

How to Prepare for Class Without Overpreparing

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Advice



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By James M. Lang July 29, 2018

I'll get right to the point, because I know you don't have much time. A new semester is looming, and you are overwhelmed. It could be because you're early in your teaching career and still feeling your way. Or it could be related to the impossible amount of work you are facing, as teaching loads grow ever heavier. But some of it arises from a common problem that you can help to alleviate yourself: You are overpreparing for class.

Almost 20 years ago, when I wrote a column about my first year as a full-time faculty member, one of the major realizations I reported was that I had spent way too much time preparing for class. These days I help orient new faculty members throughout their first year, and I have seen how many of them struggle with that same problem.

Faculty members overprepare for lots of reasons. You feel an obligation to give students the full benefit of the knowledge you have acquired. You want to ensure that they recognize and respect your expertise. You are nervous that you will run out of material before the class period comes to an end. Or perhaps you just want to make sure that the class will run as smoothly as possible, and so you attempt to foresee every potential problem in advance.

You probably have learned already that the college classroom is a messy place that doesn't lend itself to inflexible plans. And just because you cover lots of material, as the teaching guru Ken Bain once told me, doesn't mean that the students are learning it.

The best way to help yourself escape the problem of overpreparation? Let go of the fantasy that you must use every minute of a strictly planned class schedule to introduce, explain, clarify, and cover. Let the homework you've assigned — readings, problem sets, videos — do some of the introducing, explaining, clarifying, and covering for you.

Starter Kit: New to College Teaching

Once you let go of the instinct to provide exhaustive coverage, you can use the time that emerges to create opportunities for your students to engage with the material in class. Those opportunities represent pathways to saner levels of preparation. Your goal here is to devise, identify, test, and refine a small number of strategies that you can deploy at any moment you need them in class. They can be modified within different contexts and time frames.

Best of all, these approaches aren't just to fill class time and free up your schedule but are well-grounded in the literature on human learning.

My tool kit of class activities has been developed over many years. Below I explain four that I often use in teaching literature, but which can be adapted for any discipline. I offer them here to stimulate your thinking about what kinds of quick-engagement modules you might devise for your classroom, steal from your colleagues, or discover through searching online.

No. 1: Start class with a writing exercise. This is my oldest and most trusted activity. Once or twice a week, I begin by asking students to respond in writing (about a half-sheet of paper) to a question I pose about the day's reading. This exercise provides confirmation (or lack thereof) that students are doing the reading. It also helps students practice retrieving what they've learned. That means they are getting regular opportunities to master the foundational knowledge and skills of the course.

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More important — and the reason I started doing this writing exercise in the first place — is that it provides a starting point for a class session devoted to discussion. After they finish writing, I ask students to spend the next 10 minutes or so sharing and discussing their written responses. This discussion can take as long or as little I need, depending upon what else I have planned (or not planned) for the day.

No. 2: End class with a "connection" question. This is a more recent addition to my tool kit and shows that, even after 20 years in the classroom, new teaching ideas are just waiting to be discovered. This one also takes the form of students' writing a short paragraph, but here it happens at the end of class and has a different form and intent.

Inspired by research on the importance of helping students make connections between what they have learned in a course and their lives outside of class, I ask students to answer end-of-class questions like:

- How does something we discussed today connect to something you learned in another course?
- Have you had any personal experiences that connect to today's subject?
- Have you ever encountered any of today's material in a book, film, or television show?

If I don't have much time left at the end of class, students simply write their responses in a designated blue book (I collect and grade their blue books three times during a semester) and leave. But when I have planned a little more carefully, I finish this writing activity by asking students to share their responses in class. And occasionally, fascinating discussions arise from that invitation.

No. 3: Annotation worksheets. This one might seem particular to the humanities but, with a little creative thinking, you might adapt it in almost any discipline. Hand out a piece of paper with a section of a reading on it. Divide students into groups and ask them to annotate the hell out of it: Define keywords, identify how those words connect with other parts of the text, consider whether they point to things outside the reading. In short, dump anything they can think of onto the annotation sheet.

Once they're done, you have a rich palette from which to draw in a classwide discussion. You can go through the passage word by word and line by line, recording their responses on the board and helping to ensure that their interpretations are productive ones, supported by the text.

This applies even more easily to other disciplines if you let go of the idea that the exercise has to be about written material. Anything you are studying in class — whether written, visual, a lab experiment, a film — could be the subject of an annotation worksheet. You may also be able to use online tools (like Hypothes.is or Perusall) to shift this exercise online and add some intriguing new features.

No. 4: (Electronic) Polling. Inspired by the work of the physicist Eric Mazur and his peer-instruction technique, I began using electronic polling in my courses a year ago and became an instant convert. I use PollEverywhere.com, but you can find multiple options for electronic polling. The technique is a simple process:

- Pose an interpretive or conceptual question to your students — one that doesn't have an easy answer.
- Students then use their phones or laptops (you could do this with index cards in a low-

tech environment) to select a response among several options. With electronic polling, they can also respond with short answers. Their responses are instantly visible to me and — if I choose to display them in class — to one another.

- Ask students to explain or justify their answers with a partner or a small group.
- Poll students a second time.
- Discuss the question as a class.

The kinds of questions will, of course, vary by discipline. Many scientists use polling to test students on their understanding of concepts and theories, and how they're applied in specific contexts. The questions I ask my literature students tend to be more about word choices and interpretations. Search online for the term "concept tests" — [here](#), for instance — and you will find plenty of examples.

Polling hits all of the buttons in terms of an in-class activity that is quick, easy, and effective. It sparks engagement, challenges students with interesting questions, requires them to articulate their understanding, and gives you a quick overview of how well they are grasping key course material. It requires no grading, and — like all of the techniques listed here — can be expanded or contracted according to how much time you have available.

Our stock in trade. With some of those four strategies, you might feel that you are just swapping preparation time for grading time. But you don't have to comment much, if at all, in grading those brief writing assignments. I assign a low percentage of the course grade to in-class writing activities, collect them and ensure that they have been done, and then discuss them with the class as a whole if I see trends or issues that need our attention. The value of the activities is mostly in letting you know what students are thinking about the course material.

Of course, it's important to make sure that your in-class engagement activities are designed to support student learning — and not just to rescue you in a bad moment. But especially in your first few years of teaching, you sometimes need activities that you can fall back on in a pinch.

They are the stock in trade of experienced teachers everywhere. The sooner you find in-class exercises that work for you, your material, and your students, the more you'll find yourself well-prepared for class, ready for the unexpected, and enjoying the moments when your students come to life through the engagement opportunities you have created.

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