

**Teaching:  
A Crash Course for New  
Part-Time Community  
College Faculty**

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***Welcome to the community college system!*** You are about to embark on a great journey teaching the most diverse students in the world. We find teaching in a community college the most rewarding we have ever done; we get to make a huge difference in some students' lives. Being a community college teacher is very different from being a university or even 4-year college teacher. But, when we get it right, when students really learn something important to their future, when we see a few more students succeed in spite of the circumstances they face – what a wonderful feeling!

What kind of teacher do you want to be? Decent? Good? Great?

Okay, do you want the bad news first, or the good news? Let's try good news! The good news is that by following a few tips and learning a few techniques, you can become a **decent** community college teacher. Now, the bad news. To become a **good** community college teacher requires a lot of hard work. A LOT. Let's get started.

We all like to think we are pretty decent teachers already just by being ourselves, but good teaching is more than personality, instinct, or even experience: it is intentional. By making intentional choices about your teaching, you have the power to move your teaching to a much higher level.

Have you thought of your overall goal as a community college teacher? How about this:

**To create a positive, professional, productive and beneficial learning environment for as many students as possible.**

***This means that, rather than seeing our role as weeding out people not yet ready for college, we see our role as helping a few more be successful than a decent teacher would. Just a few more. But, what if each of us got a few more? Each class. Each semester.***

## Components of Success

- Use Your Time and Energy Productively
- Structure Your Course For Student Success
- Plan Lessons for Student Success
- Nail the First Class
- Make Grading Support Student Learning
- Over Prepare
- Whoops

## Using Your Time and Energy Productively

You cannot be your best if you are stressed with last-minute complications and the nuts and bolts of teaching. Eliminate many of these distractions so you can focus upon creating the best learning environment you can.

**Ahead of time:** Go to the college a week ahead of your course, copy everything you will need for 3 weeks, check out the latest room assignments to see if your classroom has been changed. Check out the room, but don't expect it to be exactly the same setup when you arrive. Check the number of seats in the room, the classroom technology (sometimes rooms have different setups) and the number of students in the class.

**Banner:** "Banner" is the software that lets you access student records, view and print your class list, and do other things. For now, view and print your class roster. You will probably have students adding and dropping your class during the first couple of weeks, so probably print a couple of times.

**Blackboard:** Unless you are experienced with using Blackboard, the online learning platform, start by using it simply as an electronic filing cabinet. You can learn how to create an announcement, how to create folders and how to upload files in less than a half hour. Post your syllabus and assignment sheet, all updates, and information you pass out in class. Remind your students often that course "nuts and bolts" are online (what a great name for the first folder "Nuts and Bolts"! ). Leave more sophisticated ways to use Blackboard to the future.

**Whiteboards:** Using a whiteboard in class? Throw a couple of markers and an eraser into your briefcase, and take them with you after every class, else they disappear. Trust us. Murphy's Law, avoided.

**Course folders:** Create a "Hand In" and "Hand Back" folder. Get 9 x 12 envelopes for all students (ask the program coordinator or department chair where office supplies are) and in the first class have students print their last name in large letters on one. Tell them all material you hand back will be placed in their envelope and will be in the "Hand Back" folder 15 minutes before class. It is up to them to pick their envelope up, take their material out, and at the end of class, to leave their envelope with everything they are supposed to hand in for that class, in the "Hand In" folder.

**Syllabus:** A syllabus is the "rules of the road" for your course. Perhaps your department requires a certain syllabus. If so, fine. If not, they will have an outline of what to cover, and probably the college has some "required language" for certain things. Ask the department chair or program coordinator for a recent course syllabus and a syllabus they consider to be an excellent one for you to model.

If possible, separate the class schedule of assignments (the readings and other homework assignments for each class period) and the syllabus. At least staple it as the first page – not the last.

Now, do something different for YOUR course. Leave a bit of extra space on the first page of your syllabus for you to write "Welcome to our course" and sign your name (with whatever name you wish your students to call you – "Professor Lincoln" or "Abe Lincoln" for example). You are different – correct? Demonstrate this to your students right away.

**Course Assignments:** Hand out only the first half of the readings and homework assignments for each class (consider listing them by class number rather than date, since a cancelled class will throw all subsequent dates off). Tell students you will give them the remainder 6 weeks into the course. (Gives you a chance to mold some assignments to that particular group of students and if there is a cancelled class early in the semester you can accommodate easily.)

# Structure Your Course for Student Success

Many beginning teachers focus on how to perform best in the classroom. But much of what happens in the classroom is based upon how you set up situations ahead of time.

*Creating a class culture that focuses on both learning and success is **your** job.* Structure as many things as possible so that it is easy for students to do what you want them to do – do the reading each week, take useful notes, identify questions they have, help each other, and learn as much as they can. Set up your systems so that students who move “off-track” know it right away.

**Class times:** Start class rigidly on time and end when the class is supposed to end, not early. End early once or twice and students will always expect it, just watch them start to pack up their books! When you let students out early regularly, you undermine the connection that is the basis of credit hours and class learning time.

To get everyone into seats on time, do something at the beginning of class that is graded. At the beginning, as in right after “Hi, everyone – glad to see you and hope you all had a good week. Time to ... [do whatever you do at the very beginning of class – see ‘open note quizzes’ below for one idea]”. Keep them in their seats for the entire class period by doing something at the end that counts significantly toward class participation – use “significantly” rather than tell exactly how much (See “Ending class” below for one idea).

Taking notes in class: If you want students to take notes in class, show them how. After the first class where you cover content, at the end hand out the notes you would have taken, had you been a student. This gives them a model.

**Get everyone doing the reading:** Consider “open note quizzes” as the first thing you do in class. Show students how to take notes from the reading (use a simple system such as “red for major headings”, then “green for sub-headings”, then “black for the points you want to remember”). Give no more than 5 questions on *key points* in the reading that you can grade in a minute per quiz. Take care of the “I got into a traffic jam and could not get here in time for the quiz, plus my grandfather had a heart attack” by automatically

throwing out the lowest grade, so students do not worry if they have one problem, life does happen.

**Ending class:** Within the last 10 – 20 minutes of class, do something that students will hand in. Have them do a class summary, or identify what they consider the 5 key points to be, or identify one question they think some students will have about the lesson (if you are REALLY into this, look up Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire and use it). Something you can quickly glance through, that will also give you an idea of what they are learning. Make sure students know this contributes to their participation grade so they get rewarded for being at both the beginning and end of class.

**Treat students like adults:** Remember, people respond to the way they are treated. If you treat students like children, they will respond that way – for example if you constantly remind them what the next assignments are, and to remember to hand in whatever they did in class. For a few classes remind them what the next class is, and, hence the assignments. Ditto with “hand in” – remind for the first few classes only and tell them you will be stopping this because they are adults.

**Study Buddies:** Strongly suggest that everyone get 1 – 3 “study buddies” – students they will regularly be in contact with to share ideas about what is important in the reading, check assignments due, remind each other what is necessary, go over class notes. This helps students build responsibility and removes you as “Class Reminder”.

**Move students:** Figure a way to move students several times during the course so they are not sitting with their buddies, which may not be a good thing! Do it in the first class, then perhaps after 4 more classes, then again after 4 classes.

**Don't cover the book:** This may sound odd, and probably will not fit with course PowerPoints and other materials that you may be given by the publisher of a text. But. But, if you cover everything in the readings for the week, why should they? Plus, it is boring for those students who really did study the reading.

Instead, look back at the course outcomes. Examine what the outcomes are for the particular reading for the week. Determine what your 3, or if you

*MUST* – 5, key points are, tying them in with the overall course outcomes. Make the connections explicit in your teaching – keep telling students “this is important” and “do you see how this connects with XXX outcome for the course”.

Work on some exercises for them to do that will reinforce the 3 key points. Reading something creates some learning. Writing notes about it helps. Reviewing the material in class, with your own examples will add more. Having them **do something** with the material will reinforce that learning.

Do go through all the reading, but you do not need to cover it all. “Does anyone have any questions about Attribution Theory” or “Do I need to go over the rules for using colons” is enough of a prompt. Let them ask questions.

**Student questions:** Most students do not ask questions on their own. In fact, one of the key things many college faculty do is to teach students how to know they have a question and how to ask a question. Also, a few students usually dominate both the asking of questions and the answering of questions. Neither is healthy for all students.

When you ask your students a question establish as a norm that everyone waits at least 15 seconds to give all a chance to think. Establish another norm that you will pick the person to answer, no one will shout out an answer. Establish another norm that you expect *everyone* to answer questions. To accomplish this without embarrassing shy students, when asking significant questions, allow students to talk with 1 – 2 others to see if they have a good group answer. Establish the norm that you will ask different students to respond with their group’s thoughts.

You can use the same idea when asking if there are any questions on a section of the reading. Allow students 4 minutes to consult with 1 – 2 others and then ask for the group response.

Oh, and at least once during the semester – preferably early, admit you do not know the answer to something. You are not supposed to know everything. Plus, this gives you a chance to do some research and show students your answer in the next class. Modeling learning.

## Lesson Planning

Our tendency as teachers is to explain, to talk, and to use PowerPoints and videos to give examples. The bad news is that most students lose focus after 10 – 12 minutes. Go ahead, try to listen to a lecture or a PowerPoint about something you know little about. How long do you passively pay attention?

Set a timer in your head. No lecturing, no PowerPoint or video for more than 10 – 12 minutes before you have students *do something*.

Here is the easiest lesson planning tool we know - BOPPPS. Use this system for all of your class periods.

**Bridge-in:** How does what you are going to cover today relate to what you covered before, why is it important. Keep it SHORT.

**Objectives:** Identify clear objectives for the lesson. What will students know, be able to do when done? After mid-term, have them help with the objectives. Shoot for 3 key topics per class.

**Pre-Test:** What do students already know about the subject?

**Present:** Develop interactive activities for students to make sense of the material. No talking longer than 10 – 12 minutes. Most of our students need to be actively engaged to learn best. Listening to abstract information, watching endless PowerPoints, and sitting passively is not helpful. Connecting content to your students' lives will also increase engagement.

**Post-Test:** How will you measure whether students understood the lesson (perhaps combine with the next one) – again, after mid-term, have students help with this one.

**Summary:** Start by doing a summary yourself, show students how to do it, then have them do their own summary.



## **That first class**

**Welcome:** Show up a half hour ahead of time. Get all your stuff organized. Write “Welcome to ... [your course]” and sign whatever name you want students to call you on the board. Greet students as they come in. Invite them to pick up a syllabus and assignment sheet and read it.

**Get them involved:** Most of us talk too much. Even in the first class, keep breaking things up with activities for them to do.

**Get students to read the syllabus:** Rather than go through the syllabus yourself in the first class, boring – boring, give students a reason to look carefully at it. Have them review the syllabus, and pretend they are giving a quiz on the syllabus. Each one has 5 minutes to write two quiz questions. Then, pair them up and have each pair take 8 minutes to develop 5 quiz questions. After that, spend time have students share one question with the class and make sure it is answered.

Do the same exercise with why your course is important to students. Ask them to take 10 minutes to review the chapter headings in the text, or the subjects of your assignments and then identify 3 reasons why the course content is important. Call time and pair them up again, preferably with someone different, to take 10 minutes to come up with 5 reasons why the course is important. Review as a class.

**Be human:** Tell students something about you and your career. Even better, let them develop some questions in groups of 2 – 3 and then ask you. No more than 12 – 15 minutes. Remember to work in something about you in each class – but only one thing. The purpose of the class is not to have you tell your stories! And, that also means stories about the course content. Keep them short and to the point!

**Student names:** Ask students to use their first name when they say something in class and then repeat their name. Learning student names is hard, but establishes a personal interaction that forces them to see you as a person.

**Class Agenda:** Put your agenda for the class on the Board and ask students to review it. Provide only enough detail that they know the subjects to be

covered and give yourself plenty of time for student questions. Doing this every class gives students a chance to ask you to cover something else, or to comment that they need to review past content.

**Student Information Sheet:** Have students fill out a personal information sheet, including how you can know who they are when you look out at the class. The more you know about them, the more you can use that information in a positive way in class. Why are they in this course? Do they work – where – how much? Where do they live? Have they always lived in this area? What has helped them be successful in courses in the past? What has gotten in the way of their learning? What worries them about the course?

Look at the great information you will get to be able to personalize some comments, and assistance! And, a bonus. Share a general summary with your students. For example, 14 of you have always lived in this area, 12 do not like to speak in front of others, 7 asked for more time for tests, 8 are non-native English speakers, etc. This helps students realize they are not alone – that others have some of the same concerns and issues that they have. Consider employing an online survey program where students can use their phones or tablets to provide anonymous information that then is instantly put onto charts and graphs you can project.

**Move yourself:** Establish right away (and each week) that the room is YOUR room by moving all over. Talk from the side, talk from the back. Give in-class projects and walk around. Be careful of desks or tables at the front of the class, they will limit your mobility unless you consciously move. Do this in the first class and *every class* after that.

**Cell phones:** Establish your cell phone rules early and enforce them. Make sure to put them in your syllabus. Students almost never need to access their phones for personal use during class.

## Grading

If your department allows people to design their own evaluation system, great! Even so, they might have some aspects that must be included (a short paper, for example, or a mid-term and final examination).

If there is no short paper required, consider having students write 2 pages on something – this is college after all. If you don't feel comfortable grading grammar because you don't have time to teach it, you can still hold students accountable for basic college level writing and suggest/refer them to work with tutors in your Writing Center or Student Skills Center. Only comment on the very egregious problems in their writing. For first level courses, it might be something fairly easy, such as a personal analysis based upon information gleaned during the course, or a "learning-reaction paper" where they explain some things they have learned and then identify how it might impact their life in the near and distant future.

For tests, if you use "objective" tests (T-F, multiple choice, etc.) at least do not believe that they measure much except short-term memory. Even if you do, consider adding one or two short-answer questions (long-answer questions if the course is advanced!) to get students thinking and applying concepts.

If you are designing your own evaluation system, perhaps the "open note quizzes" identified earlier can be 15% of the final grade. And, simply participating in class and completing the end of class exercise might be most of the "class participation" grade – perhaps another 25% of the final grade. If then you decide to give a mid-term and final exam, perhaps the mid-term is 25% of the grade and the final is 35%?

On tests, consider allowing students to use their notes on the reading and class. Repeat regularly how to organize them for maximum use. For example, perhaps you want them to only use the left side of the paper for reading notes, so they can add class notes on the same subject on the right side. Using notes on tests, reinforces how important notes are. If you do this, consider telling them to read their notes, out loud, several times the week before the test and the day before the test – it helps "fix" ideas in their mind so they use the material for your question. And, remember, now your question can be application-oriented, rather than simply content specific.

Arranging your course for student success does not mean making it too easy. Hold your standards, just make it likely that students will be able to jump onto the right path and feel comfortable asking for help when they are struggling. Discard the idea of grading on a curve – give people the grades they have earned. If all get A's and B's and you believe you have made the course sufficiently hard, so be it.

## **Over prepare**

Have activities that you can go to at any time – energize a class, change up the routine, deal with unexpected extra time – whenever you need them. All result in information about what students are understanding. Consider doing some of these after the middle of the course when students may be following into a routine in your course.

**Key Points:** Have students work in groups of 2 – 4 to identify the 5 key points in the readings, and 2 reasons why each is a key point.

**Visualize it:** Have students alone or in groups of 2 – 4 draw a diagram that illustrates some key points, suggest no more than 5 words.

**You explain it:** Have students alone or in small groups explain a key concept, or several key concepts in their own language.

**What if:** Have students in groups of 2 – 3 play out the ramifications of something, “What if George Washington had refused to be first President of the USA” for an American History course or “what if water molecules were not sticky” for a biology course, or “what if everyone had a personal robot” for a sociology course.

**Your examples:** Have students alone or in small groups provide good examples for several key concepts in the class.

**Key So Far:** Any time after the middle of the semester, have students alone or in small groups identify the 5 key concepts in the course so far.

**Linking Ideas:** After showing students how to link ideas in the readings, have them – alone or in a group of 3 – 4, draw a diagram linking key points for the past 2 – 3 classes.

**Dump These:** Either alone or in small groups, have students identify 4 subjects in the most recent readings which are absolutely not necessary for them to know right now, with a reason for each choice.

Applications: Have students identify how they can actually use the information they have learned in class in their life in the next month.

Student feedback: Have students identify one major thing you do in class that helps them learn and one thing you do in class that they feel gets in the way of their learning (this gives you good feedback also). Go over the high points in the next class and identify how you are trying to change the class if many students wrote similar things. Save these, and compare course to course to see how you are changing.

*That's it! Thanks for all your hard work, both from us and from all those students who will benefit for you deciding that "adequate" is simply not good enough.*

## Whoops

We forgot two things. First, an excellent source of information about teaching on your campus is your Teaching/Learning Consultant funded by the state-wide Center for Teaching (CFT). Find out who it is and consult with that person! They also know about CFT programs and materials.

Second – how do you measure success as a teacher? How about this definition “success is measured by how far you have come from where you started.” So, right now, put on your calendar for the week AFTER you submit final grades to spend a quiet half hour by yourself thinking how much you have changed as a teacher. **Pat yourself on the back.** Do the same for the next course(s) you teach. Every time, a week AFTER final grades, give yourself a quiet half hour to reflect. “How far have I come from where I was as a teacher at the beginning of this course?” Perhaps you want to jot down a few notes for yourself so you don't forget before your next class.

## Thanks!!

Teaching in community college is an honor. We consider it to be the most wonderful place to teach in the United States because we get more diverse (on any measure of diversity you can imagine!) students than any other educational institutions. Because it is an honor, we must work hard to uphold our part of the bargain. This means we must continually learn. Thanks for reading this and embarking on this critical journey to excellence in teaching.

As teachers, we have been positively influenced by a great many colleagues and teachers we have had the honor of observing – superb teachers and wonderful colleagues. For this publication we must especially thank two – **Amely Cross** and **Carol Laliberte** from Asnuntuck. Thanks for your ideas!

Also, we have learned so much about teaching and learning from our own students, those poor guinea pigs (don't tell them!). Paying attention to our students, trying things out and getting their reactions, listening to their ideas and their struggles – what a gift they have given us.