7 PROVEN STEPS

to planning, teaching, and engaging your students

STEP **1** Know Your Target Audience

If you don't know who you're talking to, you're going in blind. Your stuff won't engage students. And boredom/indifference is your biggest enemy. This is true whether you're in a classroom, at a conference presentation, or writing a journal article. If you know your audience, however, you can plan lessons that resonate. Some keys ideas to consider:

- Figure out what kind of students you have, by asking questions like: Does your class comprise of more female or male students? What age are they? Socioeconomic and cultural background? Are they required to take this course? Full time or part time?
- Think about the barriers they face: Are they taking many other courses? What's likely to be their number one fear/concern going into your course? What are their priorities in life? What are their goals in college? What keeps them up at night?
- Keep your audience in mind when writing your syllabus. How can you make your course meaningful to your students' lives? What skills will they gain that relate to their career? If you can, rewrite the boring course descriptions and outcomes. Make it a "pitch" for your course—with an eye-catching headline, interesting subtitle, and compelling copy! (Want to know more? Download my ebook, "Create an Engaging Syllabus," free on Amazon HERE.)

STEP **2** Zero in on 1 to 3 Things to Teach

The purpose of the class is to go deep. Not to cover everything (which students will forget anyway). Better you teach 1-3 things they can grapple with and apply that day. Sense-making is part of learning. Some considerations:

- There will always be a million important terms, concepts, and events to cover; but which one(s) do students need to know most? (Sounds obvious, but the list is hard to whittle down.)
- If you can't decide what to keep and what to cut, use what I call it the "Average Joe Test." This entails asking yourself: Would the typical layperson have heard the term/concept you are teaching? If yes, then it's probably important enough to delve into during your lecture. If not, consider it a secondary topic to leave out. For example, has the average person heard of the economics term "supply and demand?" Likely. The "Theory of Optimal Taxation?" Hmm. Maybe leave that one out.

STEP 3 — Don't Bring Up Boring Concepts & Terms So Quickly

None of this: "Today, we're gonna go over Vygotsky's zone of proximal development" or "Let's talk about Adam Smith and why he's so important in the field of economic theory." The minute students hear theory—especially so early in the lecture—they're less likely to care. Why? Because these terms mean nothing to them. It's not relevant to them now.

- A better way to engage students is to first get them to explore the **underlying idea** or **experiences** behind the concept/term you're teaching.
- For example, how do you teach the chemistry term "oxidation-reduction?" Instead of saying "It's a chemical reaction in which the oxidation states of atoms are changed" (yawn), why not start by asking students how wildfires are started (combustion is a fast oxidation reaction)? By tapping into underlying relatable experiences, you can start a conversation that leads to introducing the technical stuff.

TRY THIS! Make it a game: How long can you go into your discussion/lecture without actually using the term itself? I try to start lessons without using the technical terms, principles, laws, and jargon for as long as possible. This forces me to activate students' ideas about that term in a more informal way—a way that usually draws out experiences or prior knowledge. That's how I get them warmed up. Only then do I go into the lecture (i.e., the details and technical stuff).

STEP 4 — Incorporate 'Hands-on' Activities

Sounds obvious, I know. But activities serve as the "playground" for learning. Students explore, grapple with, and make sense of what they read or hear in class. A professor's most important role, therefore, is to **create meaningful experiences**. Not to lecture. Experiences helps students process more deeply and take ownership of their learning. Here are some activity ideas that can be modified:

- **Small groups**: Get students into groups of 4 to 5 to work through a question you pose, a dilemma, scenario, or issue. So instead of lecturing about the differences between race and culture, why not have students work it out? Even if they don't know the answer, it gets them to process actively. Even if it's only for 3 to 5 minutes.
- **Class discussions** that get everyone involved (see Step 6)

- **Affinity Mapping**: Get students in groups of 4 to 5. Give each group post-it notes and have them jot down everything they remember or know about a topic (one idea per note). The topic could be short, like something you just taught ("OK, break down the infrastructure of public health"). It could also be a longer activity, like one based on the readings ("Use what you know about Chapter 5 to describe everything related to the central and peripheral nervous systems"). Want to know more? Read my article on affinity mapping HERE.

STEP 5 — Reframe the Way You Present Slide Presentations

Want a quick test to see if your slides are effective? Go through a slide deck page-by-page. If you notice they basically sound like your lecture, then you've failed as a teacher/presenter. Why? Because slides aren't meant to duplicate what you say (audiences can't listen to you and read text at the same time—usually the speaker loses out). It's supposed to complement or enhance the speaker's words. Some key ways to improve your presentation:

- Insert visuals (and maybe a few words) instead. There's less to process. The goal is to reduce cognitive load. If you have complicated stuff, consider a "leave-behind" students can take home.
- Get out from behind the podium and own your classroom space. When you're stuck in one corner, it's easy for minds to wander. Get a clicker.
- Avoid using titles at the top of every slide. That's just a default setting on your PowerPoint (or Keynote, etc.) that distracts from what you're saying. Again, use visuals to enhance your words.

STEP 6 — Involve More Students During Discussions

For most courses, discussions will be the default mode of activity that helps students process ideas. But don't you hate when you ask a question, and the same four students raise their hand? One way to get more students comfortable and involved is to first give them a few minutes to **jot down ideas**. Then they all have something to refer to. Less anxiety to speak. Another is to have students come prepared with a **question, comment, or quotation** from their reading and go around the room sharing them. What about the introverts? I give them the option to email me their thoughts. The idea is to build a running dialogue, right?

7

Assess Your Students Every Class

How do you know students actually get what's been lectured or discussed? Don't wait until grading midterm exams or final papers to see. Check in on them every single class—multiple times. How?

- One easy way is to ask a question and have students discuss their answers with a neighbor, something that's called "turn-and-talk." Walk around, listen in, and come back as a class to share diverse perspectives. No more than 5 minutes for everything.
- Another is to have students summarize on paper what you just lectured the past ten minutes. When they re-write their notes in their own words, they are forced to make sense of what they have been passively listening to up this point. If you do this regularly, such informal assessments simply become part of the learning process.

ADVANCED TIP: Want to incorporate technology? Create a hashtag with your name and lecture topic (e.g., #ProfEngSupplyandDemand) and have students, using their digital devices, summarize their understanding in a tweet (maximum of 280 characters). Once posted, you can display all the tweets related to that hashtag in real time. A great way to share and discuss students' understanding. An alternative to Twitter? Create a question using Google Sheets (which is Google's version of Microsoft Excel). Give students the link to the sheet, and each student types his/her answer in real time. Again, you can share and discuss.

To Wrap It Up

Hope you enjoyed this outline.

Teaching can be complicated and full of so many strategies it will make your head spin. This guide is meant to be super simple and quick. Something you can implement now.

If anything doesn't make sense or is confusing, don't worry. I'll be back soon with more great stuff and make everything crystal clear.