Prepping for Class and Communicating with Professors

Everyone has different comfort levels or thresholds when it comes to feeling sufficiently prepared to teach…BUT…there are a few things to know and remember when it comes to your class prep.

1. The first time through a class takes the longest in terms of preparation and generally isn’t a comfortable or smooth experience for any instructor. A new prep can have a big learning curve for you. So:
   a. Plan ahead and do the legwork in advance. Know when the heavy work weeks will occur during the semester—like the ones where you’ll be grading 150 essay tests or papers—and adjust your schedule accordingly. Try to avoid settling into a week-to-week prep routine. It’s much less time consuming to review notes you’ve already made, than to start your teaching plan from scratch every week. Work ahead when the load isn’t as heavy to save yourself trouble and time later.
   b. Take good notes and keep good records. Have an activity that works really well? Have a discussion question or group project that was a total bomb? Take a moment after you finish teaching to record a note to yourself about that for future reference. Once you’re a year out from that teaching experience, it’s unlikely you’ll remember exactly why an activity succeeded or failed and/or what you thought needed to change. Save yourself from having to re-invent the wheel (or crashing and burning) and keep track of your teaching successes and failures.
   c. Ask for help. There are lots of teaching veterans and award-winning instructors walking around who have already done what you’re doing. Take advantage of that!

2. Prep work will eat you up and spit you out…but only if you let it.
   a. Budget your prep time. Over-prepping may make you feel better in the short term, but you have other longer-term responsibilities that will suffer if you don’t strike an appropriate balance between prep and your other academic work.
   b. They (the students) don’t know that you don’t know, so don’t let them scare you into excessive prep. You need to have sufficient knowledge of the material to be an effective instructor but you don’t need to be prepared with an answer to every conceivable question that you think they may ask. Also, it’s really ok to say upfront that you don’t know the answer to a question. Use it as a teaching moment and get the students involved in solving the puzzle. See Jake’s info on assisting learning vs. teaching for a more nuanced look at this point.
   c. Pay attention and take notes in lecture. As a TA, odds are that you’ll be asked to it through the larger lecture periods. This is part of class prep! Lectures are often another run through the material. You have to be there anyway so pay attention and turn an arduous slog through an intro chapter into a skim. Although many good instructors will lecture outside the text, their lectures will hit the main themes in the material and point you in the direction you need to go in your recitation.
   d. You don’t have to do all the talking…and you shouldn’t! Build in class discussion, relevant guest speakers, videos, whatever fits into the material that you need to cover. Students love it and it’s a freebee for you.

For folks working as a teaching assistant for a supervising professor:

1. Communicate with your supervising professor early, often, and efficiently.
   a. Clarify expectations in advance. Make sure you understand the course syllabus, their overall objectives for the course, how they see recitation fitting in, what they expect the work flow to be for you.

Notes by Carly M. Jacobs
cjacobs@huskers.unl.edu
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b. *Defer when necessary (and convenient).* If a student has a question or compliant that isn’t directly related or able to be resolved by the syllabus, send them to the professor. You aren’t really in charge of the course and you don’t have the power to grant extensions or exceptions. So don’t even fret over it – send them to the person who can help them with what they need.

c. *Air problems early.* If you have a concern or worry, relaying that to the professor early rather than letting the problem compound over time will save you a lot of time and grief down the road.

2. Protect yourself…it’s one thing to assign work, it’s another thing to do it.

   a. *Keep track of your hours* so you can see where you’re spending your time and how much time you average per week doing work for the course. If it’s not a pretty sight, it may be time to seek input from your supervising professor.

   b. *Give realistic estimates of deadlines.* Take a look at your schedule and be reasonable when estimating when you’ll have a task completed. Don’t say you’ll have the 150 essays graded tomorrow if that won’t happen. It’s better to build in a few extra days at the outset rather than miss a deadline.

   c. *Practice saying no...nicely.* Your objective is to be a good teacher and TA but at some point you need to work on setting boundaries so you can do the work necessary to accomplish the ultimate goal of graduate school: finishing!

**Maintaining a Professional Presence in the Classroom**

Many new instructors worry about how they’ll do as the authority figure at the front of the class. How do you distinguish yourself from your students?

1. Part of this is related to your preparation (but can lead to over-preparation…see above).
   a. *Know your stuff but fess up if you don’t.*

2. Students don’t have to like you, and they shouldn’t all the time since occasionally you’ll have to ask them to do things that aren’t fun or pleasant. But, they should respect you regardless.

   a. *Always have a “so what” attached to assignments and lectures.* Avoid busywork and pointless exercises. Anything you assign should be intentional and be justified within the parameters of the course. It’s particularly helpful when you clarify how this affects them in the real world, beyond the bounds of the classroom. Don’t waste their time.

   b. *If you expect effort, give effort.* Don’t be a black hole for assignments and tests. If they have to put in the time writing a paper or doing the project, you need to be prepared to put in the time grading carefully and giving appropriate feedback.

   c. *Stop looking for friends in your students.* The individuals in your class are students first. Although many are likeable, wait to establish any relationship other than instructor/student until after the semester ends.

3. Look like you care: wear professional attire, abandon the hoodie sweatshirt, and throw away your Uggs.

   a. *Ladies, this means you especially.* Unfortunately, some guys seem to be able to get away with more variation in wardrobe without any adverse affects on their ability to command the attention of a class. Only some though…so guys, don’t automatically assume that you’re one of these few.
For women, it is tremendously helpful to wear dress clothes whenever you’re in the classroom and nicer casual clothes when you may encounter a student in the office. Full suits aren’t necessary—wear what you’d wear to an office. But, dressing a level or two above your students gives you an edge in terms of looking like you’re in charge. You can relax and swap out nice jeans for dress pants as the semester moves along, after the instructor/student relationship is solidly established. But start high on the dressed-up scale…don’t give them a reason to discount you the moment they lay eyes on you.

b. Not to be creepy, but I promise they’re looking at you. Think about this: you’re standing in front of a 25+ people for 50+ minutes several times a week. If you were them, what else would you be looking at? They notice what you wear and how you look, to the point that it shows up on teaching evaluations occasionally. Convey that you care by dressing like you care.

Motivating Your Students

Recitations aren’t generally worth a substantive portion of the overall course grade for a student. Often, new material introduced in recitation doesn’t tend to make it on the test. So how do you keep your attendance up and your students motivated?

1. Opt for carrots over sticks if at all possible.
   a. Use penalties sparingly. If you penalize a student for failing to turn in an assignment or inadequate in-class participation, you are essentially dealing with the problem of motivation after it’s too late. Also, overuse of penalties diminishes their overall effectiveness, especially if you have few real ways to have an impact to begin with (i.e. no real points associated with recitation). Set up penalties for really important assignments/deadlines but work hard with your students up front so that, if you’re lucky, it’s a non-issue.
   b. Enthusiasm and mutual respect works wonders. Make them want to work for you. Putting assignments in context and always giving them a “so what” helps with this. Also, excitement is contagious. Use your enthusiasm for the subject to your advantage.
   c. Food works, but not too often. This is a nice trick at the beginning of the semester when everyone is shy, or post midterm when everyone is tired. Tossing a mini candy bar at someone for answering a question gets attention quickly and makes participating fun and non-threatening. But, use this sparingly. The novelty wears off quickly.

2. Add value whenever possible.
   a. Don’t regurgitate lecture or the text. They already sat through it once, they don’t need it again. Find news articles or examples that you can tie back to lecture so they can get how the material applies to them. Let them know that this course is useful beyond filling a requirement or serving as a new and exciting place to nap. Convince them that it’s worth their while to get out of bed and come to recitation.
   b. Meet them halfway. Treat them like the adults they are. It hasn’t been that long since you’ve been in their shoes. If they know you’re working with and for them, they’ll work for you.

3. Have fun.
   a. Be willing to laugh at yourself. Your drawings on the board won’t always be fantastic. You will definitely misspell something on the board or in your slides. You will say something backwards or totally unintelligibly at some point. Don’t take yourself so seriously that you aren’t willing to
acknowledge some silliness or humor in the classroom. Just start over and try again after a good laugh.