

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty No. 7

The Top 10...

Observe Your Teaching Tendencies

Here's a new take on a teaching observation but without all of the anxiety that usually comes with it: observe yourself. Bring awareness to your teaching so that you verbally and nonverbally communicate to students what you intend to.

- ✓ Do you, in subtle ways, call on, validate, or convey a desire to help women more than men? Black students more than white students? Native English speakers more than non-native speakers? Older students more than younger students? Try to observe your tendencies and be willing to acknowledge what you discover. Do not judge yourself; simply bring awareness to your teaching.
- ✓ Do you have a tendency to teach your classes in a way that would most make sense to you? If you do, you're not alone, but recognize this as a well-intentioned tendency. Not every student thinks or learns the way you do. Explore some ways that you can engaged visual and kinesthetic learners, especially if you usually ask students to read and listen. Instead, what can you get them *doing* in class?
- ✓ Do your nonverbal behaviors send the same message as what you say? When you ask a question, what is your facial expression, where are your arms and hands, and where are you looking? When you answer a question, what is your tone, where are your arms and hands, and where do you look?
- ✓ Do you have any potentially annoying speech habits, such as the placeholders "um" and "uh"? Ask a student (in front of the whole class) to keep track of the number of times you say "um" or "uh" during a single class. Tell the class you are trying to become more aware of how you speak when teaching. Your students (all of them) will be freshly attentive and you will model self-awareness and a desire to grow as a teacher and person.

- ✓ Do you make eye contact with one side of the room more than the other? This is far more common than most teachers think. Do you make more eye contact with students who have established themselves as active participators? Bring your awareness to your eyes, where you direct them, and how you use them to engage *all* students in the room.
- ✓ Do you always call on the first hand that goes up? Does that hand always belong to one of the same four students? Ask yourself, especially early in the semester, if it is speed you are rewarding instead of a willingness to participate. Try asking a question and then giving the entire class a minute to write down some ideas before sharing ideas, or ask the class to wait fifteen seconds (time them) before anyone raises a hand.
- ✓ Do you only “haunt” one part of the classroom? Classroom configurations including computer stations, desks, or lecterns can box you in if you let them. Keep a sheet of paper on your desk or table and keep a tally under “Left” or “Right” every time you go to each side of the room. Also note how often you go to the back of the room or down the sides and aisles. The closer students are physically to their instructor, the more they tend to be engaged.
- ✓ Are you comfortable with silence, or will you be the first in your classroom to fill it? If you tend to fill silence, you train students to not to take ownership of the discussion and their own learning. The same thing happens if you always call on that one student who will *always* raise his or her hand. Silence can be a powerful, thought-provoking experience. Don’t avoid silence; *use* it.
- ✓ Do do you validate students’ ideas (and invalidate others) by what you write on the board? Before a class discussion, appoint a student to call on raised hands, tell the class that during the discussion each person gets to nominate an idea that someone else has just said for “publishing” on the board, and relegate yourself to simply “publishing” nominated ideas on the board as they arrive. This eliminates the tendency to validate some ideas and not others using the board.
- ✓ Do your assumptions about or experience with individual students in your class impact (perhaps unconsciously) how you evaluate them? For any assignment that requires subjective evaluations, consider having students put their names on the last page instead of the first or identify their work with a three digit number associated with them in your gradebook. If you have a good memory, go with a five digit number.