

Informal Teaching Advice

1. Enthusiasm. When you're in class, you should act like there's no place in the world you'd rather be. Enthusiasm is infectious—it makes your audience perk up, enjoy the material more, like you more, and learn more.

2. Confidence. Act as if you know your shit. Act as if you've done this a hundred times before and it's always gone smashingly. This will reassure the students that they're in good hands and they'll learn better.

3. Mix it up. Don't just do the same thing over and over again, throw in some variety—movies, demos, etc. Variety is the cure for boredom.

(yes, I have been told that some of this is also sex advice.)

4. Bring in other people. Guest lectures, interviews, etc. Easy to do with Zoom.

5. Be modest in your goals for each class. The most common mistake of beginning teachers is cramming too much material in any single session. (Early in our careers, we teach as if our advisor was in the room, drumming his or her fingers impatiently).

6. Be yourself. Everyone has strength; teach in a way that aligns with what you're good at. As an example, if you're funny, engage the students with humor—if not, don't bother. Serious and

intense is also a fine way to run a class ... but so is cheerful and mellow. There are a lot of ways to do this right.

7. Teaching prep can leech away all your time; don't let it. Say to yourself: Diminishing Returns. Then say: Opportunity Costs. Repeat as needed.

8. A well-timed “Great question. I don’t know — but I’ll find out for next class” is really charming and makes everyone feel good. This is so powerful that some profs are rumored to do this even when they DO know.

9. Use specific students as examples in arbitrary ways. For example, in a Developmental Psychology course, you might say: “So, Stella? — let’s pretend you’re a 5-year-old. So imagine we asked you ...”. You don’t have to actually ask Stella anything, but once students became aware that you do this, they’ll pay more attention, wondering if next time it will be them.

10. When I was in the second grade, I asked a stupid question and the teacher, Mrs. Pound, made me feel like an idiot for doing so. It says something about how awful this feels that I still remember this experience so many years later! Don’t be like Mrs. Pound. Every question a student asks is, at minimum, “Interesting!”. If it’s total gibberish, go for something like: “Parts of your question might go a bit too far beyond our topic for today, but one of your points raises something really neat ...” and then talk about something else.

11. Use concrete examples whenever possible, often from your own life. They don’t necessarily have to be true. (There is no Mrs. Pound).

12. Many good teachers self-medicate before class, especially if they suffer from anxiety. This is fine, so long as you’re careful with dosage.

[Thanks to Chaz Firestone for comments on an earlier version of this. Send any thoughts to paul.bloom@Yale.edu]

-- Paul Bloom