



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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FIFTEEN MINUTES BEFORE CLASS

Complaints that one often hears most from teaching faculty is that there are not enough hours in the day—there are too many preparations, especially with learning the “newest” technologies (which are supposed to be time-savers); too many meetings, often about what appears to have no relationship to teaching; too many commitments that the college expects us to keep. And, there is the grading. Many who think that all of these new technologies make grading “a piece of cake” do not realize how time-consuming it really is.

But, the time-consumers that “bug” instructors the most are the students—no, not the dealing with students, but the explaining over and over again what we have already said that we feel they should “get” the first time. Students will stop us in the halls, call, and e-mail (even after we’ve asked, “Are there any questions?” in class) to ask about something that we thought we made clear. They will arrive at the office five minutes before class or five minutes before you are ready to leave for the day and want/need an hour of your time. But, there is a solution to this “bugging” problem. It is the parsimonious answer to a significant part of your problems with time.

I have discovered the successful strategy of arriving at the classroom 15 minutes before the class is scheduled to start. “How,” you ask, “am I supposed to get ready for class, take care of my personal needs, and deal with everything else? I don’t have enough time now, and you want me to get there early. I can barely get there on time now. Someone is always calling me five minutes before class starts, anyway.” My response is that if you are in class, you don’t have to answer the telephone! Moreover, think about the inane conversations you can avoid with people who have nothing better to do. If, when you excuse yourself to go to class, and they say, “What’s your hurry?” you are able to tell them you are going to help students!

Arriving early, you have time to make sure the technology works, or at least have enough time to call the techies or switch to Plan B. You will have time to

outline the session on the board. You will be able to start on time, cover all of the material, and avoid the last-of-the-semester rush to cover too much material all at once. You also may be able to end the class session a little earlier, on occasion—students love that!

Being early allows you time to answer questions from the bashful student who would not ask a question in class or who may not be able to find your office (or, actually, be afraid of finding you there). By asking students questions before class begins, you can spot-check where *you* left off in the previous session and perhaps where *they* did, as well. This is helpful when you are teaching multiple sections of the same course, are at different places in each section, and/or forget to tell one section what you told the others. We then have the opportunities to determine what material was not very clear in students’ minds, review those items before going on, or cover material that had been omitted.

Most important, students will learn quickly you really are interested in teaching them the material and in their actually learning it—and they will respond positively to that lesson! Moreover, students will learn by example, watching you act on your belief that a job must be more than something you just “spend time” doing. While office hours are important, students often feel intimidated in that environment; and many students already are overwhelmed with schedules packed with academic, family, and work responsibilities. We all have enough stress to go around. Make it easier on everyone, and get to class early!

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OLD WAYS CAN BE GOOD WAYS

Reflecting on my 33 years of teaching, I have decided that three strategies led to my success as a teacher—having every class structured, getting to know each of my students, and maintaining a pattern of constant review.

Students respond well to a structured environment. Those who have little knowledge of the subject may find the material overpowering. They feel more comfortable being guided through the steps of learning the material. In a structured environment, students know what is expected, and they have guidelines to follow for being successful in the course. All of my students have a class schedule that itemizes the material to be learned in each class and lists class assignments.

I always make an effort to get to know each student in each class. Knowing something about each of them helps me tailor the information we are covering in class and make it even more meaningful to them all.

There are multiple ways of getting to know your students. Those of us who teach lab classes have unique opportunities to get to know students individually and more quickly than might be possible in a more traditional, lecture-oriented classroom. I have a habit of visiting with students as they come into class and as they leave. And, I wander around the classroom as I lecture, thus helping keep students focused on the material being covered and giving me a chance to identify the students who are taking notes.

For example, in math class, after I have worked several examples on the board (with student input), I assign a problem that is similar to the examples. As students work on the problem, I walk around to see how they are progressing, offer help and encouragement, and get to know each student a little better. This is an easy way to identify with students and encourage them to ask questions.

In addition, reviewing material that has been covered is particularly helpful. My experience as a doctoral student reinforced my belief in the positive results of class review. Most of us need to hear the facts repeated multiple times and apply information before it can become working knowledge.

A review is especially important in structured classes such as mathematics and computer programming, where each step in the process builds on the last. It is a rare experience that material builds on itself without instructional interventions. The initial concepts must be reviewed and reinforced. My mother, the best math teacher I have ever known, provided reinforcement through quizzes—a technique that I have embraced.

One successful technique is reinforcing material via demonstration. For example, while working a sample problem in an algebra class, I ask students what steps I should take next to ensure its solution. When they respond correctly, I ask why that step is appropriate. This procedure reinforces the rules that students have learned and helps them see how one rule is tied to another.

Presenting material to the class is just a small part of our jobs as teachers. We need to know that students understand, retain, and can incorporate what they have learned in their academic and personal lives. Always looking for new and improved ways to increase student retention, we sometimes discover that the old ways are still very effective, that they might need only to be combined with others. This combination of maintaining class structure, knowing students as individuals, and reinforcing pertinent material works well in my classes.

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