Preparing for the First Solo Teaching Experience: An Alternative to Learning as You Go

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First-time instructors often lack necessary resources when preparing and teaching their first course, resulting in suboptimal outcomes for themselves and their students. Although introductory teaching programs can assist first-time instructors, access to these opportunities is unequal (McCormack, Gore, and Thomas 2007). Additionally, demographic and situational factors can hinder first-time instructors while preparing their first class. Consequently, graduate students and junior scholars are more likely to learn as they go during their first teaching experience, making them more susceptible to negative experiences while balancing research and service responsibilities (Assuncao Flores 2006; Gavish and Friedman 2010; Meanwell and Kleiner 2014).

We identify several aspects of course preparation for first-time instructors and address common situations which arise before, during, and after teaching your first course. Syllabus design is a necessary component of course preparation, but most graduate students are not taught how to do this. We provide points of consideration for the content and design of syllabi. During instruction, it helps when instructors have a sustainable means of lesson planning, while navigating various student issues and balancing teaching with research and service commitments. After teaching a course, instructors can benefit from spending time reflecting on how to develop

their long-term teaching identity, especially focusing on how to be responsive to the needs of students.

Planning for course instruction should be intentional, since doing so makes it easier for instructors to teach a course that is designed in alignment with its stated outcomes. Planning also enhances student experience, since they are more likely to be engaged and do better when they know what to expect in a course. Lastly, teaching, like research, is a part of our job. We plan our research. Similarly, we should plan our teaching.

Writing the Syllabus and Determining Course Assessments

As a first-time instructor, you will be balancing teaching and research responsibilities. There are several ways you can write an optimal syllabus for student learning while accommodating time for your research agenda. Remember that you can determine assignments deadlines and exam dates according to your conference and research schedule. Additionally, you can create assessments that can be graded quickly and efficiently. In this section, we discuss the pros and cons of different types of assessments that can be scaled to accommodate time constraints and research schedules, while still optimizing learning outcomes.

Written Assignments

When teaching political science, one of the primary objectives is to assess the students' ability to synthesize and apply course content. Written assignments, such as essays, papers, and discussion boards, allow students opportunities to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the course material. They also allow you flexibility in assessing final grades for assignments as you can determine point allocation based on your expectations of the students. Written assignment prompts are also scalable to short and long form papers, and can be used in multiple semesters.

They may also alleviate exam pressure on students and allow for more in-depth examinations of topics.

For all their benefits, written assignments come with tradeoffs. They can be time consuming to grade, something that is especially difficult when trying to balance research responsibilities. Additionally, their evaluation involves subjective judgments on the part of the instructor. This could open up your evaluation to challenges by students. Students may enter a course with their own preconceived notions regarding course content, which could prove challenging as some students have difficulty separating pure opinion from well-supported analysis of course content. This is something about which instructors who identify as women and/or persons of color (POC) should be particularly mindful. Compared to white male peers, women and POC instructors are more likely to have their assessments challenged by students and to be rated negatively on student evaluations if those challenges do not yield results in favor of the student (see MacNell et al. 2014; El-Alayli et al. 2018).

Exams

If your goal is to assess content memorization, exams may be appropriate for your class. Exams can evaluate content knowledge through the use of multiple choice, short answer questions, or essays. They can be quickly and efficiently graded, especially if you use answer keys for short answer and essay questions. They are also less reliant on the subjective judgments of the instructor. Like written assignments, however, there are tradeoffs. Though exams take less time to grade than long form written assignments, they can take much more time to write. This is especially true if you are writing multiple-choice exams in that you have to write not only a multitude of questions, but also multiple answer choices per question. Exams also put more pressure on students and results may not accurately reflect how much they have learned in the

class due to other mitigating factors such as class size and the intellectual propensities of the students (Leithner 2011; Towner 2016).

Projects

Projects can be a useful way to assess how well students process course content and apply it in original ways. They allow students to get creative and to turn the class into a collaborative experience. They also allow quite a bit of flexibility on the part of the students and the instructor. Like written assignments, projects can be scaled and altered for future classes. Some things to keep in mind, however, are that students may have different resources available to them. Any project that requires the use of technology or technical expertise may disadvantage some students, as access to technology outside of the classroom varies. Additionally, though group projects are a great opportunity to teach collaboration, they also increase the likelihood of intra-group conflict which may present difficulties in the process. For project and group activity based learning resources, see Oakley et al. 2004 or [APSA Educate](#).

Backward Course Design

Backward course design focuses on course outcomes rather than course content, since finding *content* is often easier (Davidovitch 2013). For example, pre-existing syllabi from home departments or through [APSA Educate](#) can assist you immensely. The focus on outcomes leaves room for instructors to make choices in how to achieve them, making assessments or pacing a more open-ended process. It also leaves room for you to make changes throughout the semester or on an individual student basis.

Backward course design involves first asking what students should know once the course is done. These goals should be formalized into learning outcomes. Second, you should decide

what students need to do to meet those outcomes. A guide for designing outcomes is in our Resources at the end of this chapter. Lastly, you decide on the activities that will meet these assessments. This will consume most of your course planning time. Reynolds and Kearns (2017) provide a helpful lesson planner if you want to align weekly activities with your course outcomes.

Identifying specific content and individual lessons is the last step (Michael and Libarkin 2016). At this point, first-time instructors may find it more useful to check whether sections from other syllabi align with the overall lesson goals. This is easier than selecting a mix of content before trying to find what makes it cohesive. Focusing on alignment with targeted learning outcomes ensures that students learn what is intended *and* have a better understanding of what is expected of them. Using learning outcomes to shape course design helps improve student engagement, since the syllabus will be clearer about *why* things are assigned (Strashnaya and Dow 2017).

It can be tempting to include many active learning techniques or the most recent academic articles in a course. You may want to update your course or entirely reject the traditional lecture model. However, be judicious. Always go back to your learning outcomes to determine if a particular reading, approach, or assessment helps you meet your objectives. The aim is to be effective, not just trendy.

You need to pace your course as part of syllabus design. Graded *and* ungraded assessments give students adequate scaffolding in the course. Scaffolding involves setting a foundation for students to practice skills or content and building towards a more complex task like an exam or paper. We recommend that you ensure your students practice their mastery of a certain skill or content in a guided way prior to grading their attempt. This helps instructors

determine the pacing of their course, since students should have multiple opportunities to practice what they have learned prior to a major assessment such as a final exam, essay, or project. Additionally, consider the various weights attached to each assessment and if it is proportional to the importance reflected in the learning outcomes.

Aside from when assessments or content are introduced, plan out the behind-the-scenes work that is completed outside of lecture or assessments. It may be useful to not only plan for when students will take their midterm or submit a paper, but also when you will grade or provide feedback. Remember that you are balancing your teaching with research and service, meaning you will not want to be grading 25 papers the same week you are presenting at a national conference.

Handling Student Issues While Teaching

As a first-time instructor, you are likely closer in age to your students than other faculty. This can be beneficial since your students may be more open with you, but it can also be difficult as you need to maintain clear boundaries with your students. The Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University identifies two main causes for student issues: (1) issues tied to the course structure and (2) issues tied to individual student circumstances (Eberly Center 2021). Following the advice provided in the rest of this chapter, your course should be designed in a way that prevents structural problems. However, individual student circumstances may still arise. We do not address disruptive student behavior in this chapter, but resources for dealing with disruptive students can be found at this link: https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1353. In this section, we focus on addressing individual student circumstances effectively. Individual student issues may be related to mental or physical health, academic struggles, cultural issues, or generational

differences in expectations related to educational experience and respect for peers and instructors (Eberly Center 2021).

Student Resources

Some student issues, such as mental and physical health, are *not* your responsibility to address. However, most universities require instructors to serve as mandatory reporters of mental or physical health issues or incidents of victimization, offer institutional pathways for reporting students of concern, and provide various support services. Keeping a list of relevant on and off-campus organizations and services is helpful, since students may not know about all of them or in case students mention a concern that should be addressed by a professional. Some temporary concerns, such as relationship difficulties, stress, procrastination, or disruptive classroom behavior may be related to health struggles. Provide information on available services to your students without stigma, as cultural differences may make seeking help more difficult for some students. Additional training, as listed in our Resources at the end of the chapter, is also available for faculty interested in improving their awareness of the symptoms of mental health problems your students may be facing.

Office Hours

Hold consistent office hours and clarify the purpose of these hours. Many first-generation students are unaware of what office hours are for or have a negative perception of them. Yet, office hours attendance by political science students is correlated with academic performance (Guerrero and Rod 2013). To encourage attendance, consider offering multiple opportunities to meet each week as opposed to single blocks of time that may not work for many students. The purpose of office hours as a time for student support should be clearly stated, and office hours

can be renamed 'student support hours' for this purpose. Reminders about the time and location can be automatically generated and sent to encourage attendance. Many students are intimidated by office hours or ashamed to admit they need help. Actively working to remove stigma from office hours and asking students who are performing poorly in class to attend office hours can significantly help these students, who may not attend otherwise.

Office hours are more than a tool for assisting students who are struggling. As an instructor, they help you gain student trust. Encouraging regular, active attendance at office hours can turn a classroom of strangers into a learning community as you and the students become acquainted. The development of professional student-teacher relationships can reduce behavioral problems and learning disruptions in the classroom (Decker et al. 2007). Furthermore, when students attend office hours, they may be more willing to share the specific issues they are facing, which in turn can help you to direct them towards appropriate resources.

Cultural and Generational Differences

Cultural or generational differences may lead to suboptimal student performance. Establishing clear expectations about classroom conduct, the purpose of lectures and activities, and actively seeking student feedback can help you to prevent many issues. Approaches to dealing with classroom disruptions vary across cultures (Lewis et al. 2005). Being cognizant of how international students' education in primary and high school impacts their expectations and behavior in the classroom can improve learning outcomes. Across the semester, international students may suffer from a decreased sense of social belonging, which may affect their ability to focus and potentially lead to disruptive behavior. Planning activities in the classroom that encourage communication and integration between students can help to alleviate issues related to social integration and may benefit domestic and international students (Van Horne et al. 2018).

Generational differences can also present challenges to new instructors. Though the "traditional" college student is typically 18 to 24 years old, there has been an increase in age variation in recent years due to the growth of early college high school programs, as well as an increase in enrollment amongst older students (Holland 2014). The increased age variation amongst students can also lead to differing expectations of the instructor, with some students expecting more structure while others desire more flexibility. Setting clear expectations and goals for the students early in the semester can help improve learning outcomes, but showing a willingness to be flexible can increase the level of comfort that students feel in the classroom. Students of different generations can have different learning styles and varying comfort levels with educational technology (Williams, et. al., 2014). Additionally, the priorities of students of different ages can vary greatly. "Traditional" students may solely focus on their identity as college students, whereas older students may be juggling academic, professional, and familial responsibilities. Given that college student populations are much more diverse than ever before, fostering communication with students across the semester will be key to achieving desired outcomes.

Balancing Teaching, Scholarship, and Service

Most of your time as a first-year instructor will be spent on course preparation. Extensive course preparation often continues into the second or third year of a faculty appointment. You may feel some trepidation about spending a significant amount of your time focused on teaching, especially when you are excited about expanding research agendas or participating in university service. However, investing in teaching yields dividends in confidence in the classroom through the rest of one's career.

Effectively balancing teaching with scholarship and service commitments can be a nebulous task. It can take years to comfortably understand how one balances their workload. Part of this challenge rests in the wide variety of expectations found across institutions. Connecting with others who have been at your institution for a significant portion of time can provide a frank and honest assessment of how to approach these obligations, especially if expectations are not clearly delineated. See Chapter 16 in this volume for more advice on time management.

Through the first year of teaching, take time to pause and reflect on your work in teaching, scholarship, and service. Reflecting upon your successes and commitments, even briefly, will help you discover that elements of your workload are inexorably connected. Bringing your research into the classroom allows you to complete publishable research projects while teaching, even perhaps in the *Journal of Political Science Education* (see Chapter 30, which discusses publishing pedagogical research). As there is limited time to devote to teaching, scholarship, and service, finding these connections can lead to efficiency and your development as a scholar. Over time, it would be beneficial to cement these connections by joining the APSA Education Section or attending the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference, sharing your ideas with others in the discipline (also discussed in Chapter 30). However, pausing to reflect on your efforts, typically in the summer months, also allows you to confidently assert and better articulate your own development as a teacher, scholar, and member of the university community.

Post-Course Evaluation

Successfully self-evaluating a course begins with setting appropriate objectives on the syllabus. These not only guide course assessments and content, but also the metric by which an instructor measures their efforts. The extent to which one successfully reaches these objectives

can be measured through carefully designed assignments and assessments that facilitate student learning. Formal assessment work can be intimidating for first-time teachers, but a good start is keeping track of exams and essays to make small, responsive changes in each iteration of the class. However, the earlier in which one consciously thinks through course evaluation, the more consistently you can measure the success of your efforts in a class.

Student evaluations are often indirect instruments and not necessarily aligned with a course's specific objectives or goals. Biases can affect scores on student evaluations (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman 2021). However, some institutions still place a high value on these scores, so we encourage first-time instructors to adhere to the teaching requirements of their position. If your position does not require peer evaluations, getting feedback from a colleague who sits in your class is still valuable. For graduate students, getting an advisor to sit in your class is helpful–but can also provide a credible example of your teaching abilities in a job market letter. It can be difficult not to fixate on student scores, but we recommend focusing on being student-centered and ensuring that course assessments or assignments align with the objectives on the syllabus.

Conclusion

Building a course is a marathon, not a sprint. Prior to teaching the course, instructors need to determine the objectives that will guide the content and pacing of their syllabi. During the term, instructors need to encourage students to attend office hours and be prepared to navigate individual or course-level issues. After the term, instructors benefit from reflections and evaluations of what worked and what could be improved.

While instructors gain familiarity with course material after successive terms of teaching, this familiarity can still be fleeting since the students who make up a class change each term. A process of deliberate course design and syllabus construction with assessments that are aligned with objectives can help ensure a course's success, whether it is the first or tenth time you are teaching it. The three stages of course preparation and clear communication work together to ensure a successful course.

Resources

[APSA Educate](#)

[APSA Syllabus Bank](#)

[APSA Teaching Simulations](#)

[Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL)](#)

[Mental Health First Aid Trainings](#)

[Dealing With Disruptive Student Behavior](#)

[Guide to Designing Learning Outcomes](#)

[Template for Backward Course Design](#)

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