![UAB] CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
The University of Alabama at Birmingham

Engaging in Teaching that Reaches All Students

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OUR TEACHING CONTEXT

UAB has an incredibly diverse student population. While we tend to think of diversity in terms of perhaps race or national background, differences in our student population also include "invisible" categories of diversity, including socioeconomic backgrounds, first generation college students, religious identifications, and gender identities, to name but a few. In addition, UAB has a large population of non-traditional students, even among our undergraduates, which include adults who are older than age 22, have dependents, have full-time jobs, are part-time students, are single parents, or received a GED rather than a high school diploma. UAB's student diversity also includes individuals with both documented or undocumented disabilities, whether medical, learning-related, or psychiatric. The widespread prevalence of student mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, in our student population can also be considered an aspect of student diversity, as they affect student experiences in class.

Increasingly, the scholarship of teaching and learning provides research-backed evidence that certain teaching practices are good for all sorts of learners. This newsletter provides many of these tips succinctly in one, handy resource. If you prefer to listen to the tips rather than read them, the CTL workshop of the same title is recorded and <u>available on the CTL's Kaltura video channel</u>.

All of these tips are considered best practices in good teaching to purposefully try to meet the learning needs of all students. They are not hard to implement, but they will impact the learning of many. They disadvantage no one and do not unfairly advantage anyone. In addition, they make you unequivocally a better teacher to everyone! There's nothing to lose by implementing a few, or many, of them into your teaching practice.

As the CTL's Associate Director for Internationalization, I've found many of these tips in literature on best practices in working with international students. However, I've also seen many of the same tips in an article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in the journal *CBE—Life Sciences Education,* and in a book written for university professors on inclusive teaching. (All of these are listed in detail on page 6 for your reference.) Here at the CTL, we feel confident declaring that these tips are simply ideas for good teaching in general. You are not benefitting two or three students in your classes with these ideas. You are benefitting everyone.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

BEING APPROACHABLE IN THE ONLINE TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

- Assure students that engagement with you is going to be a part of the class, even though you won't see everyone in every class meeting. Share instructions for how they should communicate with you. Set boundaries regarding when you will and won't be available, but also be inviting and clear about how to be in touch.

- Assume the best of students who are not communicating and if at all possible, reach out to them. Try to establish a personal connection instead of only transactional. It can make a world of difference to an isolated student and/or to an international student.

- If a student reaches out to you, be careful to pay attention to the message and follow through to make sure communication was complete. Reaching out feels risky to many students.

- Participate in discussion boards with your perspectives and examples.

- Respond meaningfully to assignments.

CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

- Learn who you have in your class. You can invite students to tell you about themselves, as long as you give them the option to share information, rather than an expectation. For example, put together a welcome survey in which all questions are optional. Or pass out notecards on the first day of class, and ask students—if they are comfortable—to share with you where they consider home, and if there is anything that would be particularly helpful for you to know about who they are or life experiences they are encountering while they are taking your class.

- Learn, or at least use, students' names. Use table cards or manila folders hanging off the front of desks or tables. Ask for phonetic spellings of names that might be easily mispronounced.

- Be a real person, not only a content-matter expert. Share something about yourself with students, especially if you can identify with challenges that some students may be facing. Were you a first generation college student? Did you go to school while working full-time? Did you study abroad? Tell them! Be a model for success.

- Schedule opportunities for interaction with students on a regular basis. Be approachable by making yourself available in multiple times and modalities. Offer Zoom open-door office hours where students can pop in and "see" you, or make appointment times for Zoom office hours readily available.

- Explain how getting help is a normal part of the university experience. Make sure that students know how to get help from you, TAs, and tutoring opportunities.

- Openly discuss the phenomenon of imposter syndrome as a way to emphasize that all are welcome in your class and discipline. Make a focus on growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset, a regular part of the culture of your classroom.

"We want to be mindful of how differences in academic preparation, background, and skill set will shape students' abilities to successfully navigate the material and assessments" (Addy, Dube, Mitchell, SoRelle, 2021, pg. 69)."

CONDUCTING CLASS: MAKING LECTURES BETTER

- Help students prepare *for* lectures. Create study guides, provide questions that you will be answering during the lecture, and support pre-learning of discipline-specific terms.

- Make your organizational structure extremely explicit with an agenda or outline, and refer to it during your lecture.

- Use multiple modalities to present information. Taking in information in different ways supports acquisition.

- Support review of class materials. Post your slides. If the lecture is not automatically recorded, record and post it; ideally, add captions.

- Maintain a discussion board for key ideas, questions, and/or additional examples to support review and content learning.

For more ideas on supporting your students in content learning especially through the lecture format of teaching, look for the CTL workshop "Tweaking Lectures for Optional Comprehensibility."

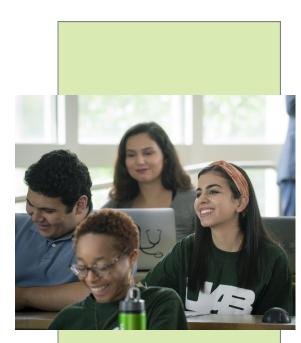# CONDUCTING CLASS: INCREASING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTENT

Let students know that participation in class is expected and why. Tell them specifically how you will be assessing their participation.

- Start the class with a mandated participation task. Ask a salient question and have everyone prepare an answer or contribute to a discussion board while the rest of class arrives. Another idea is to start graphic organizers on several white boards, and ask students to add to the boards with ideas from their readings as they come in.

- Pave the way for everyone to participate. Insist on "multiple hands, multiple voices" (Tanner, 2013), so that you can invite students who haven't spoken to speak. If you see the same hands raised, insist on hearing from new voices, and wait for participation.

- Get comfortable with silence. Many students need more thinking time than is commonly given in order to answer a question. Count to 10 silently; announce that you are giving 3 minutes to think before discussing, and set up a timer.

- Ensure that your class is characterized by active learning. Expect students to engage with the material through various activities, groupings, and modalities.

- Break students into pairs or small groups. Ask them to summarize, provide examples, share comments, do an application activity or sample homework problem, or brainstorm needed clarifying questions for you.

- In large group discussions, give out cards which students can "spend" during the discussion, so that you can create opportunities for more students to participate.

For more ideas on how to create interactive opportunities in class, attend the CTL workshop "Please Talk! Promoting Class Participation."

WHO ARE YOUR STUDENTS?

"...the aspect of classroom teaching that seems to be consistently underappreciated is the nature of 'whom' we are teaching. Undergraduate students often appear to be treated as interchangeable entities without acknowledgement of the central role of the individual students, their learning histories, and their personal characteristics in the student-centered nature of 'how' we aspire to teach" (Tanner, 2013, p. 322).

DESIGNING A COURSE: POLICIES AND CONTENT

Reading through your syllabus, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I make clear what my responsibilities are to the student, as well as what their responsibilities are to me and to each other?

- Do I give semester goals and daily or weekly objectives?

- Do I set clear expectations for assignments, and explaining what I mean about **how** things should be done and **why** I'm asking them to be done?

- Do I offer examples of good work?

- Do I set deadlines for major assignments or exams and stick to them fairly closely?

- Do I provide a range of learning materials that support different learning modalities?

- Do I design a course that makes sure I don't talk the whole time?

- Have I culled the course content so that I can thoroughly cover what I intend to teach?

- Do I set expectations for student participation in the classroom and in the learning process? If I will assess this, am I clear about that? If I will assess it, exactly how will I do so?

- If possible, do I provide a range of models/voices from our field that represent a broad picture of diverse involvement in our field?

DESIGNING A COURSE: ASSESSMENT

- Do I give information about how students will be graded on assignments?

- Do I give many low-stakes quizzes and assessments, so that both the students and I learn who are not understanding conceptual material? Do I incorporate these both before or after class, instead of only during?

- Do I build tests that match my daily or weekly objectives? Do I purposefully incorporate typical test questions into my teaching?

- Can I reduce the stakes of major papers and tests, or spread them out, so that I promote a growth mindset in the class?

- Can I give options for demonstrating mastery of certain skills?

DESIGNING A COURSE: POINTING TO HELP

- Do I tell students explicitly how to get help and, importantly, that getting help is a normal part of learning? In other words, do I teach students that resources for help are not to be used only when someone is failing?

- Do I explain what office hours are for?

- Do I tell them about opportunities for tutoring?

- Do I explain the role of the TA in my course if I have one?

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

"Besides teaching content and skills in your discipline, your role is to help students learn. And not just some students. The changing demographics of higher education mean that undergraduates come to you with a wide variety of experiences, cultures, abilities, skills, and personalities. You have an opportunity to take that mix and produce a diverse set of thinkers and problem-solvers" (Sathy & Hogan, 2019).

UAB international students prepare to participate in the UAB Homecoming Parade.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF STUDYING MULTICULTURALLY AND IN A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

UAB international student numbers are steadily increasing as UAB engages in purposeful international recruitment efforts. In Fall 2024, for example, we enrolled over 1900 international students from nearly 100 different countries in our undergraduate and graduate programs. Importantly, the vast majority of these students are from countries that are considered significantly culturally dissimilar from the U.S., and the vast majority are using English as one of several languages in their linguistic repertoire. What does this mean for student experience in the classroom?

- Remember that international students bring their home educational cultures into the classroom. That's one reason we recruit them; they add to the diversity of our student body beautifully! On a practical level, this means that some of your students may find our classroom culture to be strikingly different, and it may take them some time to adjust. Examples of practices that may seem different are as follows: an expectation that students share their opinions in the classroom, an expectation that active learning is part of the classroom environment, an expectation that students determine a topic for a project or paper independently, or an expectation that students understand that you really do grade them according to the percentage points listed in the syllabus, not only on a final exam. Explicitly-designed syllabi and taking the time to explain the *why* of how you teach as you do goes a long way towards helping students adjust to our educational culture.

- Students are always still learning English, and it takes some time to adjust to the aural landscape of any new linguistic environment, no matter how high skill levels may be. Accents, pace of speech, homophones, word elisions, and regional vocabulary are only a few of the many linguistic landmines that students' ears have to adjust to upon arrival. In addition, many students have much more practice with written English than oral English, and the highly irregular nature of English pronunciation can make the transition to actively using English all of the time a challenge. So, as much as you can, be aware of your language use. Embrace plain English. Avoid idiomatic language, slang, and unexplained metaphors.

- Consider that when an international student is in your class, if English is not their first language, the cognitive load is likely more significant for them. The brain is working to decipher and use language while at the same time working to comprehend new content and concepts. This is why it is so helpful to provide an outline of a lecture and support preparation for class as well as review. Try to point out key terms or information, as well as relationships between concepts, when you are lecturing. Signal verbally when you are giving extra examples, and especially let students know if you are sharing an extraneous anecdote.

"...increased attention to cultural and linguistics aspects of the instructional process can benefit all students—both domestic and international" (Shapiro, Farrelly, & Tomaš, 2014, p. 5).

JOIN US FOR WORKSHOPS IN THE GLOBAL AWARENESS SERIES AT THE CTL:

Establishing Expectations for the U.S. Academic Environment

Please Talk! Promoting Class Participation

Helping International Students Avoid Unintentional Plagiarism

Managing Group Work with Cross-cultural Savvy

Tweaking Lectures for Optimal Comprehensibility

Exploring UAB International Student Backgrounds

Understanding the Impact of Cross-cultural Values

Communicating Across Cultures and Languages

Adjusting to Living and Studying in a Different Culture

Addressing Student Concerns with Cross-cultural Sensitivity

Infusing your Course with Intercultural and International Learning

Supporting the Development of Critical Thinking Skills

For workshop descriptions, dates/times, and registration, please visit www.uab.edu/ctl

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