

Teaching Outside Your Comfort Zone

Sooner or later you will be asked to teach outside your area of expertise. Teaching outside your comfort zone can be scary, but it comes with the job.

Faculty of all ranks frequently find themselves asked to teach subjects that they don't know well. This isn't simply the plight of Teaching Fellows or newly hired Ph.D.s.

How to Become an Expert on Almost Anything

A key to successful teaching is to have an aura of authority. Generally, authority grows out of being knowledgeable and able to express ideas well.

One way to develop expertise is to read intensively in a particular field. But if you must quickly prepare a course, you must find another way.

Step 1: Focus on the right questions.

Identify the major controversies and debates within the subject you must teach. But don't only focus on the questions that experts ask. Frame the questions from a student's point of view. What questions will excite the student's curiosity?

It's important to introduce big questions early in the course, both in the syllabus and on the first day of class, so that students see your vision and what they should be able to do by the end of the course.

Step 2: Gather information.

Look at syllabi on the Web. See how those courses are organized as well as their themes, learning objectives, and activities.

Get a copy of the course syllabus and other materials. The syllabus will tell you how the course is organized and the weight given to assignments and exams. Copies of old exams will indicate coverage and the course's level of difficulty.

Step 3: Ask colleagues for advice and teaching materials.

Don't be embarrassed to ask colleagues for teaching tips or materials or ways to approach a particular topic.

Step 4: Read the course books and articles before the class begins.

As you read the materials, ask yourself:

- What big questions, concepts, theories, themes, and findings does the reading raise?
- Which concepts or examples are the hardest to understand?
- What advice should you give students before they read the material?



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Survival Strategies

If you've just been assigned to teach a course outside your specialty, what are some survival tips that will help you maintain your sanity?

1. Try not to fret.

Remember, you know more than your students. However little you know about a topic, you know enough to teach your students something valuable. In addition, you know how to learn quickly. And you also know how to make complicated topics accessible.

Note that when you teach outside your expertise, you are likely to learn something that will contribute to your own intellectual growth. Comfort breeds complacency. When you teach outside your comfort zone, you may find a new area of interest that you want to work on, or at least gain a different perspective about the research you are currently conducting.

2. Bargain.

The moment before you say "yes" or "no" is your best time for bargaining.

3. Plan backward.

Begin with your objectives: What do you want students to be able to do as a result of learning in your course? Then decide what you need to do to ensure that students will understand the material.

Coverage is important—but so, too, is thinking about how you will present the material and how you will know if the students truly understand what you have taught.

4. Don't over-prepare.

Too much content is the antithesis of good teaching. Over-preparation will cause you to rush through the class, lecture too much, and be more concerned about teaching than learning.

5. Spend some time early in the course on a topic within your expertise.

Not only will this reduce your anxiety level, but it will expose students to your knowledge.

6. Consider incorporating some case studies into your class or section.

That way, you won't need to prepare as broadly. Moreover, students are more intrinsically interested in the topic when they are trying to crack a case-based problem, which means they are less driven by grades and more driven by their curiosity.

7. Consider inviting guest lecturers or including student presentations.

Let others share the burden. Not only will guest lectures and students presentations give you a break, they will augment the perspectives offered in the class.

8. Limit the amount of work you assign.

Don't model the course after someone who has more content expertise.

9. Don't lecture too much.

Lectures take a lot of time to prepare. And students may well learn more through discussion.

10. Keep accurate records of your preparation.

This will be vital when it comes to marking essays or exams but also if you are asked to teach anything similar again.

Teaching Controversial Subjects

Some topics that you will teach are likely to occasion highly charged responses from students. These hot topics include sexuality, religion, immigration, disability, race, evolution, and international politics. These “taboo” subjects can easily lead to emotional outbursts and classroom conflict. In today’s classroom, many students are acutely sensitive to anything that, in their opinion, smacks of political or religious indoctrination.

How, then, can you best teach controversial topics?

1. Strive to create an open, inclusive, respectful learning environment.

Tolerance is greatest when a class has a culture of openness and curiosity. At the beginning of the semester, have your students establish ground rules together to guide class discussion.

For example, students must:

- Be respectful and civil
- Provide evidence for what they say

2. Emphasize dialogue rather than debate.

Seek to clarify and explore the many facets of an issue rather than turning this into a win/lose debate. Cultivate tentativeness among students—encouraging them to recognize the complexities of arguments and to distinguish rhetoric from effective argumentation.

3. Model dialogic questioning and reasoning.

Ask open ended questions.

4. “Academize” controversies.

Approach hot topics with detachment, as objects of investigation and analysis. For example, you might ask about the origins of the controversy and the structure of the conflicting arguments.

5. Moderate sensitivity to criticism and over-attachment to ideas

Encourage students to argue multiple sides of an issue, to brainstorm in groups, to use role playing to develop empathy with opposing points of view, and use analogies to less contentious topics.

To learn more: See Therese Huston, *Teaching What You Don't Know* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009) and “How to Teach What You Don't Actually Know,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 20, 2009), <http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Teach-What-You-Dont/47075/>.