

Ten Ways to Make Your Teaching More Effective

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

You're not the most important person in the room.

Remember that the members of the audience (your students) are supposed to be the beneficiaries of your communication.

Don't make too many assumptions about your audience. But you do have to make some.

Figure out the basics.

Who are these people?

- demographics (age, ethnicity, gender mix, etc.).
- predispositions (hopes, fears, positives/negatives, level of interest).
- knowledge of/experience with subject/me.

In what kind of setting will they receive this information?

- large lecture hall or small seminar room or classroom.
- lighting and sound issues.
- time of day.

Take into account the "me, here, now."

- Picture yourself as a member of the audience and ask "How does this message affect me, here, now?"
- Me, here, now translates into what you as a sender have to offer your students/receivers—what they will be able to understand, accept, support, consider important—because it matters to them.

Establish cognitive / behavioral objectives for your audience:

- What do I want my students to *know*?
- What do I want my students to *do*?

THE FIRST DAY, OPENINGS, AND CLOSINGS

Don't waste key "windows" of time on housekeeping alone.

THE FIRST DAY. Most teachers use the first day to get housekeeping out of the way--office hours, expectations, administrative details. Instead, summarize most of that need-to-have information on paper and distribute it. Then use the time to:

- **Introduce content**--and relate why it's important to you
- **Clarify your objectives** for students (cognitive and behavioral).
- **Establish tone and expectations**--yours of them, theirs of you.

OPENINGS. Stay away from the predictable (Good morning. On Monday, we talked about . . . , Today, I'd like to move onto . . .). Instead:

- **Begin with a provocative question, anecdote, or current event**--and how it relates to the content.
- **Ask someone in the class to summarize what happened in the last session.**
- **Use a question box**--select the most interesting/difficult questions and address those.
- **Set up a problem**--and promise that they'll have all the tools for a solution by the end of the class.

CLOSINGS. Many teachers simply talk until the end of the class--and say, "See you next time." Instead:

- **Plan a rhythm for your class**—plan to end with content 5 minutes early, so you can summarize, raise questions, preview the next topic.
- **Set aside a time for questions**—and structure that time.
- **Frame/suggest an approach for assigned reading, etc.**--"As you read the assigned text, please keep in mind these three key questions we'll be discussing next time. . . ."

PREPARATION

You probably can't cover everything you want to in a lecture.

Decide what is essential, what is important, and what is helpful (what would be nice).

- Cover the first; try to cover the second; forget about the third.
- Release a little control over the material and rely on the textbook or a list of supplementary readings for the nonessentials.

Set objectives.

- What do you want to have accomplished at the end of the lecture?
- What do you want the students to know at the end of the lecture?

Plan a lecture to cover less than the entire period.

- It takes some time to get going.
- Questions always take up more time than you expect.

Divide the lecture into discrete segments and follow the standard speech structure.

- Divide it both in terms of time and in terms of material.
- Try for ten or fifteen minute blocks, each one of a topic.
- Briefly summarize the previous lecture; introduce the topic(s) for the day; present the material; summarize briefly; preview any homework and the next lecture.

Lecture from notes or an outline, rather than a complete text.

- It's too tempting to simply read, rather than lecture, from a complete text.
- Reading also creates a barrier between lecturer and audience.
- Writing up an entire lecture is very time consuming.
- A written lecture often becomes a fossil that never gets updated.

DELIVERY

The "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" Rule. Practice, Practice, Practice.

Be conversational; speak naturally; be yourself (or your best self).

- That self may be formal, "laid back," understated, or hyper. Use those traits; don't fight against them.
- Talk about the material; don't lecture about it. (Talking is easier if you don't read verbatim.)

Vary your pacing and voice.

- Gauge audience reaction, and
- Repeat critical points immediately if you sense the necessity.
- Use your voice to underline and italicize the important points.
- Pause before new points.
- Use transitional statements to move to the next idea.

Use gestures to emphasize points.

- Consider gestures to be a mirror of your voice.
- Adjust your gestures to the size of the room.

Look at the audience.

- Try to cover all parts of the room by dividing it into four quadrants.
- If direct eye contact makes you forget your place, try looking just over a student's head, or between two students (They won't see the difference).

Use language to create pictures.

- Use metaphors, analogies, and similes.

Observe the techniques of others.

- Try out in your own class techniques you admire in others.
- Like any skill, delivery is not innate, but must be learned.

CREDIBILITY & COMMITMENT

You are the most important person in the room.

Although teaching isn't theater, we do know that students find concepts, knowledge, skills, and ideas most accessible and credible from someone they consider . . . well, not dull.

Think about antecedent image--perception is often stronger than reality.

Credibility is enhanced by:

- Your own sense of comfort and confidence presenting material.
- Your enthusiasm and interest in teaching.
- Your research and own ideas.

Commitment is enhanced by:

- Relating your own experience, ideas, and feelings.
- Taking the first person approach, not separating yourself from your subject.
- Relating your "passion" for your subject.

Delivery is tied to both commitment and credibility:

An old UCLA study of effective presentations analyzed 3 elements (verbal, vocal, visual). Here's what it found was important in establishing credibility/believability:

- Verbal (words you say): 7%.
- Vocal (how you sound when you say them): 38%.
- Visual (how you look when you say them): 55%.

Your energy and intensity will move your audience—and help you (them) reach your objectives.

BUILDING INTERACTION

Learning is not a spectator sport.

Learning takes place best in an active, not a passive environment.

Interaction is a continuous way to

- Assess the *me, here, now*.
- Determine whether or not your content is understood.
- Share the responsibility of learning more equitably and appropriately.

How to build interaction?

- Have questions prepared--begin with relatively easy, accessible ones.
- Set up hypotheticals, problem-solving exercises, brainstorming.
- Work to get everyone involved, even in large classes.

Ask students to consider issues with the person sitting next to them/jot down ideas, questions, concerns. Discuss as a larger group. Assign teams to work together on presenting mini-lectures or case studies. Clearly establish expectations about participation. Establish a question box—and reward team and/or individual with best question of the week or month.

Move yourself!

- Begin class from somewhere besides the front; invite students to consider the issue on board with you, so that you're looking at the board with them. That telegraphs your expectation that learning is a joint experience.

CHALKBOARDS

(and other high tech media)

If your handwriting is really terrible, perhaps you should go to med school.

Use the board (slides/overheads) to reinforce your points visually.

- Saying it and showing it can often forestall your having to repeat.
- Use visuals to outline your lecture for the class.

If you have a great deal of boardwork,

- Consider having most of it put on the board before class.
- Make a copy of it as a handout.
- Consider using an overhead projector.

Don't talk while you write.

- (Unless you can contort your body so that you're more or less facing the class.)
- Students lose most of your words when they're spoken to the board.
- This holds true for using a pointer. Point, then speak, unless you are already facing the class.

Limit the amount of material you put on a slide or overhead.

- The page you are reading at this moment probably contains more than the maximum you should use.

Have a plan for your boardwork.

- Research has shown that the most prominent part of a chalkboard is the upper left-hand corner, so you might start there.
- Remember that some students might not be able to see material written on the very bottom of the board.

•Remember: all visuals are supplements or complements, not substitutes.

HANDLING QUESTIONS

It's hard to answer a good question--and even harder to pose one.

Explicitly request and encourage questions.

- Students will see that you have a genuine interest in what they're thinking.

Be aware of how your behavior and comments can set the tone for questioning.

- A negative response (e.g., "We've already covered that") discourages further questions and may make students think you don't really want questions.

Make sure everyone hears the question.

- Repeat it if necessary.
- But don't make a habit of simply repeating every question. It begins to sound like you, rather than the students.
- Ask the class if they heard the question; then ask the student to repeat.

Clarify questions.

- Say, "Do you mean that . . . ," or "I'm sorry, I don't understand the question," rather than "Your question isn't clear."

Answer questions as directly as possible.

- Address your answer to the whole class.
- Ask whether you have answered the question.

Be diplomatic when students raise tangential, overly-complicated questions, or persistently ask questions just to be asking.

- Ask them to stop by after class or see you in office hours.
- If a student is simply confused, say, "Let me go over this point a bit more slowly."

GETTING FEEDBACK

By the time you get end-of-term evaluations, it's too late.

Get regular feedback.

- Ask students to spend the last five minutes of class writing down the most important thing they learned that day or one question they have as a result of the lecture.
- Answer the questions at the beginning of the next class.

Use eye contact as a tool for continuous feedback.

- If you notice students with questioning looks, stop what you're doing and ask if you need to clarify.
- If you get no response, go ahead and clarify.

Conduct a midterm course review.

- Develop your own short questionnaire, or
- Hand out 3x5 cards.
- Be as general or specific as you need to be: "What is going well?" "What is the most important thing you have learned?" "What would you like to see more of?" "Should we spend more time on arachnids?"
- Discuss the results with your class.

Borrow students' class notes from time to time.

- Alert them on the first day of class that you'll be doing this and why.
- You'll see how well students are understanding.
- Looking at several different students' notes will also tell you whether you are making a particular point clear.
- It can also enable you to see who is having trouble.

Arrange to have your lecture videotaped.

- You can view it yourself or with a consultant who can discuss it with you.

TESTS and GRADES

Poor answers are often the result of poor questions, not poor minds.

Decide what your goal in testing is.

- Do you want students to regurgitate material? to synthesize? to be able to go beyond it?

Consider the format of questions.

- In short answer and essay questions, separate out any background material or suggestions from the question itself by double spacing between them.
- Try to ask only one question at a time: not "How did people react to The Origin of Species? Why did they react the way they did? How has that reaction changed over time?" Pick the one that is most important to you (e.g., "How has people's reaction to . . . changed over time?")

Consider the format of the exam as a whole.

- If it gets progressively harder, do the students know that in advance?
- Make the first question one you expect everyone to be able to answer.

Take your own test, give it to your GSIs to take, or show it to a colleague.

- For essay and short answer tests, write out sample answers.
- These samples will give you something against which to compare students' answers
- The samples will allow you to see if your questions are answerable in the allotted time.
- For multiple choice, true/false, and problem set exams, ask your GSIs to take them as a check of their "do-ability."

Make your grading and testing policies clear on the first day of class.