Preparing for Class

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Pre-Planning

Pre-planning is the stage in which you develop (or refine if you have taught the course before) an overall picture of how you would like the course to operate and what experiences you hope to provide for your students. If you have taught the course before, this is a time to reflect on what you learned last semester and to contemplate what new instructional strategies you might want to try. If this is the first time you have taught this course, especially if you are new to the institution, there is a great deal that you can do in terms of preliminary fact-finding that will increase your chances for a successful first semester.

1. Talk to Previous Instructors and Students
   The concise catalog description is often the last place that students go to learn what to expect from your course; in reality, it is the informal student-to-student advising network where much of the real information is transmitted about courses. Therefore, you should learn all you can about how the course has been run in the recent past and, just as important, you should endeavor to find out what the students are saying about your course. You do not want to find out two weeks into the course that the class GPA last semester was 3.6 and that students often scheduled other classes at the same time as the lectures because the course culture was, “All you need to do to get an A is to read the book the night before the exam.” Although this is not an ideal situation in which to begin, it is better to know of this reputation up front so that you can deal with it. If you are faced with this situation—and assuming you think it should change—there is no simple answer: If you do decide to make a drastic change in the course’s expectations right away, it will lead to tremendous student dissatisfaction and will show up negatively on your end of course evaluations. Such a situation makes it imperative that you talk over any radical changes in advance with your department head, and perhaps even your dean, to ensure that you will get the support you need if students complain.

2. Find Out Why Students Will Be Taking Your Course
   The first important thing to know is whether your course is part of the university’s core curriculum—called CORE 2.0. If it is, then you should talk to other faculty members, ask the your department head to review the documentation that was submitted to get the course approved, and contact the members of the faculty steering committee related to the core area for your course.

   Beyond general education requirements, there are other elements in students’ curricular requirements that could direct them into your course (e.g., additional science requirements for engineering, computer science, or pre-service education majors) and it is important to understand these before planning your course if you wish to try to make your course relevant to the students. Even if the course is specifically designed for majors, it is important to know whether it is a course required of all majors or if it is an elective course within the major.

1 However, if your first semester is not successful, don’t get too discouraged. Even the most celebrated teachers often tell of horrible experiences when teaching a class for the first time, especially at a new institution.
Find out what resources you will have

The degree of support (graders, teaching assistants, demonstration setup, audiovisual, etc.) provided to instructors varies tremendously and can have a profound effect on how you plan your course. You might wish to assign term papers but, without grading assistance, you may be forced to abandon this idea in favor of less labor-intensive assessments. Or, you might decide that student writing is so important that you approach your department head about increasing your grading support for what you see as a critical course component. One approach to dealing with this that is far too often overlooked in departments with graduate programs (and therefore a history of using graduate students as teaching assistants and graders) is to pay undergraduates to grade for you. Undergraduates are typically paid significantly less than graduate students and, by selecting your top students from previous semesters, you can often acquire high-quality help. Additionally, as part of their student aid, some students have work-study support, which greatly reduces the direct costs to you.

Developing an Instructional Plan

An excellent place to start is to write down your three or four most important learning goals for the course (i.e., how do you want the students to be different as a result of taking your course?) Having these goals firmly in place will help you make decisions about what to and what not to include as you craft your instructional plan. The key elements that define your course and on which decisions must be made are as follows:

- the sequence of topics that you plan to teach (including specific learning objectives)
- your in-class strategies for teaching each of these topics
- the additional requirements that students will be expected to complete outside of class time (writing assignments, homework, reading, etc.)
- the methods you will use to assess their learning for the purpose of assigning a grade

Schedule of Topics

Your syllabus should provide an outline of the topics to be covered and a schedule. At a minimum, I recommend listing the order in which the topics will be taught and, if possible, I suggest listing the weeks (or even days) on which the topics will be covered. The specificity of your schedule involves some real tradeoffs that you need to consider. Students appreciate knowing that on November 18 they will be learning about the solar cycle (and often think of a syllabus as nothing but a course schedule). However, once this level of specificity is supplied, it is important to stick to it, which really limits your flexibility to make adjustments. Generally, I suggest offering a less specific schedule (maybe even just an ordered list of topics) until you have enough experience to predict with some degree of certainty what the schedule will be. If you do not provide a detailed schedule in advance, a complete listing of dates, topics, learning objectives, and text references is easily listed on a Web site after the fact and then can serve to inform a more complete schedule next year.

In-Class Teaching Strategies

Your decisions about instructional practices will affect your syllabus in many ways. At the very least, the methods you select to teach your objectives will impact course scheduling; there is always a tension between the desire to cover the material, which is done most quickly in lecture mode, and the desire to provide students alternative learning experiences to promote deep learning, which almost always require a larger allocation of time. An understanding of what topics you can reasonably expect to teach in the time you have and how various teaching strategies will affect your schedule are things that develop with experience. Beyond impacts on your schedule, it is important for you to explain to your students the teaching strategies you will be using, your rationale for using them, and the resulting expectations for your students. All too often, students feel that their only job is to come to class and copy down what they must then learn—an expectation too often confirmed by experience. To move them away from this
passive view, it is important to communicate your expectations repeatedly by explaining their responsibilities and your role in helping them learn; the syllabus is a great place to begin this.

**Out-of-Class Activities**

If you have scheduled activities that take place outside of regular class time—especially ones for which students might have to arrange time off work to attend, such as film screenings, museum visits, or group projects—these should be listed in the syllabus and repeatedly drawn to students’ attention. I have found it difficult in large classes to schedule required activities in the evenings because so many students have legitimate conflicts such as work, childcare, and long drives. In particular, after-hours requirements preferentially have a negative impact on nontraditional students.

Whether or not to assign homework, or what type of homework, is a decision that is likely to depend on your class enrollment and grading resources (including your own limited time). In many classes, homework would ideally be assigned at each class meeting and collected at the next, thus providing incentive for students to engage consistently in the material within a few days of class, which greatly enhances retention. However, with large classes this is often impractical. One way to provide incentive, although not as much feedback, is to assign homework but collect it randomly based on, for instance, the chance roll of a die.

An even more resource-intensive activity is collecting and grading student writing. The tradition of collecting student writing varies tremendously across disciplines—in some disciplines it happens only rarely in upper-division course whereas in others it is regular part of all courses beginning in the freshman year. Even where it is not perceived as a required element of the course, many faculty recognize the value writing has in helping students develop an important skill, and in contributing significantly to student learning. However, because of the tremendous amount of work involved in providing thoughtful and timely feedback, many other faculty avoid this completely. A detailed discussion of strategies for successful use of student writing is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in seeking assistance, a good place to start would be to talk to the Director of Composition, housed in the Department of English.

The most potentially time consuming, and also potentially rewarding, out-of-class activity is some form of term project, which can take a variety of forms as appropriate to the level of course and the subject. The most straightforward project is to require a term paper that students complete based on library and Internet research. You should require that it be typed, specify a page or word count requirement, and require a minimum number of resources that must be cited. You should also make clear your expectations of the quality of writing you will accept.

Instead of asking students to communicate results in a written document, many faculty, especially in the sciences, find it much more rewarding for everyone involved to sponsor a poster session in which results are shared much like at a professional meeting. Such a format encourages creativity and the use of images, allows more naturally for group projects (thus reducing grading time), and encourages students to become more personally invested in their projects because they will be displayed publicly. I suggest that you arrange to have a large room set aside, perhaps in the student union, and invite colleagues and other students to view the projects and perhaps participate in the grading or even giving awards by interviewing the presenters. Consider having students submit an abstract via e-mail well ahead of the “meeting” and publish a program. The campus newspaper staff will often help with advertising and coverage.

**Determining Grades**

For many students, the most important information conveyed on a syllabus is the statement defining how grades will be determined. All too often, students perceive grading as a magical process that they don’t understand and one that encourages competition because grading on a curve means the failure of others is as important as personal success. I recommend making your process for determining student grades as simple and transparent as possible and routinely reviewing how the various course elements affect final grades.
If you are new to MSU, begin by reviewing the grading policies, which you will find in the MSU Bulletin (generally referred to on campus as “the catalog”). You will find some specific requirements regarding how you assign grades, but you will also find that there is a great deal that is left to your discretion. At MSU, the grades you may assign are F, D, D+, C-, C, C+, B-, B, B+, A-, or A; however, you are not required to use plus and minus grades. A passing grade is nominally an F, but many programs require higher grades in specific courses, and call core courses requirements must be satisfied with grades of C- or better. In some cases, it is also appropriate to assign an incomplete (I) grade, but this is normally initiated by the student and requires additional documentation. It is also important to know that you will be asked to report the last day of attendance (to the best of your ability) for all students receiving an F who did not attend the final exam. I suggest that a good first step in developing your own grading policies to talk to several experienced colleagues, especially those with experience teaching courses similar to yours, to learn something about common practices and student expectations.

The most important decision to make regarding your grading policy is whether or not to “grade on a curve” (called norm-referenced grading) or according to some predetermined scale (called criterion-referenced grading). I strongly advocate that you avoid norm-referenced grading (e.g., stating that only the top 10% of the class will receive an A) because of the loss of a sense of personal control this creates in students—their grade is now affected as much by the performance of others as by the quality of their own work. Although less well-defined, telling students that you will assign numerical grades for now and determine the letter-grade cutoffs at the end also seems arbitrary and out of the students’ control. Ideally, you should contract with students on the syllabus what minimum score (percentage or total number of points) will earn them each grade and they should know how the various course elements contribute to that grade. Of course, you can always choose at the end to lower the minimum required scores if, for instance, you think that you underestimated the difficulty of the final exam. I strongly suggest you make grade modifications only at the end of the term and avoid making scoring modifications to each exam (e.g., add 5 points to every test score).

The Actual Document

Your course syllabus unquestionably contributes to students’ overall first and lasting impressions of the course and fundamentally affects the tone of your course. It is important that your syllabus convey a sense of excitement (and hope for success in traditionally intimidating courses) instead of simply a list of rules and regulations. It is worthwhile asking some trusted students to review your syllabus because the overall tone that it conveys may be difficult for you to judge.

There is some basic information that any syllabus should contain:

- Course name and number
- Your name, office location, phone number, and e-mail
- Scheduled office hours
- Policies regarding your availability outside of office hours
- Prerequisite courses or skills
- Required purchases such as textbooks, study guides, and calculators
- Policy on using or having access to calculators, personal digital assistants (PDAs), Internet, and so on
- Detailed description of how grades are determined
- Descriptions and goals of assignments and tests
- Dates, times, and locations for all tests or other out-of-class requirements

Remember to make additional copies for students who add the course late.

Although not likely to go on your syllabus, you should clearly tell students how you would like to be addressed, as many freshmen are unfamiliar with college culture and individual professors differ greatly on this issue.

Some professors routinely list their home numbers and invite students to call them “any time they need help.” Think carefully before extending this offer.

Note that there is no automated enforcement of prerequisites at MSU at the time of student registration.
policy on missed classes or tests

Additional items that you may include in the syllabus or on separate documents distributed on the first day include the following:
- instructor’s philosophy on roles and responsibilities
- detailed list of course goals and objectives
- course calendar including exams, drop dates, and holidays
- an explanation of how this course fits into students’ overall education and the specific university goals
- firm statement on academic honesty (often already available from your department)
- list of appropriate additional courses for those looking to take additional courses in this area
- community resources
- allocated space for students to write the names and contact information for two or three classmates

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6 I emphatically suggest that students inform their families of these test attendance requirements to avoid the oft-heard excuse that “my parents bought me a plane ticket home that leaves before the final exam.”