

Transformational Teaching

Successful teaching involves much more than the transmission of content and skills. Our ultimate goal is to create independent, self-directed, self-motivated learners who are capable of critiquing and directing their own work; who are open to alternative viewpoints; and who have strongly developed higher-order thinking skills.

Teaching as a Developmental Process

At its best, teaching is a developmental process in which a student moves from less or more sophisticated ideas and abilities.

In addition to teaching subject matter and methods, we have a more expansive goal: To create reflective, self-critical learners, who understand our discipline's goals, who have internalized our profession's standards, and who have high-level skills in interpretation, analysis, and communication.

As an instructor, one of your most important tasks is to guide, motivate, and assist your students through this maturational process. Students must recognize the limitations of their current skills, knowledge, and perspectives. They must realize that approaches rewarded in high school—such as rote memorization, the mechanical use of formulas, or the parroting back ideas from a textbook—are no longer sufficient in college, where we value originality, high-level analytical skills, and facility in writing.

From Transactional to Transformational Teaching

Transactional teaching involves the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Students are expected to simply assimilate and synthesize the new knowledge on their own.

Transformational teaching emphasizes inquiry, critical thinking, and the development of higher-order thinking and communication skills. Students must recognize the limitations of their current knowledge and skills and have opportunities to test and apply new skills and perspectives.

Teaching Strategies

Transformative teaching requires a fresh approach to teaching and learning. It must be much more self-conscious about its objectives and methods. It must adopt a learner-centered rather than an instructor-centered approach.

Here are some practical strategies for becoming a transformational teacher.



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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Advancing Teaching and Learning at Columbia University

The **Teaching Center** is the go-to place for practical advice about teaching. We can help you to:

- Successfully market your teaching
- Deal with anxiety, challenges to your authority, and other classroom issues
- Design innovative and inventive courses
- Deliver scintillating, substantive lectures and lead stimulating, successful discussions and labs
- Respond appropriately to shy, withdrawn, disgruntled, or disruptive students
- Use technology more effectively

The Teaching Center offers weekly workshops, individual consultations, classroom observations, certification in pedagogy, tip sheets and a resource library,

We also work collaboratively to improve public education through community and school partnerships.

To arrange a one-on-one consultation, contact:

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9 Steps Toward Becoming a Transformative Teacher

Step 1: Remember, You are Not Your Students' Friend or Therapist.

Rather, you are an interpretive guide, facilitator, and resource.

Step 2: Make Your Students Privy to Your Larger Goals

Especially at the freshman level, students need to understand that the expectations at college are different—and much higher—than in high school.

Step 3: Warn Students that They Will Receive Challenging Feedback

Most of your students did very well in high school and received little critical or constructive feedback. In an effort to cultivate students' self-esteem, many of their teachers provided only positive feedback. Let your students know from the outset that your feedback will be blunter and more forthright.

Step 4. Discuss your discipline's objectives

It is doubtful that your students ever discussed in depth why we study biology or political science or how we engage in literary criticism. Independent learners understand why they are doing what they are doing. For example, we not only want history students to master facts about the past, but to think historically, to evaluate historical evidence, to appreciate the importance of context and multiple perspective, and to pose problems, formulate arguments, and take account of opposing viewpoints.

Step 5: Foster Intellectual Openness

For transformative teaching to be successful, students must feel safe—free to make mistakes without embarrassment, free to try out unfamiliar perspectives, free to test imaginative hypotheses.

Step 6: Cultivate “Reflective Learners”

Give students the opportunity reflect on the learning process. For example, ask them to evaluate sample answers to questions or to spell out the criteria used to evaluate evidence or to explain the procedures utilized to solve a problem.

Step 7: Create Opportunities for Students to Think in More Sophisticated Ways

Students need to understand the limitations of their current skills, knowledge, and assumptions. Present students with challenging problems, and provide them with alternate interpretations and viewpoints. Ask them to defend or critique an argument, theory, or paradigm. Invite students to play devil's advocate. Challenge students' thinking habits by asking them to defend a viewpoint they disagree with. Ask students to approach a topic from multiple perspectives (e.g. feminist, materialist, psychoanalytic, etc.). Create activities, such as role-playing or debates, that give students opportunities to experiment with various points of view.

Step 8: Encourage Critical Thinking and Discourse

Have students talk through their reasoning and problem-solving strategy. This is called “metacognition,” and it can be done with partners or in small groups. Have your students engage in dialogue and reflection.

Step 9: Give Your Students Meaningful Assignments

- Give your students case studies that involve real world problems and real life data.
- Have your students contribute to a project of ongoing significance, for example, by helping to create a virtual encyclopedia, glossary, or museum exhibition.
- Make authentic research an intrinsic part of your course. Have your students engage in inquiry, investigation, and active, hands-on learning using the evidence appropriate to your discipline.

Classroom Management

As an instructor, you will encounter a wide range of classroom management issues:

- Challenges to your authority
- Belligerent, disruptive, and annoying behavior
- Students who interrupt, heckle, or dominate
- Shy and withdrawn students
- Chronic tardiness and early departure
- Disputes over grades

Your challenge is to handle these issues in a calm, professional manner. The best way to do this is to avoid problems in the first place and to prepare strategies for managing these problems when they occur.

Common Classroom Management Issues:

How do I establish my authority and credibility?

1. Establish your credentials on the first day of class.
2. Be clear about your expectations—about attendance, late assignments, missed classes.
3. Make sure that each class session is clearly organized.
4. Be professional—in your demeanor and even your dress. Start out hard nosed and you can ease off later.
5. Keep order in the classroom.
6. Be consistent in your enforcement of class policies.

How do I handle disruptive or disrespectful students who chat or pass notes or sleep in class, interrupt, heckle, challenge your authority, arrive late to class or leave early?

1. Define your expectations and policies clearly in the very first class.
2. Get to know something about your students and use their names so that they don't feel anonymous.
3. Make direct eye contact with students and physically move to the area where the disruptive students are.
4. Vary your teaching style. Move into group work, for example.
5. Be positive rather than negative

How can I maintain order in my classroom?

1. When students get off-topic, re-focus their attention back to the subject. Consider using visual aids, such as writing on the blackboard.
2. When a student rambles, say: "Would you summarize your main point please?" or "Are you asking...?"
3. If a student heckles you or becomes argumentative or grandstands, acknowledge the student's positive points and redirect the topic back to the group or to supportive students. Say: "I appreciate your comments, but I'd like to hear from others," or "It looks like we disagree."

How do I motivate apathetic students?

1. Give students some kind of assignment before each session.
2. Pose questions that make students think about the subject matter, even if they have not read the material.
3. Use real world examples to illustrate your points.
4. Present material as problems to be solved.
5. Share your enthusiasm and incorporate interesting anecdotes or demonstrations. Make your class interesting.

How can I best deal with late papers or missed quizzes or tests?

1. Have a clear policy for missed, failed or late assignments and tests—and stick with it. Deduct points based on how late a paper is handed in. An instructor might subtract five points for every day an assignment is late.
2. Recognize that some excuses are acceptable.
3. Encourage students to stay on track. For the most part, students miss deadlines because they waited until the last moment to complete an assignment and discovered that it was more difficult and time-consuming than they had assumed. One way to deal with this is to require students to submit portions of a larger assignment in stages.
4. Be flexible-but don't be a push-over. Require evidence.
5. Require students who must miss a test to notify you beforehand.
6. Create alternates. Allow students to drop one quiz or test. Or create an optional test or final exam, or require students with less than a B average to take the final, while excusing those with a higher average.

How can I best handle grade disputes?

1. Establish and explain your grading criteria
3. Provide students with written comments on their work.
4. Show a student your grading criteria.
5. Don't feel pressured to make a decision on the spot.

6. Don't change a grade out of sympathy or compassion (or to end the dispute) or because of a student's personal needs.
7. Have the student explain why your original grade was wrong.
8. Tell the student that you will re-grade the entire assignment, not just one portion, and that the final grade could be lower rather than higher.
9. Tell the student how to raise the grade in the future.

How can I create a more inclusive classroom environment?

1. At the beginning of your class, establish a “respect your classmates” rule.
2. Get to know your students.
3. Be sensitive—to language, terminology, and diversity issues. Be wary of assuming that all students share certain cultural reference points (e.g. that everyone knows about the TV show Friends) or a common set of values and orientations.
4. Never ask a student to speak for an entire group. Treat students as individuals, not as representatives of a gender, race, or ethnic group.
5. Don't let a comment that maligns a particular group pass without notice.
6. Give all students equal attention.
7. Increase the amount of time that you wait before calling on students. This allows more students to formulate an answer to a question in class.
8. Solicit student opinions. Encourage questions and encourage critiques of the course itself.

How do I deal with controversial topics or with “hot moments” in the classroom?

1. Introduce controversial topics in impersonal terms. Rather than asking a student, for example, "Do you think high schools should make contraception available to students?" present the arguments usually made for and against contraception in high schools and ask students to critique or support the arguments.
2. When “hot moments” arise, turn them into a learning opportunity. Explore different views about the topic that provoked the hot moment. Listen for the sub-text. Get students to view the hot issue from multiple perspectives.

Active Learning

Today's students do not want to be passive learners. They demand learning experiences that are more inquiry-based, engaged, and experiential than in the past. How, then, can we shift from an instructor-centered to a learner-centered classroom? Here are some strategies that you might consider:

1. Collaborative or team-based learning: Many instructors, who recall bad experiences with small group learning, worry that some students will fail to pull their weight or that group dynamics will be a source of complaints. In fact, today's college students have extensive experience working with small groups and find this a productive way to solve problems and to learn from one another. Here are some helpful tips to ensure that collaborative learning is successful:

- Groups should consist of approximately five members.
- Make sure that the groups are equally diverse.
- Give the groups assignments that are relevant to the class.
- Consider having students take a quiz individually and then collectively as members of a group.
- Let students evaluate each others contribution to the group.

2. Inquiry-, case-, or problem-based learning: Teaching through inquiry engages students in the research process. This approach is question driven, rather than topic or thesis driven. In case-based learning, which is widely used in business and law schools, students explore how issues and principles learned in class interact with real-world situations. Problem-based learning involves presenting students with a detailed problem and students try to solve it individually or in teams.

3. A research “scavenger hunt”: This approach teaches students how to conduct library or online research by having them hunt for the answers to a series of questions. It gives students the opportunity to practice and refine their research skills and to learn about various library and Internet research resources.