

**GOV DEPARTMENT TEACHING ORIENTATION – FALL 2014**  
**PUTTING TOGETHER A SECTION**

You have arrived at your first substantive section: how do you make it a success? Putting together a good lesson plan and writing interesting and successful discussion questions is partly a matter of practice. But that doesn't mean there aren't best practices and tips that make the process easier. Below are some suggestions for successful lesson planning.

**1. BACKWARD DESIGN**

“Backward design” is a pedagogical tool where you start planning the lesson with two questions: What do I want the students to learn? How would I find out whether they have learned this?

An example of learning goals: “The students should be able to a) distinguish between a state, a regime and a government and b) define a social revolution. I can find out whether they have learned the concepts and are capable of applying them by observing them in a structured debate about the Arab Spring.”

Backward designs are useful because they force a consideration of priorities and help with a very common problem for beginner teachers: over-preparing. New TF's frequently over-prepare (both in terms of depth of reading and the length of lesson plans), out of fear that they will not be perceived as competent. (It's a common fear, but don't worry too much; to the students you are an authority.) You can use learning goals to split your section into time chunks with distinct goals. Then you can assign discussion questions and activities varying levels of “urgency”, allowing you to skip some if time does not allow you to cover everything. Having your priorities straight before class will save you from deciding “on the spot” what to skip, which is very hard to do.

**2. COMMUNICATE GOALS TO STUDENTS**

When you have a lesson plan, make sure to communicate it to your students. Start the section by outlining what you intend to do that day. Say what they should have learned by the end of the class. At the end of class, revisit the goals. Remind them what you did to reach the goals, and re-iterate the main take-away points. This may seem obvious or repetitive to you, but remember that you as the teacher have a birds-eye view that the students don't. It is surprisingly easy for students to miss the “point” of section unless it is summarized for them.

The advantage of the “birds-eye” view applies to more than just the lesson plan. One of your main advantages as a graduate student (even if you are teaching a course where the material is unfamiliar to you) is your ability to synthesize material and see the big picture. Help the students out with this. During discussions, take moments to briefly summarize where the debate is going. Create a framework for the students to put their ideas in

context. Entire sections can be very usefully designed around helping students understand how different authors and ideas “fit together”.

### **3. USING ACTIVITIES**

“Active learning” is a pedagogical tool whereby the students learn by engaging in activities (as opposed to listening to a lecture or going over definitions). It is highly effective – if deployed right. You should definitely try to incorporate activities into your classroom, but every activity should stem from a learning goal in your section design. In other words, the activity needs a clear take-away point.

In political science, common activities include assigned group debates, mock revolutions, illustrations of the collective action problem, mock trials, and of course “advising the president of hypothetical country X”.

Harvard has an initiative (started at the Government Department by Dustin Tingley and Leslie Finger) called ABL Connect (<http://ablconnect.harvard.edu/>). It is an online repository of active learning activities. You can search by activity type, learning goal type, or class code among other things.

### **4. TIPS ON MANAGING THE CLASSROOM**

#### **Get to know your students in the first week**

Learn and memorize their names as soon as you can. In addition to names-to-faces, it is useful to know a little bit more about your students. Some people use “get to know you” sheets that students fill in on the first day with details on where they are from, which House they are in, extracurriculars etc.

One very effective strategy to get to know your students is by having “get to know you” meetings in the first weeks of term. You might require that everyone sign up for a 10-minute office hour slot to come chat to you. You can use this as an opportunity to get to know your students better, solicit their input on and expectations for this class, and learn about how this course fits into their broader curricular and extracurricular interests. This is particularly useful in getting the students to feel more comfortable talking with/to you, and can often increase their sense of accountability in terms of preparing for class discussion.

#### **Help your students get to know each other**

Class flows better when the students are comfortable with each other. Make sure to have ice-breakers on the first day, and make use of name-games and/or name signs for the first couple of weeks. You could also strategically plan a small group exercise for one of the first few sections, to allow students to get comfortable with each other.

### **Encourage all students to speak**

Students can feel intimidated to speak up in class, but feel more engaged if they've had a chance to say something. If you have quiet students in class, try directing simpler questions explicitly to "someone who hasn't spoken yet". If your students submit reflections or discussion questions prior to class, you can call on a specific student in a non-intimidating way by saying "Sheila, I know you had an interesting observation/question about this reading, would you mind sharing it with us?". You can also use small group exercises, in which quiet students are more comfortable speaking. If the same four people always end up being the "spokespeople" for the results of their group, you can explicitly request that this role should circulate.

### **Write different types of questions**

See handout for some different types of questions. Invitational questions are less intimidating to students than inquisitorial questions: asking a question that is framed as having a single right answer often discourages students from venturing an answer, for fear of answering incorrectly. "What do you think about X" type questions are better than "What is..." type questions.

### **Correcting students**

Sometimes, however, it is necessary to ask questions that have a right and a wrong answer. There are certain facts or arguments that you will want to ensure the entire section understands correctly and clearly. Even so, the way you phrase such questions and your responses to incorrect answers is crucial in making students more at ease with providing a wrong answer, or even guessing. It's important that you do indicate that the answer is incorrect, in order for students to have the correct answers/information ~ don't avoid correction. There is no one right way to deal with incorrect answers, and it will often depend on the atmosphere of the discussion. Some potential methods include directing the question back to other students ("Do you agree with X that the answer is Y?"; "Did everybody have the same interpretation/reading of this argument?"; etc.). Sometimes you can provide the correct answer yourself ~ one way to do this would be to say "I can see why you would say/think that...let's go back to the reading/text and work through this argument again to really answer this question fully" ~ then walk them through to the right answer, or provide a more thorough explanation of why the correct answer is the right one. Often this technique works better during the beginning of the semester when you have less of a sense of the section dynamics and the students' strengths in terms of comprehension and preparation. The former technique works better once the students are more comfortable challenging each other.

### **Maintaining authority as an expert**

I mention this more because new TF's tend to worry about it, not so much because it tends to be an issue from the students' perspective. If you are worried about whether the students will think of you as an expert, know that they probably will. One way to contribute to this is to thoroughly explain your research interests on the first day. Students then realize that you are an expert in something that may or may not be related to the particular topic of the course. Most importantly, don't be afraid to say you don't know ~ it's better to recognize explicitly that a student has asked a good or a hard

question that pushes the limits of your knowledge about a topic. So say this, rather than trying to come up with an answer that you only think may be right. You might venture some conjecture to answer the question, invite their thoughts on what they think the answer is, and then offer to find out the answer and follow up with them. That being said, you should still prepare the material well ~ if a course completely new to you, do read 1-2 weeks ahead. Students can tell if you haven't prepped at all, or haven't prepped thoroughly.

## **5. WHAT TO DO IF...**

### **You realize that students haven't done the reading ~**

- Stress from day one the importance of the readings for class discussion (and the grade!)
- Ask students to bring the texts to class, read (aloud) short passages in section, then ask students to comment on them. Note that this requires you to identify a few key passages before class!
- Ask students to volunteer to summarize and explain key concepts (or summarize them yourself) and build class discussion on these
- Ask questions that can be answered without the readings, but which still relate to the concepts you would like to teach
- Organize an in-class exercise / debate / small-group discussion
- If possible, make sure reading assignments are reasonable, or identify the key pages they should read carefully (but be careful as students might take this as an invitation to not do the remainder of the reading).
- Last resort: cold call random students. While students seem to really dislike this method, it will force them to come prepared.

### **Conversation is dominated by one or more students ~**

- Ensuring that discussion is not dominated by one or two students requires that you firmly direct discussion. This may require you to respond to hands out of order, allowing those who haven't spoken much to speak before those who tend to dominate discussion.
- If you have a 'talker,' explicitly say that you would like to hear a contribution from someone who has not talked yet. If that does not work, meet with them outside of class and explain that you appreciate how active they are, but that they may sometimes prevent others from participating in the discussion.
- Set a rule that everyone should speak at least once in each class; this applies primarily to small sections

### **You have a 'contentious student' ~**

- Set a standard of mutual respect in the classroom from the first day of section (put this in a handout if need be)
- Keep your cool and remain impartial (don't pit students against each other)

- Try to dissipate tension by acknowledging that it is a sensitive topic on which no agreement can be reached and / or changing the topic
- If none of the above works, meet with the contentious students outside of class and explain that you appreciate that they challenge the other students' arguments, but that they may be hindering the progress of class discussion and / or offending other students

**You have a constant Facebooker / Tweeter / G-chatter ~**

- Set clear rules about using laptops in the classrooms (you may even forbid them, though students generally prefer to do the readings/take notes on their laptops)
- Clearly state the importance of section participation (and of paying attention to the discussion instead of mechanically typing notes)
- Try to walk around/behind students from time to time
- If discussion seems to particularly lag in one week because of the allure of screens, you can ask everyone to close their laptops for that session. (This works best if you have mentioned in first section/section syllabus that you might take this measure.) This can revive the session and reduce facebooking in future sessions.

**You are boring half the students and confusing the other half ~**

- This might occur in courses for which prior/background knowledge is useful, but not required, and sharply differentiates students with different backgrounds (e.g. statistics for social science).
- Conduct midterm evaluations to assess the rhythm and usefulness of section
- Encourage students to help each other and explain things to each other in class
- Create optional / "extra discussion credit" exercises

**You just 'don't know' ~**

- Admit that you do not know and *do not make something up*.
- Ask the class – perhaps someone knows!
- Ask a student to Google the answer
- Promise students you will get back to them (and follow up!)
- Keep your cool – students will not judge you for an occasional knowledge gap.

**You suspect a student is lying about homework or attendance (or plagiarizing) ~**

- Grade them based on the evidence you have and accept documented excuses only (set clear standards for these from day one)
- Insist when it is possible and non-intrusive (e.g. if someone claims having emailed an assignment that never reached you, simply re-check your inbox, then ask them to forward that email ASAP so that you can check the time stamp for time-sensitive assignments)
- Set up a Dropbox for assignments on the course website

- If the suspected lying persists, nicely explain to the student that you are concerned about his / her approach to the class and offer to help him / her with any issues they may have
- If this does not work, contact their resident dean.
- Explain the plagiarism policy from day one (e.g. when collaborating on assignments is and is not allowed); if plagiarism is suspected, discuss with the course head

**You have a regular no-show ~**

- Email them (several times, if needed) politely explaining why it is important to attend section (especially if participation is graded) and asking if they have any issues you can help with
- If they do not respond, contact their resident dean.

**6. EVALUATIONS AND IMPROVEMENT**

**Midterm evaluations**

Midterm evaluations help you find out whether the section is functioning well. It is better to do midterm evaluations early than late: after enough time has passed that the section is established, but when there is still enough time to make changes. 5-6 weeks into term can be a good time to do them.

The format of a midterm evaluation can be the same as the Q evaluations, or different. You can write your own if there is something you wonder about. Two attached evaluation forms illustrate different approaches. The “Keep, Quit, Start” sheet tends to produce honest and open-ended answers that are not constrained to a specific type of activity or given question.

Remember that in a section of mixed abilities and students, you cannot please everyone. If most students tell you that you need to speak up, you probably should try to do it. If half say there is too much discussion and half say there is too little, you are probably getting the balance roughly right.

Even if the results of the midterm evaluations do not speak in one uniform voice, you can use this as a moment to reflect on the section with the class. Summarize the results of the evaluations for them. If there is something that you won't be changing, tell them why. If you, as a student, think that pinning down definitions is tedious, finding out that most of your fellow students actually appreciate it, can change the attitude.

**Videotaping**

You can get your section videotaped for a later viewing with the DTF, a Bok Center consultant, or a fellow teacher whose judgment you trust. This is a tool that most people

find cringe-inducing to think about at first, so don't shy away if that was your first reaction! Those who do it tend to find it *very* helpful. Contact the DTF to set this up. Viewings are confidential.

### **Bok Center Courses**

The Bok Center for learning and teaching provides workshops and courses for Teaching Fellows on a variety of pedagogical topics. If you are interested in sending the signal of being a committed teacher, you can opt to take several courses and get a Teacher Certificate. See <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/> for more details.