

Ideas for Teaching Unfamiliar or Unpopular Courses

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Teaching a course for the first time and teaching courses in which students often find the content uninspiring create both opportunities and challenges. Student evaluations of first-time teaching efforts are seldom flagged as such. They carry the same summative weight as courses one teaches routinely. And although some instructional evaluation instruments ask about student effort and interest, these data are not used to adjust ratings. Faculty members may find these realities sobering. In this chapter, I discuss each teaching context briefly and offer ideas for effectively confronting related challenges.

Teaching Unfamiliar Courses

New course preparations are part and parcel of new faculty members' lives. These experiences provide new faculty with vital opportunities to develop and hone effective teaching practices. Even after many years of teaching experience, however, circumstances may arise that can draw any of us into - or back into - this potential discomfort zone. Especially problematic situations occur when the course one is asked to teach is not squarely within one's sphere of competence.

The sudden and late-breaking unavailability of a particular faculty member to teach a particular course often forces academic administrators to choose the least problematic path from among several problematic options. As a result, clinical psychologists may be pressed into teaching a "required" physiological psychology course with a lead-time of one week (Ford, 2006). Keith-Spiegel, Whitley, Ware Balogh, Perkins, and Wittig (2002) presented an alternative and equally credible scenario involving a faculty member with no clinical training who wishes to teach a course in behavior disorders. In all such circumstances, ethical ramifications must be addressed - after all, it is unethical for faculty members to teach courses that are not within the scope of their competence (American Counseling Association, 2005; American Psychological Association, 2002).

At the very beginning of any semester, that which is unknown about the upcoming 15 weeks looms large and, to this day, stirs butterflies in my stomach. Standing before students on the first day of class, I often find myself wishing I could advance the clock about 3 weeks hence. When the course is one that I have not taught previously, and especially when it is one that I feel is on the periphery of my sphere of competence, I feel unsettled well into (and sometimes throughout) the semester. Assuming I am not alone in these reactions, it follows that one's visceral reaction to being pressed into teaching beyond one's comfort zone is related to one's degree of familiarity, interest, and relevant experience. Courses for which one lacks relevant experience or interest feel foreign to us, and requests to prepare a new course in such areas may feel more like an invitation to fail.

Ideas and Recommendations for Teaching an Unfamiliar (or New) Course

In teaching an unfamiliar course, it is crucial to be optimistic and to recognize that it may behoove you to get this course within your bailiwick. In doing so, you may endear yourself to the powers that be not only by teaching it, but also by teaching it very well and without complaint. Approach the course with the idea that you likely will teach it again soon. Whatever circumstances prompted your assignment to teach it this time around may well continue to exist. The ability of the department chair to secure coverage for courses depends on several factors, many that are beyond his or her direct control - for example, the availability of part-time faculty members or the funds to pay them, the degree of specialization required to teach the orphaned course, and the likelihood of filling a vacancy if and when a search is opened.

Early on, you should ascertain the degree of flexibility regarding course content, text selection, and course requirements, and act to modify these elements to better suit your repertoire. Be sure to consider how the course fits within the program: Is it required outright? Does it serve as a preparatory or prerequisite course for other courses? It is also important to gauge students' expectations and assessment of the course. Talk to former students to understand how students view the class, as far as its value in preparing them for additional experiences, such as fieldwork or the Graduate Record Examinations.

In order to know your audience more fully, it is advisable to obtain the previous syllabus as well as syllabi from courses that serve as prerequisites for it and those for which this course serves as a prerequisite. Doing so provides a more complete picture of students' abilities and prior experiences, as well as the degree of uniformity of their backgrounds. In addition, you might seek out other course syllabi from reputable sources such as the web pages of Project Syllabus (go to <http://teachpsych.org/>), developed and maintained by the Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP), which offer over 100 peer-reviewed syllabi in psychology.

It may be helpful to schedule a few respite sessions during the semester, by identifying sessions where you have (or can imagine having) a solid, safe, or even "fun" topic and/or activity (e.g., guest speaker, relevant film, student debates, activities you have developed that are applicable to the new course). Distributing these across the semester will give you safe haven from time to time, and will allow you to develop material for the intervening weeks accordingly.

Across many teaching challenges, it is vital to identify and use one's resources well. For teaching unfamiliar courses, this process may begin with a recollection of your first-hand experiences that relate to the course content. Be willing to reframe some experiences in order to make them applicable to the new course. For example, I have taught a number of courses related to assessment in which I have drawn upon my experiences administering tests in school and clinical settings. Were I asked to teach a course in interviewing techniques, I would seek to draw upon the interpersonal aspects of conducting such assessments in order to elicit information, as formal tests represent highly structured interviews. It is also important to talk to colleagues, face to face or electronically, perhaps by using OTRP's Mentoring Service. The Service offers self-directed, confidential mentoring on a large variety of academic topics, as well as 49 specific courses for which mentoring is available.

Teaching Unloved Courses

A second kind of experience that often puts me out of my comfort zone is teaching courses for which students lack enthusiasm. Some courses are easy to love for the majority of students, but some are not. For students who yearn to be practitioners of any kind, courses with a fair amount of clinical content are generally appealing. Those without it, far less so.

For about the first 10 years of my academic career, I taught courses in Research Methods to Master's degree-seeking students in applied areas of psychology (i.e., counseling, school psychology, and marriage and family therapy [MFT]). Every semester, students wondered aloud why this course was required in their programs of study. They were not required to do a Master's thesis, and almost never saw themselves as becoming involved in research down the line. A few were mollified by my mentioning that, as practitioners, they would be ethically obligated to remain current as far as research findings bearing on their areas of practice. Others recognized that the course content was featured prominently on the departmental comprehensive examination that loomed in their future. On their end-of-semester course evaluations, many students reminded whoever might read their words that they had not looked forward to the course. Some admitted that they had outright dreaded it. Most then proceeded to deliver a backhanded compliment such as, "this course was better than I thought it would be," or "it was a lot of work, but I learned a great deal."

Other courses that seem to fall in the less popular category are those involving statistics. In her 1995 Presidential Address to the Northeastern Educational Research Association, Schmelkin stated, "...[I]f you want to get a flavor of how most people feel about statistics, I suggest that the next time you are asked at a social gathering what you teach, tell people you teach statistics..." (p. 4). Schmelkin routinely seizes these opportunities to begin to demonstrate the relevance of her subject matter, and its reliance on logic and critical thinking, which are far more appealing than numbers to many students.

Ideas and Recommendations for Teaching an Unloved (or Unpopular) Course

When teaching unloved content, it is essential to address student concerns immediately and to respond to the entire group whenever it seems even remotely appropriate to do so. It may appear that only one or two students are seriously misinformed or somewhat antagonistic regarding course content or requirements, because perhaps only one or two students bring an issue squarely before you. However, I have found that students often put their "best representatives" forward to carry the concerns of the large group to their instructors. This practice seems to be especially true in unloved courses. When discussing the concern with the entire class, try to avoid identifying individual students by simply noting that "whatever" has come to your attention as an issue that needs clarification or additional attention. This approach opens (or keeps open) direct lines of communication with all students.

In teaching such courses, be sympathetic about student concerns. It probably has been a while since you experienced your "least favorite" course, but we all had one or more. My least favorite undergraduate course was a psychology course. I deem it my least favorite because of the faculty member's actions, not the course content, per se. Try to remember the feelings you had during your least favorite course (e.g., frustration, annoyance, confusion, uncertainty, fear) when listening to your students today.

Most programs in psychology require students to take one or more courses in behavioral statistics, rather than general or mathematical statistics. Why? Because the content is organized and presented in a manner that emphasizes behavioral science applications of statistical principles. In other words, the content is made relevant to psychology. The same idea should permeate our teaching of unpopular course content: Make the content relevant to students' goals and values. In teaching Research Methods to students in a MFT program, for example, I used examples involving family adaptability and cohesion, which was a prominent area of interest for students in the program.

Perhaps the most important element in teaching unloved courses has to do with our expectations of students. We should expect students to succeed and let them know that we expect them to succeed. It is unreasonable to equate success with some kind of "conversion" to your way of viewing the subject matter. Rather, one should respect students' preferences and help them to appreciate the value of the subject matter at hand with reference to their aspirations.

Summary

One overall theme that undergirds the recommendations for teaching unfamiliar or unloved courses is to know and exploit one's resources. The term "resources" should be interpreted broadly, to include one's personal strengths, attributes, experiences, and creativity, as well as those of others upon whom one may draw directly or indirectly. A second theme relates to early and ongoing collection of relevant information, from multiples sources (e.g., colleagues, students, mentors, institutional records and files, and so forth). I hope these general strategies and the specific techniques spelled out herein will improve instruction of new or unpopular courses in psychology.

References

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