

Four Beginner Teaching Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

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Having taught college for five years now, I sometimes take for granted that teaching methods that seem obvious now were once foreign to me. So, to prevent other first-time teachers from making the same mistakes I did, I want to share four of the biggest teaching mistakes I made and how learning from them has improved my class.

Mistake #1: Too much course work

Within 14 weeks, my poor students had to complete 11 projects, seven in-class exercises that often spilled over into homework, six lecture research tasks, and ongoing assigned reading. This meant that at various points in the semester, students had multiple overlapping assignments due at different times.

There was not enough time for students to give their best effort, so I did not get a true sense of their abilities. This also meant the class schedule was so tight that there was no room for unforeseen class cancellations, causing anguish whenever a snow day forced me to move lectures and due dates around the calendar.

Fix #1: Give assignments time to breathe

After some research on course design, I took a hard look at my syllabus, evaluating how well each assignment aligned with my desired learning outcomes. Because of this, I ended up cutting the assignments in half. By eliminating redundancies and projects with vague goals, my new class structure gave students space to explore options where they could fail and learn without feeling pressured to hit tight deadlines. It also encouraged more work sessions, where students could work on long-term projects in class, and I could supervise and give personalized input before the critique.

Mistake #2: No reinforcement

Having such a tightly packed class schedule meant I left no opportunity to go over any technical information that was covered in the lectures more than once. I expected that a single lecture would suffice, and was somehow surprised at the abysmal test results.

Fix #2: Repeat, over and over again

Now, I end each lecture with some form of classroom assessment technique (CAT), like the muddiest point, to quickly gauge how well the students understand that day's information. Then, I begin the next class by going over their questions from the class before to clear up any confusion. Eventually, these assessments become cumulative, so students can ask for clarification on anything we've covered so far. This kind of repetition not only helps me discover gaps in my explanation abilities, it gives me a chance to enlist other students in the clarification process, reinforcing the information for them as well. This, in addition to retrieval practice activities scattered throughout the semester, means that students are encountering the same topics multiple times.

Mistake #3: Unclear relevance

A particular challenge I face is that even though my class is required, the class's relevance to the students isn't immediately clear to them. I designed the class assuming they already knew the answer to the question, "Why do I have to learn this?" But after a few semester's worth of student evaluations, it became clear this was not a safe assumption. Even among the positive reviews, "I don't see the relevance of the course" was a consistent complaint.

Fix #3: Start and continue with why

I added a brief "*Why should you take this course?*" paragraph to the first page of my revamped syllabus. There, I outlined the benefits of my class and then reiterated those points in my introductory lecture. This put the students in a more receptive frame of mind by answering their most important question first. Each subsequent lecture and assignment was also similarly introduced with a clear statement about how that particular activity related to the overall course goals.

Mistake #4: Teaching in the dark

Students often had to wait until the end of the semester before getting an opportunity to offer feedback about the class. While that might help the administration, it did nothing for the students in the class. I had no idea which topics were proving hard to grasp or how effective my teaching methods were.

Fix #4: Multiple feedback channels

In addition to the CATs geared towards reinforcing the content of the lectures, I also offer quick three-question [Poll Everywhere](#) surveys that query students about the format. These give me an up-to-date picture of how the class is going and allows me to make any necessary course corrections.

Anonymous, on-the-spot surveys might not be enough to get a full sense of students' opinions. That's why I also request a more thorough midterm evaluation from my school's Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. This focus-group style survey is done while I'm not in the room so the students can speak freely. After a session like this, it's important to let students know what changes were made as a result of their feedback so they feel heard and share ownership of the class.

Although it's embarrassing to think back on how many mistakes I made starting out, I now know my students can enjoy a more humanely paced course, where the material is covered several times, and there's a clear picture as to why they should care. Plus, whenever things aren't working for them, they have plenty of opportunities to let their professor know.

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