Advice for New Faculty: Start with the Syllabus

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Editor’s Note: The following is an excerpt from 23 Practical Strategies to Help New Teachers Thrive.

The ability to teach is not something that one either has or does not have. Teachers are not born. Rather, they are made, through hard work, research, continual learning, and practice. Any teacher, no matter how experienced or new, can improve, and even the best teacher’s skills can degrade if he or she does not pay attention to continual improvement. Teachers are made through hard work and persistence.

Likewise, the perfect course is not created and set in stone. There are many small actions that make a good course, and many of these actions need to be repeated and reexamined with every class and every year. Therefore, becoming a good instructor who teaches quality courses is a marathon, not a sprint. By developing and honing skills, a teacher will have a long career in which the teaching itself is the best reward.

**Strategy #1: Start with the syllabus**

Focusing on the syllabus at the front end helps the teacher focus his or her ideas and bring all of his or her learning philosophies together in one place. One can never start too early. The syllabus is an organic document that will continually be revised; it is a mistake to think that the syllabus is a static document that only needs dates changed to be relevant for the next term. A syllabus is an organic creation that should be changing as the teacher changes. It is also a contract between the teacher and the student, and it should be as clear as possible.

Start with the syllabus and create a rough outline, including the course schedule and the grading policy. These elements will help in planning the course. Think also at this point about how students will address the instructor. While some instructors prefer to be called by a first name, others
believe it will undermine the authority of all teachers. Consider informing students that they do not want to call female teachers with a PhD “Mrs.” rather than “Dr.” A safe bet is to teach students to always use “Professor” unless told otherwise. Be thorough with the syllabus but not exhaustive. This in an area in which many faculty members make mistakes. Since they correctly view the syllabus as a contract, they want to include everything that the student should or should not do. This quickly becomes a list of prohibitions, such as “no hats in class,” “no talking,” and “no tardiness.” However, this approach undermines a sense of trust in the student. In spite of concerns the instructor may have about the youth and inexperience of students, they quickly understand how to behave in the course. Think like a student: how would you want to be treated if you were taking a course? Write a syllabus with that perspective in mind. Think about texting in class. While it is tempting to place a prohibition against texting on the syllabus, a student who is texting in class is typically not disruptive, although the instructor may view the behavior as insulting and rude. In this case, patience is a virtue. Consider using a combination of brief explanations of why behavior is disruptive followed by periodic silences throughout the rest of the course when behavior becomes excessive. And, if all else fails, the instructor can reserve the right to kick a student out of class, which will at least solve the problem temporarily. What about required elements? Some universities require faculty to include in the syllabus a statement about academic integrity and cheating, so inclusion may be as simple as cutting and pasting. However, this can still be a learning opportunity. In a first-year seminar course, consider including an activity exploring what academic integrity is, how to cite sources appropriately, and the like. Students will then perceive that this is not so much a prohibition as a chance to learn. The same is true of including issues like a late policy. This may seem like an obvious inclusion, but often it is enough to handle these issues on a case-by-case basis. What to include on the syllabus is an issue for each individual instructor to decide, but likely one does not have to include as much in the syllabus as one thinks. A teacher cannot control every action that occurs in the classroom. But if a teacher can patiently reflect on the actions he or she decides to take—whether it is finding a way to gently nudge a student toward paying attention or whether to ignore certain behaviors—the teacher will have a much more pleasurable experience in the classroom. This will allow teachers to thrive in the long term.

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