom, students usually expect to be called by their first name rather than by last name or title (“John” or “Mary,” not Mr. Jones or Ms. Smith). Make an effort to pronounce students' names correctly; you might make notes on pronunciation on your class roster to help you remember. In general, students are forgiving if you forget their names or mispronounce them. It is okay to ask them to remind you of the correct pronunciation.

Bridge the language barrier

As we have seen in Chapter 6, international instructors have found that enlisting the aid of their American students in pronunciation helps bridge the language barrier. Some have joked with their students, asking for their help in correcting grammar and pronunciation errors, even learning slang. Some reported learning the more informal patterns of speech by socializing with students outside of class or attending university-wide activities. In general, students appreciate instructors who interact with them, so finding ways to encourage this is extremely beneficial.

Never apologize for the fact that English is not your first language. But do acknowledge it. Let your students know that it is important to you that they understand the way you speak. Encourage them to raise their hands if they do not understand you. You can make use of your students and the experience you gain teaching in the classroom as an opportunity to enhance your English pronunciation and speaking skills. Enlist the help of your students in this endeavor. Reassure them that your communication with them is important to you and that you want to work together with them to make sure you understand each other. Let them know that you will depend on them to let you know if communication ever breaks down. You might also tell them, with a smile on your face, that you will stop them also to ask questions if you do not understand some of their more casual speech, idioms, or slang.

Speak slowly and check for feedback of student understanding. For example, simply asking, “Is everything clear so far?” goes a long way to bridge the language barrier. It is always efficient to use the chalkboard or other sources of multimedia for illustration and explanation of material.

Share your culture

Just as you are new to the culture of the U. S. college classroom, so too are the students new

to you and your culture. Sharing your culture with your students helps you to get to know them better and motivates them to overcome stereotypical beliefs and understand your culture, thereby creating a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Sharing your culture can be as simple as informing students where you grew up, where you went to school, why you decided to study in the United States, or even pointing out any similarities or differences in both educational systems. Depending on the discipline in which one teaches, successful international instructors have even used world events as an opportunity to share with their students first-hand any cultural, economic, linguistic, or scientific information that may be applicable to teaching and learning the subject matter.

I can think of at least three compelling reasons for sharing your culture, a little or a lot (depending on your comfort level), with your students. It's an effective icebreaker that puts you and your students at ease. It's an added educational bonus that only you can provide. It makes your relationship with your students easier.

– Danielle Wainwright, ITA, French & Italian,
Haiti

Smile

A warm and friendly smile goes a long way in making you and your students comfortable with each other. A sense of humor is helpful in making light of a tense teaching moment in the classroom and can create a positive environment for you and your students. This does not mean, however, that you should try to tell jokes. As Sarkisian notes,

A joke in one culture may not be funny in another, and it can be hard to tell jokes in a foreign language. When you are teaching, you can tell humorous stories from time to time that relate to the course material or you may give funny examples. But even more important is a sense of humor that will allow you to enjoy, together with your students, a shared moment that comes up spontaneously or a good-humored reaction to a misunderstanding.
(Sarkisian, 1997, p. 37)

Get to know the students

Students also expect you to be friendly and to care about them as individuals. They will not demand friendliness, but will like it and usually respond positively to it. There are several ways in which you can help students feel that you care about them. You may want to read *The Lantern* (the Ohio State school newspaper) to become informed on issues important to students. You may want to learn to follow Ohio State sports or watch a few popular TV shows. For more information, see Chapter 1 of this book.

Part of being friendly is greeting students in and out of the classroom. If you see students outside of class, say hello. If you remember names, use them. Try to open each class with a general greeting, such as “Hi, how are you today?” or “Good morning (or afternoon), how is everyone doing today?” You might make a comment on the environment, for example, “Good morning! I’m glad to see everyone was able to make it here through the rain (despite the construction, past the picnics on the Oval).” If your class is on Monday, you might ask how everyone’s weekend was. You may have one or two people answer you, but students will generally understand that this is not a discussion question for the class.

Although it is good to be friendly with students, it is important to maintain an appropriate professional relationship. You may be close in age to your students, have similar hobbies or backgrounds, or share an interest in the field, but remember that they are your students. *In all cases it is inappropriate for you to ask a student on a date while he or she is enrolled in your class.* This is for your protection as well as the protection of the student, who may feel that a good grade depends on dating you. Other students may feel that the student is getting preferential treatment. You may be unable to separate your work relationship from your personal relationship. If someone you are dating or have had a relationship with in the

past enrolls in your class, ask your department to have them switched to another section or class.

If a student asks you out on a date, gently and politely tell him or her that you are not allowed to date students. Ohio State has strict policies about consensual relationships between instructors and students. For more information, see Chapter 4 of this book.

The First Day of Class

The first day of class can be both exciting and anxiety-producing for many teachers, not just international instructors. It is natural to feel nervous about meeting a class for the first time, especially if it is your first time teaching. But it is also an exciting opportunity. The manner in which you communicate and conduct the first class can set the tone for the remainder of the quarter. Here are a few tips to help make that first day of class a success:

Preparations

A big part of first-day anxiety is the fear of the unknown. If you are nervous, you may find it useful to learn as much as possible about the course you will be teaching. If you get the chance to talk to other TAs or faculty who have taught the course, do so. They can tell you much about the students, about course content, and about any departmental or course procedures. Some teachers find it useful to stop by the classroom ahead of time so they can familiarize themselves with the room. Looking over the course materials will also help, as will having a plan for the first day of class.

In planning to teach for the first time, many instructors are unsure about how to dress, not only for the first day of class but for classes in general. There are no university rules regarding dress code for instructors. Dress is very much a part of the departmental culture. For example,

those who teach art will dress differently from those who teach finance. It is useful to observe what your colleagues wear to get a sense of how formally or casually people in your department tend to dress. However, it's most important that you feel comfortable. If your peers wear jeans to teach but you would feel more confident in a skirt, wear the skirt. If you wear clothing from your own culture, you might use it as a way to talk about your culture with your students.

Introductions

One of the most basic goals for the first day of class is for you and the students to get to know each other. When you introduce yourself, say your name clearly and write it on the chalkboard. If you think students will have difficulty pronouncing your name, you can write it on the board phonetically and even have them say it aloud.

Students in the United States tend to call TAs by their first (personal) names and to address faculty members as Dr. or Professor, but how you choose to have yourself called is entirely up to you. Students will probably assume that your name order follows the conventions they are familiar with (personal name, middle name, family name). If your name uses a different order (for example, family name first), you may find it helpful to clarify for students which is your personal name and which is your family name.

Just as you are curious about U.S. students on the first day of class, they are curious about you as well. Many Ohio State students have never traveled to a foreign country so this is an opportunity for you and your students to learn about each other. This is also a chance for you to tell your students something about why you are studying here at Ohio State and something about your teaching experience. In other words, help them see how you are specially prepared to teach this class.

Having students introduce themselves is another way of building rapport between you and the students and also helps to build cross-cultural communication and bridge cultural differences. There are many strategies that you can use to build rapport while students are introducing themselves. For example, if your class is small enough, you can have students form pairs for 5–10 minutes and then have them introduce each other to the class. Introductions might include information on their major, home town, or their favorite ethnic food. This will help set the climate for establishing rapport and leading future discussions in class. Another technique is to have students fill out index cards with information including their name, address, phone number, major, expected grade in the course, reasons for taking the course, and what they expect to learn from the course. These cards can be used during the quarter in a variety of ways, from contacting students to using the information for assigning students to work in collaborative learning groups.

The Syllabus

Hand out the syllabus and carefully go over the contents. Some important elements of an effective syllabus are: (1) information about the course and the instructor, (2) statement about course objectives, (3) teaching activities for achieving course objectives, (4) texts and reading assignments, (5) grading criteria, (6) course policies, and (7) schedule of weekly teaching and learning activities. Invite students to ask you questions about what is outlined on the syllabus. Students are especially concerned about how they are evaluated, so it is wise to explain in detail the criteria used for grading in the course.

The syllabus is often considered a “contract” between you and the students, so they will interpret the contents as written and hold you to it. Before sharing the syllabus with the students, it is also wise to review what is being

presented with a colleague or course supervisor so you can prepare and anticipate questions. If students ask you questions about the syllabus that you cannot answer, inform them that you will return that information to them at the following class meeting. For more detailed information on how to construct an effective course syllabus, please see Chapter 4 of *Teaching at The Ohio State University: A Handbook*.

Demonstrating Your Teaching Style

After taking care of course-related matters, it is always good to give students a sample of your teaching style. In this way, students will know what style of teaching to expect from you, whether it be formal or informal, structured or facilitative. More important, students will get a sense of how to take notes in your class. Try to involve your students in the teaching and learning process. Invite questions and, in turn, encourage them to give you feedback as the course progresses. Inviting their feedback about your teaching or the course in general encourages motivation and establishes a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. For information on how to solicit feedback from your students, contact Faculty and TA Development at 292-3644 or ftad@osu.edu.

Concluding the Class

It is always good to conclude the class by summarizing what was covered and sharing what you are going to be focusing on for the next class. Since it is the first day, you might want to take a few minutes to ask students to give you feedback on their first day of class experiences. You can ask them to respond anonymously on an index card or paper. After reading through the responses in your office or research lab, you can make appropriate adjustments in future classes or, depending on the

theme of the responses, consider responding to their comments at the next class.

Conclusions

It is important to keep in mind that good teaching is the concern of *all* teachers. Although international instructors may face many additional challenges, you have much in

common with your U.S. colleagues on campus. The principles of learning and the teaching strategies discussed in this chapter will help to improve teaching and learning in all classrooms. Faculty and TA Development has additional resources and services to support your efforts to excel as a teacher during your career at Ohio State.

Recommended Readings on Teaching Strategies to Enhance Student Learning

Items preceded with an asterisk (*) can be found in the FTAD resource suite. A number of additional resources on specific teaching issues are also available. Please contact FTAD for more information.

*Davis, B.G. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*McKeachie, W. J. (2002). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (10th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

*Sarkisian, E. (1997). *Teaching American students: A guide for international assistants in colleges and universities*. Revised edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

**Teaching at The Ohio State University: A handbook* (2001). Faculty and TA Development. The Ohio State University.