

FIRST-TIME TEACHING OF A LARGE LECTURE COURSE: WHAT NOT TO DO

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This is a slightly modified text of an oral paper delivered as part of the CAMWS Graduate Student Issues Committee (GSIC) Panel organized by Jennifer LaFleur at the annual CAMWS meeting in Baton Rouge, LA, in March of 2012. The theme of the panel was "In the Real World Now: Tools for Designing Your Own Courses." Other contributions were:

1. "Planning Small Seminars in Translation." Stephanie A. McCarter (University of the South)
2. "Teaching the Second Year Latin Student to Swim the Mississippi." Rex Stem (University of California, Davis)
3. "Aliquando Latine docendum est: Guidance on Active Latin for Graduate Students." Neil Coffee (University at Buffalo, SUNY)

The texts of these the papers may soon be available in the CAMWS webspace.

For many of our colleagues at the beginning of their careers, the transition from graduate school to a full-time teaching position brings a completely new experience, responsibility for a large lecture course. This new role can be daunting. It does not have to be. The following suggestions may help. They derive primarily from my own classroom mistakes. They are certainly not meant to be exhaustive. Improving teaching is something we learn by doing, by talking with colleagues, and by appropriating whatever works. If we ever stop thinking about how to do it better, we are all in trouble.¹

I. Basic Principles

Most of us have not taught a large lecture before we get our first full-time job. Still, many of us have teaching experience in smaller classes, and all of us have in mind the examples of the favorite teachers who taught us most effectively.

The basic principles that almost all effective teachers have in common are going to be the same for a teaching assistant's discussion section, an introductory Latin class, or a lecture for 200 people. They are:

- I.1 **Golden Rule** (In its strong form: Treat others as you would want to be treated.)
- I.2 **The fact and perception of fairness are both essential: treat all students equally.**
- I.3 **Know your stuff** (and be honest when your omniscience fails).

I.4 **Be shameless about your own excitement with the material and your eagerness to share it with your students.** (But leave the pom-poms in your office.)

I.5 **Without compromising performance standards, actively be on their side.**

II. Large Class Essentials

To teach a large lecture class, the only thing you have to do is translate those basic tenets from a relatively intimate group in which you can have a better sense of the capacities, learning styles, and perhaps even the aspirations of everyone in the room, to a large lecture hall where you are guaranteed to finish the semester without knowing most of your students by name.

The greatest change is the level of regimentation. In a small class, your simple proximity creates a relationship, so that students maintain a certain level of alertness and have a certain amount of themselves invested in not appearing "clueless." When something is obvious, you do not have to make it explicit. You don't have to tell people that their term paper should have a thesis, for example. In my experience, that dynamic changes when you get more than 30–45 students in a class. In any class with more than 45 students, the expectations based upon their personal involvement with the experience go out the window. As a result, for the class to be successful, and for your own sanity, you may find helpful these basic guidelines:

II.1 **Make the obvious explicit.** What is blindingly obvious to you and to most of your students will not be obvious at all to perhaps 10% of your audience. Be painfully explicit about what you are doing, why it is important, and about all requirements and expectations. Doing so also gives you credit for professionalism with the students who do not need to have everything spelled out.

II.2 **Think hard about the syllabus on the front end, make it as detailed as possible, and then stick to it.** In a smaller class, one can take a poll and change the date of a test or adjust assignments if most or all in the class are amenable. In a large class, any such change, even from the kindest of motives, will somehow *wound* someone. It is a one-way ticket to a plausible perception of unfairness, even to grade appeals. Don't go there.

Figure out the order and interrelationship of lectures before the class begins, and treat everything on the syllabus—assignments, due dates, grade calculation—as contractual. Do not make exceptions to your own rules. Every exception on anything to do with grading will take 20 minutes or more out of your life per student, will potentially generate another line of students at your door asking for the same treatment, and can still leave you open to the toxic perception of unfairness.

An ancillary issue is one of student crises. In a class with 200 students, it is inevitable that a few people will be hit hard by life, or imagine that they have been, in the course of the semester. It is

important to set clear expectations for the accommodations you can make. I tell my students on the first day of class that we all know that life is not fair, but that I do not have the wisdom or the energy to try to compensate for the bad hand that life may deal to 200 unique and precious individuals. The best I can do is to treat every student the same, regardless of their circumstances. I call this the “fairness doctrine.”

Students understand equal treatment, and most of them value it. When plaintive emails come (“If I don’t get a passing grade, I won’t graduate and the wedding will be off!” etc.), they can regularly be met with sympathetic replies noting that your hands are tied by the fairness doctrine.

One of the pieces of information that the syllabus should provide is the policy for make-up exams. My own make-up policy is No Make-ups. What that looks like in practice is that I tell them to call or email me beforehand if they have to miss a test because of a death in the family (which God forbid!) or some other horrific life event. Again, in a large class, these events are going to happen. When they do, I will work with students to the extent of counting the next test grade for the grade of the test missed.² This works with the fairness doctrine because I treat all students who have lost a loved one the same. There is of course the notorious problem of the student who claims to lose a dozen grandparents in the course of a semester. For this reason, after the bereaved student returns, I do ask for a copy of the obituary or the funeral order of service for the course file. When a student is grieving, a teacher’s natural instinct is to protect that young person. So this is hard. If it is presented as a mechanical formality, the student does not take it in bad part.

Other large class essentials are very intuitive.

II.3 Return papers and tests as soon as possible after they are taken, and let students know when to expect them. This is especially important to them where tests are concerned. With a class of 25, you can have a cloud of uncertainty hanging over them for a week and the personal relationship will still carry you through. With a class of 200, that uncertainty becomes an enormous distraction. Students have told me that they lose respect for a teacher who sits on their tests. It’s that big a deal.

II.4 Use the web to post everything that people would otherwise ask you for. This includes study guides, handouts, powerpoints, last year’s tests (which the fraternity and sorority members have in their files anyway, so everyone should have them as a matter of fairness). Powerpoint presentations should be used because they are easy to do, and the eye candy is really important to them. I am not visually sensitive, but students have told me that a lecture without pictures is like a day without sunshine. (Their similes are actually a bit more vigorous.) I also post my own lecture notes online after each lecture. I do this so that people will have their heads up and pay attention to what is being said, rather than being three sentences behind and asking me to spell “Hippolytus” again. Anything that you can put online will save you from 10 or more separate email exchanges about it. Making information available in this way is key to having time for your research and to having a life. And the fact that everything is online reinforces your reputation both for helpfulness and for fairness.

II.5 Articulate a clear and enforceable policy about use of digital devices. Regarding student use of digital devices in class, you must know that they are not using them to fact check your lecture. They are checking Facebook. So their screen also becomes a distraction to every student behind the facebooker who is now watching that screen rather than paying attention. Smart phones do not have that broader effect, or at least not so much, but they still take a student out. Letting them do this does them a disservice in my view.³ I have convinced myself that the exercise of trying to pay attention in a digital-free environment for 50 minutes will be a valuable life skill. In twenty years, the attention span they develop here will be a rare and powerful attribute. So, as a kindness to them, I allow no digital devices in any of my classrooms without prior permission. And I tell them that on the first day of class, emphasizing that my policy is born of concern for their future success.

II.6 Make and follow closely a lesson plan for every class.

The old nostrum of “tell ’em what you’re going to tell ’em, tell ’em, then tell ’em what you told ’em” is not without merit. At a minimum, tell them what you plan to accomplish in this lecture and provide a powerpoint outline if that’s your taste. In a smaller class, you have the flexibility to go in with one lesson plan, encounter the Muse, and follow where she leads into an area that is infinitely more exciting and satisfying for your students. For a larger class, make a mental note to get back to the Muse later. Else you risk taking your entire syllabus off the rails and muddying their expectations for the material for which they are responsible. If you do find yourself winging it in class, label explicitly what part of what you have said will be fair game for testing.

III. A persona for students who will never know you personally

III.1 You belong in front of this class. Show confidence in your role and in your subject matter. In a large class, your audience will be enormously varied. And you are there to teach all of them, not just the 20% who come in the door already engaged. The only thing that you can assume about all of them is that they want a good grade in the course, that you are at first simply a part of the landscape through which they are traveling, like a steep hill or a traffic light, and that what they want most is aid for their journey. Many of your students will not care about classics, but will be there because of some requirement to take humanities (“Whatever that is.”). They are still open to learning what you have to teach them. They want to be interested rather than bored. But at the end of the day the one thing they have in common is that they all want to get their ticket punched. Some are happy to be there, and will like you instantly because you know this stuff. Some do not want to be there and will be predisposed to loathe you as their tormentor. None of this has anything to do with you personally. It is, as the young people say, “so not about you.” That can be deflating, but it can also be liberating.

In fact, this is the paradox of teaching, and it is amplified in a large lecture environment. Even though it is not about you, it is essential to be your best self, to go in firmly believing that you have something to teach all of them that is worth learning, and that is going to have a positive effect on their lives. It may take a lot of contemplation to get to that point. If you have been spending your intellectual time with quantitative metathesis, or with antecorsonantal *atique*, you must ask yourself if sharing those things is

the best use of the time of a twenty-year-old who may or may not ever have another classics course. (The answer, by the way, is “no.”) This time of contemplation, of convincing yourself that what you have to teach will make a positive difference in their lives, is time well invested. It is the foundation of your classroom ethos.

III.2 Make your highest priority sharing with them information that is important, and that is going to help them do well on the next test. If you are an introvert, or just insecure in your own powers, you may be concerned that they doubt your authority. Whether you think they do or not, you are right. To avoid falling into that, dress professionally (a good idea in any case). As you speak, if you are diffident that they trust your knowledge, just write something in Greek on the board, say “oops,” erase it, write the Roman alphabet equivalent, and keep going. You don’t need to do more. If you are an extrovert, there may be a temptation to be funny or mildly shocking for its own sake, just to enjoy your audience’s reaction. But you already know to harness that for their learning or to avoid it.

It is essential to make clear that you want them to do well, and to be available to them to help at need. Our rule of thumb is at least three office hours per week, but we also meet students at other times, and we answer emails all the time. If you have designed the mechanical piece properly, the students who meet with you will genuinely need to meet with you. They will be grateful for your care.

III.3 Because you are in an unequal power relationship, you are constrained to a kind of ersatz saintliness. If you show meanness, anger, or sarcasm to any student, every student in the class will feel threatened. Never make a joke at a student’s expense. Never betray impatience. Never be unkind. Strive for the patience of Job and the kindness of St. Francis of Assisi. They will love you for it. More important, they will learn better. (This takes some getting used to. A beer in the evening may help.)

III.4 Delivery is key. To read a paper at a scholarly meeting without looking up is an odd stylistic choice. To read a lecture without looking up is a death wish for everything you are trying to accomplish with them. If you can handle eye contact (and some people are so shy that this is Mt. Everest for them), make eye contact with someone in each quadrant of the room as you proceed. To make the obvious explicit: Smiling doesn’t hurt. Scowling does. Keep sufficient engagement in your voice so that it does not become a monotone. If you are relying on powerpoint (or a handout) to reinforce what you are saying, have something to say, or some emphasis to bring, that goes beyond reading to them what is on the powerpoint slide. Else, they either zone out completely or become mechanical note takers, and neither of those things is helpful.

To the extent that you can have a little interaction in each lecture, whether through the use of clickers or singling out of individuals, it helps everyone to stay alert. Teachers vary enormously in the kinds of interaction they can get away with. So much depends on your own comfort level. Personally, I single out two or three individuals in every class, but that may not work for you. When I was a teaching assistant at Chapel Hill for Kenneth Reckford’s epic journey course, Professor Reckford, a true master teacher, punctuated his lecture on Dante’s *Paradiso* by throwing handfuls of candy from the stage to set the joyous tone. It worked superbly for him. It would not work for me.

III.5 Finally, measure your performance in a constructive way. James Redfield long ago wrote (a little wickedly) that classicists are socialized into our profession by translating while our teachers correct us. Our teacher, the perfect classicist, is one who is free from error, and who corrects error in others.⁴ At some level, that teacher is who we aspire to be. And that socialization has real plusses. But one minus is that we all want to be free from error, and our course evaluations tell us otherwise. One standard question on such evaluations at my institution is “What aspects of this class contributed most to your learning.” If you have such a question on your student course evaluations, the good news is that just about every term you will get evaluations that say you are the best teacher a student has had in college, that your passion for the material and your genuine care that students learn made this the best course ever. They will say that you are amazing or AWESOME in capital letters. Take heart from that. You’ve earned it. I trust that you will never get evaluations that look like others of mine. On our narrative evaluations, we also ask what detracted most from your learning in this course. Here’s a very select sample from a large mythology lecture I taught last fall:

- “Make it an online class because this semester you detracted from my learning the material from online.”
- “Everything in class was a waste of my time.”
- “Do everyone a favor and get rid of this teacher and this class.”

By our perfectionist standard, this eloquent view, although very much a minority opinion, can be disquieting. Don’t let it be. Whether students say that you are the Second Coming or Hitler’s love child (as one of my superb teaching colleagues in history was once described), or anything in between, focus on the specifics, and ferret out the concrete suggestions for change that are worth considering to make the class better next time. Remember that what’s past is prologue. One tactic that you may find impossibly cheesy, but that has helped shield me from both arrogance and despair for many years, is this: I keep a small sign on the office wall, placed so that I always see it on the way out the door with lecture or lesson plan in hand. It says, simply, “You are only as good as your *next* class.”

ENDNOTES

¹For stimulating discussion, I must thank the panel organizer, my fellow panelists, and our audience. For vetting what follows, I am grateful to my departmental colleagues who teach large lectures, to several of our students in those courses, to Dr. David Schumann, Taylor Professor of Business and Director of the University of Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center, and to my co-author, Dr. Taimi Olsen, Associate Director of the Center, who is responsible for the appendix and bibliography. Remaining errors and idiosyncracies are my own.

²As my colleague David Schumann points out, this is a real sacrifice of effective pedagogy. In a perfect world, every test is a learning experience that should be afforded to every student, and make-ups should be the norm. While we await that perfect world, this seems the least unsatisfactory solution to the problem.

³See Carr, N. *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: Norton. 2010. [See also Adam Gopnik “The Information: How the Internet Gets Inside Us.” *The New Yorker* online edition, 14 February 2011].

⁴Redfield, J. "Classics and Anthropology." *Arion* (3rd series) 1.2 (1991): 5–23, esp. 6.

APPENDIX

The foregoing observations are all keyed to the only model for large lecture classes that I know well, the so-called "sage on the stage" model. There are other ways to negotiate the large lecture classroom dynamic, and there is much new thinking on the use of technology in this environment. At the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, we are fortunate to have a Teaching and Learning Center that offers expert guidance in this arena. My colleague Dr. Taimi Olsen, Associate Director of our Teaching and Learning Center (<http://tenntlc.utk.edu>), has graciously provided the following bibliography:

I read Professor Craig's remarks with pleasure. He aptly describes the shift that you will experience from small to large classes and provides excellent advice on how to proceed with a large class. The relationships you develop with students in small classes will bring you joy. You can, though, reach some of that sense of personal fulfillment even in a large lecture hall. No matter what you else you do, use student names. You will not memorize all those names, but refer to people by name and they will feel welcomed. Use a seating chart or "table tents" and call on people by name—even if it is a random "Alexi, where are you? What is your opinion of...?" And, if you are truly fortunate, your school can accommodate you with a "flat and flexible" room for large classes. These rooms, like many now being installed across the country, hold large round tables with multiple screens on the walls—so students can see your slides while you talk or turn to each other when asked to interact. However, even in fixed rows, students can turn to each other and discuss. Research shows that for every 15–20 minutes of lecture, a 3-minute activity break at the least to think and process ideas is extremely important for learning. Finally, I fully agree with Professor Craig—"teachers vary enormously in the kinds of interaction they can get away with. So much depends on your own comfort level." I believe, though, that even the most introverted of us become more extroverted in the classroom, as we develop our classroom persona. At least, I've seen it happen with my fellow Humanities professors! Below are some resources for ideas on how to create anything from a more interactive lecture designed to support student learning to a fully "flipped" class in which your lectures are recorded for evening consumption and your class is devoted to discussion and problem-solving. It's your choice. Go with your strengths.

Web Resources

The following web links provide short resources giving advice and strategies. Davis is noted for her work on collaborative learning. Craig and others introduce methods of formative feedback (also referred to as CATS: Classroom Assessment Techniques, as introduced by Angelo and Cross). CATS are extremely helpful in taking the measure of your class, of getting some information on what is working and what is not. "Lecture Capture" is a catch-all term for various software used to record and post lectures for students to view outside of class. Research shows that students who are provided with recorded lectures (which they heard in

class or watched individually out of class) will return to that lecture for review multiple times. "Deep learning" refers to the more cognitively complex and lasting learning that students do, as opposed to surface learning for test-taking purposes (see Bloom's taxonomy for a list of cognitive levels of learning). "Active learning" and "engagement" are similar terms for any activity that gets students out of a passive, receptive type of "learning." Active learning by students is linked to higher cognitive levels of learning, better transfer of knowledge from class to class, and higher college retention rates.

- "Innovative Teaching Showcase: Planning for Large Classes." Center for Instructional Innovation and Assessment, Western Washington University, 2012. 25 July, 2012. <http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/showcase2009>.
- Cooper, James L., Pamela Robinson, and David A. Ball. "The Interactive Lecture: Reconciling Group and Active Learning Strategies with Traditional Instructional Formats." *Exchanges: The Online Journal of Teaching and Learning in the CSU*. http://www.exchangesjournal.org/print/print_1161.html.
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- Davis, Barbara Gross. "Preparing to Teach the Large Lecture Course." *Tools for Teaching*. University of California, Berkeley, 2002. 25 July, 2012. <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/largelecture.html>.
- Millis, Barbara. "Promoting Deep Learning." IDEA Center, 2010. 25 July, 2012. http://www.theideacenter.org/sites/default/files/IDEA_Paper_47.pdf.
- Sarkisian, Ellen. "Twenty Ways to Make Lectures More Participatory." Adapted from *Participatory Lectures*, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, 2010. 25 July, 2012. <http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/TFTlectures.html>.
- Zhu, Erping and Inger Bergom. "Lecture Capture: A Guide for Effective Use." CRLT Occasional Paper No. 27. Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, University of Michigan, 2010. 25 July, 2012. http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/CRLT_no27.pdf.

Books

The following is certainly not an exhaustive list and does not include the many, many research articles published each year on active learning.

- Bligh, Donald. *What's the Use of Lectures?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. Bligh's book outlines the argument against lectures as accomplishing either higher levels of cognitive learning

for students (analysis, application, evaluation) or transfer of knowledge. In terms of lower-levels of learning (memorizing and understanding), lectures are no better or worse than other types of transfer of knowledge, such as reading text.

- Bonwell, Charles, and James Eison. *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*. Ashe-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1 Washington D.C.: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development, 1991. A classic—and a short, readable and imminently helpful—book on active learning, which includes a chapter on active lecturing.

- Bruff, Derek. *Teaching with Classroom Response Systems: Creating Active Learning Environments*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. Bruff specializes in the use of “clickers” in the classroom.

- Heppner, Frank. *Teaching the Large College Class: A Guidebook for Instructors with Multitudes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007. A sound resource for all sorts of questions about creating and running a large class.

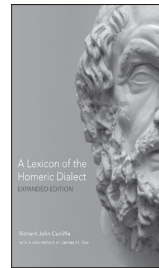
- Mazur, Eric. *Peer Instruction: A User's Manual*. NJ: Pearson, 1997. Mazur is well-known for creating concept questions to use during lectures. As stated on his webpage, “Lectures are interspersed with conceptual questions, called ConcepTests, designed to expose common difficulties in understanding the material. The students are given one to two minutes to think about the question ... then spend two to three minutes discussing their answers in groups of three to four, attempting to reach consensus on the correct answer.” There is a guidebook and online resources for peer instruction as well.

- National Research Council. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Expanded Edition. Washington, D. C.: National Academies Press, 2000. An excellent, general resource based on research findings about student learning. Not only does it address the importance of active learning and engagement for students, it also emphasizes the importance of “metacognition” or a student’s awareness and understanding of his or her own learning processes.

- Simkins, Scott, and Mark Maier, eds. *Just In Time Teaching: Across the Disciplines, and Across the Academy*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009. “JITT” is the method of getting students to be prepared and assessing how well students are prepared for class through short quizzes “just” before class, thus enabling the professor to include more discussion and conceptual activities in class.

- Stanley, Christine, and M. Erin Porter. *Engaging Large Classes: Strategies and Techniques for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002. Another good, overall resource for the teacher of large classes.

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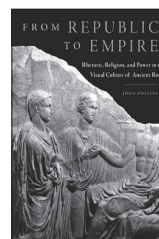
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