

## **SURVIVAL TIPS FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES**

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The following are some tips that have been collected from teaching colleagues with varying levels of experience and substantive expertise. Hopefully they can serve as a basis for our discussion and sharing of the challenges and helpful strategies we all face in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and with integrating our professional and personal lives.

### **Inside the classroom**

- The first day of class is the most critical. I've always found the first day sets the tone for the entire class. I try to model everything I want to have happen on that day. If I plan to use groups I have them get in groups. If I want them to share their views, I make sure that I ask questions that allow for positive, supportive responses from me. I also make sure they know what "really" matters for me in regards to course objectives and behaviors and also seek information from them about their goals and fears related to achieving success in the course. So, make the first day about more than just the syllabus and you'll set yourself up for a rewarding and successful class.
- 3X5 cards! For in class participation, I have students purchase a pack of 3X5 cards at the beginning of the semester. Then, on random days (or planned days) I tell them "take out a card" and ask a question. This can be about the reading they were supposed to do, about material from the day before, or about what they watched on TV the night before. This is often a group work option as well (one card for a group). Why a card? Instead of dealing with random ripped pieces of paper, or full sized paper sheets, cards are much easier to sort, alphabetize, and confine how much the student writes. So, if you care to include class participation, this is a big help for time saving!
- Engage the students... let them know you are human... use personal life stories if need be.
- One of the things that faculty often fail to realize early on in their careers is that students often feel invisible and/or irrelevant in the classroom. There are all kinds of techniques that I use to try and render students visible and create a space where they feel noticed, but I think the most important is learning names. Sounds obvious, but I think faculty often don't take the time to do this. Obviously this is tricky in big sections, but I do think you can memorize and learn names in classrooms up to 50 students (some people can learn more names but 50 is my limit). I spend the first class session having students introduce themselves using some kind of ice breaker and I write down their names and some kind of association to help me remember who they are, then I ask them to fill out a student info sheet that takes about 5-10 minutes to complete. While students fill out these sheets, I spend 10 minutes memorizing their names. I tell the students I'm doing this so they don't freak out when you are staring at them. I then test myself in front of the class. Even though I make mistakes the first few times, the students think it is funny and are often impressed that I can remember who they are. I then go through and say each student's name at the beginning of each class for the first two weeks of the semester. It is a lot of work, but I think there is huge pay off in terms of attendance, participation and overall classroom rapport.

## **Outside the classroom**

- Be organized and have a thoroughly planned and detailed syllabus before the term starts. Don't make significant changes to your semester teaching plan (unless absolutely necessary).
- I like to use a textbook the very first time I teach a course (and then drop the textbook after this point) because you often get the PowerPoint slides and discussion notes that come with the textbook. Then, as I make the class more "mine," I slowly dump the power points (or change them entirely), and bring in more of my own resources. My Soc of Family class is now, after 4 semesters, completely free of the canned textbook slides, but they were invaluable that first semester of teaching the class. It has been a huge time saver on course prep, while still allowing me to develop as a better instructor.
- Don't be shy about asking for help. Borrow and repurpose material whenever possible, and look for ideas and content in : TRAILS, Teaching Sociology, the TeachSoc email list, and your Faculty Development Center/Center for Teaching Excellence.
- Take time to think carefully about the objectives and grading rubric of each assignment at the time you create them – the first time. I can't tell you how often I've taken short cuts only to have to re-do and re-do again and again when I didn't carefully thing through my learning goals and assessment strategy. It takes more time at first but then only minor tweaking is usually necessary after that – a big time saver in the long run and usually a much more useful assignment emerges as a result.
- Seek out advice from other colleagues who are "known" to be good teachers. Asking others for input or help makes them feel good and will usually result in a solution to concerns you may have to, at least, to their helping you talk through various possibilities for addressing the issue. You'd be surprised at how willing people are to help – all you have to do is ask!

## **Items for mindful reflection**

- Forgive yourself. Most of us are perfectionists, but the first year (or two) can be overwhelming and you will screw up at some point. Do the best you can and forgive yourself for the occasional subpar day in the classroom.
- Remember what it was like when you were the student's age....I think we forget about this a lot.
- Set the bar high and then trust the student ... e.g., the syllabus says "no make-up exams unless you provide proof of medical or legal emergency, etc.".... but then the student lets you know that they are a single parent, have two kids, their mother is the usual babysitter but she was sick and your student missed class... give the student a break and give them a make-up exam... sometimes it takes more time/effort to maintain certain standards than to just go with the flow.... and faculty need to spend their time on things that really matter for learning and professional development... not "fighting" students over various kinds of "proof."

- Not everything is a “problem” (an occupational hazard of being a sociologist but one we should employ mindfully).
- Take time to work out.... it really matters. Body and mind are intimately connected.
- Maintain a sense of humor about “everything”... it gets you through each day and keeps you from getting migraines and an ulcer.
- The thing I feel that has helped me survive is the integration of teaching and research. I hear some graduate students claim that they “just want to teach.” In other words, they are going to finish a dissertation and then never conduct research again. But I try to tell them that in order to teach about something it is helpful to really have some expertise, from ongoing first-hand research, about a topic. This doesn’t mean we have the “Truth,” but it does keep one's teaching fresh, because our research always raises more questions than it answers, which leads us to ask questions in the class that we try to answer together, as a group. This is what Parker Palmer (in *The Courage to Teach*) calls the subject-centered approach, to be contrasted with the teacher-centered (sage on the stage) or student-centered (all opinions are equal, student-as-consumer-to-be-entertained) approaches. With the subject-centered approach, we are exploring the mysteries of the social world with our students. As instructors, we have a special role to play and special responsibilities, but we draw on the collective resources of the group.
- Try not to let teaching consume all of your life. Try to have allotted times during the week during which you work on your class prep/grading and allotted times for research, service, and other professional activities. Then, try to keep to whatever schedule you construct. Doing this feels like an accomplishment in and of itself.
- Having a *sense of humor*! Definitely the most important thing! That and *compassion* - I never disbelieve a student's story of hardship or loss (okay, I may doubt sometimes, but I always accept their excuse). What I have found over time is that it makes such a difference to students who have real life difficulties that it is worth the small number who might kill off grandma to get out of an exam or missed deadline. I have had students hug me, breaking down into tears, just because I said “I am so sorry for your loss. Of course you should be with your family now.” They tell me “my other professors said ‘too bad’ I still had to take the exam, etc.” They'll remember that (and you) long after the class is over.