

Beginning Teaching at a University The Ultimate On-the-job Training Program

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Abstract

As university budgets decline, teaching assistantships are often cut providing fewer opportunities for graduate students to gain teaching experience. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the teaching experiences of an assistant professor transcended from being a graduate student, who primarily conducted research, to teaching university classes within the college of agriculture at a land grant institution, in an effort to lessen teaching anxiety of others. Topics discussed include first day of class activities, classroom mechanics, course materials, grading, student learning methods, as well as expectations and feedback by both students and the professor.

Introduction

Ph.D. graduates from agricultural colleges in the land grant university system may not obtain teaching experience as part of their graduate school training. Yet, upon graduation, typical academic appointments include a substantial teaching component. As university budgets become increasingly tight, teaching assistantships are more likely to be cut, providing even less opportunity for graduate students to gain teaching experience. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the teaching experiences of an assistant professor, transcended from being a graduate student to teaching university courses at the undergraduate level, in an effort to lessen teaching anxiety of others. This paper is not a treatise about teaching; instead, its intent is to share experiences with future graduates faced with a similar situation, recognizing that there is much left to be learned. What I have learned, and present in this paper, is based on my experimenting and listening to colleagues' successes in teaching.

Background of Course

This paper presents teaching tips at the undergraduate level. (See also McKeachie; Taylor; Wick and Estabrook; and the March 1992 *NACTA Journal*.) The undergraduate course referred to throughout this paper is entitled "Principles of Agricultural Marketing" (AEC 301) and is a service course to the College of Agriculture. It enrolls about 50 undergraduate students, mostly non-agricultural economics majors, i.e., it is a *required course* and students do not necessarily want to be in class. Also, since students come from different disciplines throughout the College, they do not necessarily know each other. Given this setting, my philosophy of teaching is to create a learning environment

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which is receptive to student needs, and is fun, as well as educational.

First Day of Class

The first day of class is a very important day, since it sets the tone for the semester. It is a very busy day, packed with activity. I begin by introducing myself, discussing my farm background, educational credentials, and work experience in agriculture. This establishes credibility, i.e., not only do I have the educational background to teach this class, but I also have "hands on" agricultural experience.

The syllabus is reviewed on the first day of class. I believe it is important that the syllabus be specific, by not only including the typical items such as course text, class meeting times, and grading policies, but the syllabus should also include policies on absences (including the definition of an "excused" absence), disagreements with grades, and rules on plagiarism. In addition, a calendar specifying due dates for homeworks and test dates is included. Thus, students know on the first day of class when they will be tested and when assignments will be due.

Concurrent with the syllabus discussion, student photos are taken. The photos are later mounted on poster board and students sign their picture. Student photos aid in learning student names and are a useful reference. Also, "expectations" are identified during the first class meeting--students' expectations of me, as their professor, and my expectations of them, as my students.¹ Specifically, students are asked to write down their expectations of professors. These "Expectations of Professors" are then collected, tabulated, and a summary sheet is developed, listing their expectations in priority order (results are discussed below). This summary is later distributed to students. In addition to obtaining students' expectations of me, I specify my expectations of them, e.g., to be courteous, attentive, and ask for help when needed. Finally, the first class session concludes with a fun activity. Students team up in pairs (with a person they have never met before) and introduce each other to the rest of the class, specifying their partner's name, where they are from, and their favorite activity or hobby.

Classroom Mechanics

I begin each class session by writing two key outlines on the chalkboard which specify (1) announcements, e.g., due dates for future assignments, College of Agriculture events (Phone-Athon, Job Fair, etc.) and (2) "today's" lecture material. The announcements are written on the left hand side of the board and will be erased shortly thereafter, while the "today's" outline is written on the right hand side of the

board and stays up throughout the class period so that students have a comprehensive view of the lecture.

In terms of the flow of the lecture, lectures follow the standard format for presentations: (1) introduction (i.e., tell them what you are going to tell them); (2) the body of the lecture (i.e., tell them); and (3) a summary (i.e., tell them what you told them). In addition, my lecture introduction recaps highlights of the previous lecture as a means of getting students reoriented to the course. The lecture summary closes with key points of today's lecture, i.e., the concepts that I want students to know, at a minimum.

In regards to visual aids, both overheads and computer graphics² are used in class (Davis; Debertin and Goetz). Practicing the lecture is important for new professors, especially during the first week of the semester. A run-through of the lecture helps one become familiar with the audio-visual equipment and helps one's timing, i.e., to get the feel of a 50 minute lecture period and to determine where natural breaks occur in the material. For first time teachers, a dry run is a great confidence builder. Finally, voice is important, i.e., can the students in the back of the room hear you?

Course Materials

Course materials used in AEC 301 include the course syllabus, readings, handouts, learning objectives³ for each course topic, as well as past examinations, and a glossary of terms. The learning objectives are "results oriented" and specify what the student is expected to know from each section of the course, e.g., definitions, specific concepts, etc. Items in the learning objectives are used to base future questions for homeworks, quizzes, and exams. Past examinations are included in course materials so that students can see the type and way questions are asked. This also lessens student anxiety.

Grading and Examinations

In an undergraduate, required class, frequent feedback is important. Within a 15 week semester, AEC 301 students complete 4 homeworks, 5 quizzes, 2 midterms and a comprehensive final. Thus, they are actively involved in a work assignment nearly every week. This forces students to keep current on the material throughout the semester, rather than cram for an examination. Frequent knowledge checkpoints (e.g., quizzes, tests, etc.) have been identified as one of three crucial features of highly respected courses (Light).

Grading policies are specifically identified in the course syllabus. No late homework assignments are accepted. No one is allowed to take an examination (midterm, final or quiz) at any time other than at the scheduled time. One make-up examination (for either a missed midterm and/or quiz) is given at the end of the semester for anyone with a verified legitimate absence, which are defined. It is the student's responsibility to notify the professor of anticipated absences prior to the event. Student grades are based on flat percentages rather than "on a curve;" this reduces competition among students.

Graded assignments are returned the next class meeting in order to give students rapid feedback. Immediate and

detailed feedback is another crucial feature of highly respected courses (Light). (I have been fortunate to have a grader each time I have taught this course, Clemen Gonzales and Eric Jessup, respectively). The grader reviews assignments initially. Then, the two of us make a second pass through each individual students' assignment, discussing vague and misconstrued answers. Individual comments are written (both positive and negative), when appropriate. An answer key is selected from the students' answers, xeroxed (concealing the student's name), and distributed to all students at the next class meeting. Assignments are reviewed during the next class session, focusing on questions missed most often.

Examination dates are clearly specified in the syllabus. In an effort to lessen test anxiety, an in-class comprehensive review session is held. This session is used to cover the material in a comprehensive manner, encouraging students to just sit back and listen. An out-of-class question and answer session is also offered. This session answers students' questions and reviews concepts and class material.

Student Learning Methods

It is important for students to use as many of the physical senses as possible (Bonwell and Eison; and Wetzstein), including (1) seeing--computer graphic images projected from a "big screen" TV, built into the lecture room to explain economic concepts (Davis; Debertin and Jones), overhead transparencies, and the chalkboard (Ruppel); (2) hearing--listening to the lecture; (3) speaking--encouraging students to talk about the material via in-class group problem solving sessions culminating with student presentations, student questions (both in-class and out-of-class), and study sessions. The in-class group problem solving sessions encourage student creativity and student interaction (Anderson; Wetzstein). Students comment that they provide "hands on" applications of theoretical concepts to current events in their own discipline. Examples include "Identify a key issue or problem confronting agriculture today and use the analytical tools from AEC 301 to analyze impacts on producers and consumers."

Treatment of Students and Feedback

Students are vulnerable and should be treated with respect, especially in regard to in-class student questions. It is important for professors to be accessible to students and make time for students; often the best time to meet is immediately after class or by appointment. Professors should be flexible, especially in the case of excused absences (e.g., a field trip in another class), when makeup quizzes and examinations become necessary. Finally, students always appreciate treats, e.g., coffee and doughnuts brought at least once during the semester, on a non-stressful class day.

In regard to student feedback, the "Expectations of Professors" questionnaire filled out the first day of class provides good feedback regarding the characteristics students want of their professors. Listed in priority order, students' expectations of professors were:

- Give fair exams and grade in a consistent manner

- Be accessible to students outside of class
- Be understanding and helpful when students are uncertain of the material
- Be open to questions and encourage group discussions
- Use "real life" examples to illustrate concepts
- Present the material in an organized, understandable manner, and lecture at a comfortable rate in order to achieve a basic level of understanding
- Keep the class upbeat, enthusiastic, and fun
- Be knowledgeable in the subject
- Convey a sense of priority, i.e., identify important material
- Be prepared; don't waste class time
- Have clear course objectives
- Give ample time to complete assignments and remind students of due dates
- Explain homeworks thoroughly

In addition to determining what students expect of their professors, a midsemester evaluation was conducted. Midsemester evaluations provide the professor with an opportunity to obtain feedback during the semester and to make appropriate changes before the semester ends and before the "official" student evaluations are administered. The results of the above "Expectations of Professors" questionnaire were used in the midsemester evaluation, e.g., fairness, accessibility, etc. In addition, open ended questions were included, e.g., "What is your favorite part of this course? What would you most like to change to improve this course? Given that I'm fairly new at teaching, how am I doing? Comments are most appreciated."

Teaching Rewards

Although there are many rewards from teaching, three come to mind immediately. (1) Knowledge exchange--learning from students about agriculture from the perspective of their discipline and teaching them from the agricultural economics' perspective. (2) New friends and future professional contacts--it is a pleasure to encounter former students. (3) Current undergraduates may become future graduate students--we are seeing more and more of this, with our best students staying at the University for graduate work.

Conclusions

I started teaching with little experience and only two weeks to prepare my courses (a high anxiety situation, potentially detrimental to both myself and my students). In talking to recent agricultural economics graduates, my experience of being thrown into the fire of teaching is not unique. In fact, several peers arrived at their new university job with their courses already underway and no time to prepare for them. The motivation for this paper was to share what I have learned about teaching from the perspective of an assistant professor, recognizing that there is much left to be learned. I have learned much through experimenting and listening to my colleagues' successes in teaching. I hope that this paper will help to relieve teaching anxiety for future graduates.

Endnotes

1. Identification of students' "expectations of a professor" was suggested by Dr. Joe T. Davis.
2. Computer graphic visuals were provided by Dr. David L. Debertin.
3. The use of "learning objectives" for each course section was suggested by Dr. Loys L. Mather.

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