When should I begin planning for my course?
How do I construct a syllabus?
What should I do on the first day of class?

Two of the most important elements in good teaching are: 1) planning and organization, and 2) a demonstrated sense of commitment to students' learning. While the latter will be addressed in the next module, we will discuss planning and organizing a course here.

You may have heard some teachers say that they teach by staying one week ahead of the students. Yet if the teachers are successful, it is more likely that they have planned well in advance and are really just making adjustments each week to meet students' needs. Careful preparation allows you to design a course that helps students learn and gives you a chance to handle the inevitable surprises that arise during the semester.

As you read this module, remember these basic principles:

1. Your goals and objectives for student learning should guide how you structure the course. What do you believe students should learn and how will they achieve this?

2. Share your goals and the course organization with the students so they can understand your rationale. It is easier for them to learn if they know where you are headed and why.

3. Emphasize core concepts. Little details are quickly forgotten. Helping students grasp the big picture and broad concepts will give them a foundation in the discipline and a basis for future learning.

Preparing for a Course

If you are a TA in a “typical” situation, you are probably not responsible for designing an entire course. Therefore, working with the professor two to four weeks in advance (to define your role, learn his or her expectations, and begin to review the material) is sufficient.

However, if you are faculty and designing a course yourself, you should begin doing so two to three months ahead of time. This might seem early, but consider all you have to do:

1. Learn from past examples. If others have taught the course before you, talk with them. What successes and troubles have they encountered? Where have students stumbled? Ask for copies of their syllabi, tests, textbooks, etc. If you have taught the course before, what have you learned? Review your materials and course evaluations to plan for the future. If it is a completely new course, talk to others and review texts to explore the major topics the course might address (Davis, 1993).
Planning and Organizing Your Course

- Think about your situation. What knowledge will students already have and what prerequisites will your course require? How many classes will you have, how often will each class meet and for how long? How many students will be enrolled?

- Identify your goals. Think broadly at first, and ask yourself what you want students to learn. This can be related both to content (e.g. understanding specific equations) and non-content (e.g. learning to present an oral argument) (Davis, 1993). Then, think more realistically; the limited amount of time each semester means you can only cover so much. Assume you will have a diverse range of learners. What are reasonable goals?

Selecting Course Content

Even experienced teachers have difficulty narrowing down course content. We love our subject area and get excited to share it with students – this is what makes teaching fun – but organizing content is challenging. The points below may help you decide what your course will contain:

- Select content as you would pack for a trip. First ask: what do I want to bring? Then ask: what do I need to bring? Your course content should be the material and ideas that are most necessary and that can fit into your structure. Trying to pack too much information into a course can hinder students’ learning.

- You can differentiate between required (core), recommended and optional material in your syllabus, allowing students with varying levels of interest to explore the subject to different degrees.

- You may choose to build your course around core concepts that the students will use in many situations or highlight critical issues or ideas, such as those that attracted you to the field.

Organizing the Course

Once you have selected the main ideas and the content you want to cover in your course, you are faced with the challenge of organizing it into a coherent pattern. It is important to have a sense of how the term will go: what are the major holidays and breaks that will influence your plans? How many classes will you actually have to cover the material?

You can then begin to structure the content within the allotted time, including several possible ways to organize the content:

- Chronologically
- Topically/Categorically
- Theory to application (or vice versa)
- Easy to difficult
- Broad ideas to narrow examples (or vice versa)

As you chart the semester, you will have to decide just how much time to give individual topics (complex ones require more time), and should plan time to catch-up.
Planning and Organizing Your Course

It may be helpful to refer to the goals you defined at the start as you consider how to organize the material. It is important to keep in mind that planning a course is a complex process. As you review material, you may elect to revise your goals; as you organize the course, you may realize that you have left out important concepts. You should be ready to make constant adjustments during your planning.

Writing the Syllabus

Once you are comfortable with what you have designed, it is time to translate content into the syllabus. A carefully crafted syllabus can create a sense of trust between the teacher and students and show that you care about your teaching. It gives students a basic “road map” of where the course will be heading and lays out course policies so that expectations are clear. It also serves as a written agreement, not unlike a contract, that offers what you expect of the student and what they can expect of you.

A sound syllabus contains many, if not all, of the following elements:

Core information
- Course name, title, location, and meeting times.
- Office hours and contact information for all of the instructors.
- The instructional goals of the course (you have already identified these in your planning).
- Required texts and additional course materials.
- Course prerequisites or special knowledge required.

Policies
- Will late assignments be accepted and what, if any, will be the penalty?
- Students with special needs should be invited to see the instructor to discuss necessary accommodations.
- Is a statement on conduct (respect of others, cultural sensitivity, etc.) necessary?
- Plagiarism, “fair use” and expectations about using electronic sources should be explained (see Module 5.1).
- How will students be evaluated? What is the formula for weighing particular assignments?
- Add a statement for students with disabilities, “Students requesting academic accommodation based on disability...”

Content and Assignments
- Provide a “course calendar.” Dates for discussing readings and material should be clearly laid out. Some teachers maintain a more flexible schedule by listing topics weekly, while others elect to outline content on a class-by-class basis.
- Outline each assignment, any particular expectations for that assignment, and due dates.
All students should receive a copy of the syllabus and you should do your best to stick to it during the semester. If you find it is necessary to make adjustments (perhaps you will find that students seem particularly taken by a topic and want to study it in-depth), explain your rationale for doing so. And, as you go through the semester, keep notes on the syllabus about what you would change or do differently if you taught the course in the future.

Sources


**TIPS ON...**

Organizing Your Course to Involve Students

- State on the first day that one of your goals for the course is to have students actively participate.

- Build in opportunities for students to get together in small groups for more intimate and safer discussions.

- Assign on-going group projects that allow students to work in teams.

- Set up a process for students to review and comment on each other’s papers and assignments before they turn them in for a grade.