

Controlling what you Can: Teaching Fundamentals for the New Year

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The time has come that we academics anticipate with a mixture of exhilaration and dread: back-to-teaching time. This is the time we hesitate to complain about to friends and family, knowing that they may not sympathize with our plight of having at last to return to work, following a three-month period of near-total freedom. We wistfully take our last camping trips, and watch meetings and orientation events appear on our Google calendars. The latecomers among us begin frantically perusing potential course readings with a mounting sense of what I call “syllabus panic.” Yes, alas: it is the time for us academics to start preparing our teaching for the fall. I know, some of you may have just thought indignantly, “I’ve been preparing my teaching since last spring!” or “I prepare all my syllabi and lesson plans before I start my summer vacation!” or “I’m good – all I have to do is change the dates on the syllabi I’ve been using since I got tenure in 2005. Thank goodness for the oldies but goodies!” If you are one of these people, good for you. If you are not – or if the third category I evoked made you feel a little sheepish, as it does me – read on.

Teaching is a complex and beautiful thing, a thing of mystery. To enter our classroom for the first time is to embark on an adventure that is messy and unpredictable. There is no way to know what our students’ needs, personalities, and level of preparation will be; no way to predict what events of the world will barge in to disturb our plans; no way to foresee the social dynamics (pre-existing or yet to be discovered) among our students. So many factors will enter into our teaching that we cannot control, and we will need to improvise and adapt our way

through these uncontrollables. The random and chaotic elements of teaching cannot be avoided.

It is precisely because so much of teaching is by nature unpredictable that we must be ruthlessly vigilant with ourselves about the elements of teaching that we can predict and control. These are what I call “teaching fundamentals”: the things we can do, and should do, to give our students a solid and reliable framework from which to learn. They will need a stable foundation in order to feel safe enough to take the risks all good learning requires. When we systematically, faithfully tend to our teaching fundamentals, we allow them to relax, and focus their energy where it matters most: on learning the skills and content we want to share with them. The best teaching incorporates both stability and disruption, predictability and spontaneity. The teaching fundamentals I will describe below relate to the stability part of teaching. I see them as a sort of sturdy skeleton or frame upon which the rest of our course is built. If we implement them consistently and diligently, both we and our students will feel we are standing on something secure; but if we neglect them, our teaching will always feel at least a little wobbly.

1. ***Give yourself the gift of a finished syllabus.*** There are many ideas about what to include or not include in a syllabus: various blurbs, descriptions, rules, and warnings that you may find useful, or not. As far as these things go, do what seems right to you. As I see it, the main benefits of a syllabus, for both faculty and students, reside primarily in three things: the ***reading list***, the ***grading schema***, and the ***calendar***. If you can begin the semester knowing what you will read, what work (reading, written, oral, etc.) the

students will be expected to produce, how much this work will count, and exactly when you will do all these things, you are well on your way to a solid semester. A good syllabus gives both faculty and students a sense of direction and order. Yes, it's a lot of work, especially for the first time. But believe me, it's easier to edit a syllabus you've already written than to create one on the fly once the semester has started. (If you have time, read [Steve Volk's "The Dual Life of a Syllabus"](#) for inspiration... but don't let it be a form of productive procrastination that distracts you from finishing your syllabus!)

2. ***Make a lesson plan for every class.*** I know, it's basic. The lesson plan can be as thorough or as loose as you like. Everyone needs something different in a lesson plan: make it your own. If you need ideas, take a look at [Billie Harra's "Lesson Planning for the University Classroom."](#) To me, a lesson plan should at least include the following: an idea for beginning the class, an idea for ending it, and a plan that makes students grapple with course concepts in a variety of ways. Go into class with a few things – I recommend no more than 3 or 4 – you absolutely want to get across in that class. They are your *sine qua nons*. Know these things. Write them down. Proclaim them to your students. Make sure they are connected to the homework they did for class. (There's no faster way of signaling to your students that they don't have to do their homework than never using it in class.) I also recommend changing types of activity every 15 minutes or so, and having several templates for lesson plans. Don't always do the same thing every class. Variety is the spice of life, and teaching is no exception.
3. ***Make next time's homework the first thing you do on your lesson plan.*** Go into class knowing EXACTLY what you will assign as homework for the next class. If you have 10

minutes until class and no lesson plan, and you have to walk into class clutching a sheet of paper with only the homework plan on it, so be it. Everything else can be improvised if need be. Do not say you will send them the homework later. Do not send them the homework at midnight the day before class. If you want them to do their homework, they have to know what it is, with plenty of lead time. Period.

4. ***Hand back graded work on time.*** This is without a doubt the hardest task for most people. Give yourself a schedule for grading, and follow it religiously. I like to put deadlines for the turning back of graded work into my calendar. Try not to let more than one week pass between when they hand it in and when you give it back. Maybe two weeks for big classes. The point is, give yourself a deadline. (And possibly a rubric, if it can help you go faster; see Jessica Greenfield's "Rubrics: A Best Friend for Teachers & Students" for some ideas.) Not giving students timely feedback on their work undermines every learning goal you have for the class. Believe it.
5. ***Change your syllabus if you have to, not much.*** Teaching requires both structure and flexibility. We sometimes need to change things in our syllabus along the way. But know that it will frustrate your students every time. The most organized students will have made far-reaching plans according to your syllabus. I've had students who had made master calendars showing every assignment for every class of the semester, and who sighed deeply every time I moved a due date. Make changes if you must, and when you do, always proclaim and explain.
6. ***Be clear, with yourself and them.*** We are not here to be perfect. Your students can learn as much, if not more, from how you address your mistakes as from your brilliant,

spot-on, teacher-of-the-year moments. In order for this to happen though, you will have to be clear about things, in a way that requires honesty and sometimes even courage. Be clear with yourself and with them. Make it your goal to ensure that everyone in your class knows what is happening and why. You most of all.

What it boils down to is this: when things get unpredictable and unclear in a class, or when students don't know whether the work they are doing meets your expectations, they get stressed out. The fancy word for this stress is "cognitive load." The greater the stress or cognitive load, the harder it is to learn. (For more ways to reduce cognitive load for your students, check out [Jennifer Randall Crosby's "Reducing Cognitive Load: Keep it Simple."](#))

Taking control over the controllable aspects of teaching – consistently and reliably making sure your students know what they need to do, when they need to do it, and how they are doing in the class – is surprisingly powerful, because it keeps your students' energies focused on learning, instead of on trying to figure out what's going to happen next. If you do nothing else, finish your syllabus, enter class with a basic lesson plan, assign and grade homework in a timely manner, minimize changes, and be as clear and transparent as you possibly can at all times. This will be a present to yourself that will support you in becoming your awesome self as a teacher.