

Handling Problems, Pitfalls, and Surprises in Teaching: Some Guidelines

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In workshops, suggestions about how to handle the problems in the scenarios under discussion have surfaced. Those ideas have been distilled into some guidelines to help you handle many of the challenges that will arise in your teaching career. These guidelines fall into several broad categories.

1. Be aware that two kinds of contracts exist in the classroom.

Two kinds of contracts govern the expectations and behavior of both instructor and students in any classroom: 1) the explicit contract, which is often spelled out in the syllabus and covers such aspects of the course as weekly classroom topics, course requirements, and course expectations; and 2) the implicit contract, which stipulates norms such as who can talk in the classroom, what styles of teaching are used, and what styles of learning are emphasized. Give careful thought to the explicit contract; it is directly in your control, particularly at the outset of the semester. But also be conscious of the implicit contract, particularly as it evolves through precedent in the classroom interactions of your course. Monitor it and respect it throughout the semester.

2. You are a human being. Admit to and share your humanity.

This guideline is, perhaps, a corollary of the previous one. You can make your teaching life a very complicated one if you think teaching is neither nothing more nor nothing less than delivering information. What seems critical is to figure out how to be yourself through your teaching. Then you will accept the role of teacher easily and comfortably, and honesty will be easy to accomplish. Students see through artificial poses, as they should. Be yourself.

3. Use outside resources, including colleagues. Remember, you are not alone.

Your university has resources available to help with difficult situations that arise in the classroom. That you have been asked to teach is not, in itself, a validation sticker on your teaching abilities. Teaching skills can be developed and honed, and your university provides a lot of resources to help you in that growth. These may range from an ombudsmen to written policies on cheating and plagiarism to a guide on handling sexual harassment. One of the most valuable resources at your disposal consists of fellow faculty members and fellow TAs. Use colleagues as sounding boards as you develop your own teaching style and as you work your way through some of the problems that will inevitably challenge you.

4. Honesty is the best policy.

We have experienced very few issues in education that are not addressed best with honesty. If you do not know the answer to a student's question, admit it, but promise to find the answer before the next meeting. If you find yourself in a dilemma to which there is no ideal solution, say so. Provide a truthful reason for why a policy is what it is, and if you do not understand why it is what it is, say so, but once again promise to find out.

5. Listen with empathy and make sure you have all necessary information before making a decision.

Listen intelligently and carefully to a student when he or she comes to talk to you about a problem. Try to sidestep any preconceived notions about the student, the problem, the class as a whole, and so on. Put yourself into his or her shoes and attempt to determine both the meaning and feeling behind what the student is saying. Recognize those feelings (e.g., "It must feel terrible that^s"). Make sure you talk to all concerned parties before deciding on a course of action, and remember that the issue that is under discussion may not be the underlying problem.

6. Think strategically about the problem.

By strategic thinking we mean analyze the problem you have been confronted with by answering the following questions:

* What is my purpose in this situation? Every problem or difficulty presents an opportunity to accomplish one or more teaching goals. Can this situation provide a chance for learning? Can you use this problem to change the learning environment in the classroom? To the extent that you can determine beforehand what you want to achieve, you will be able to decide on an appropriate response more effectively.

* What are the characteristics of the students who are involved in this situation? Knowing something about the personalities and backgrounds of your students will help guide your response. For example, the norms in some cultures dictate that students should be silent in the classroom, neither participating in class discussions nor asking questions. This norm might account for the unusually quiet behavior of some students, and that knowledge could help you aid those students in modifying their style of expression.

* What responses and/or feelings are brought up in me as a result of this situation? How can I use my particular teaching style and communication skills most effectively? It is not unusual that teaching dilemmas bring up strong feelings in the instructor. For example, you may feel uncomfortable addressing gender issues in the classroom or trying to communicate with a student who is a nonnative English speaker. Recognizing these feelings in yourself will help you frame an effective response. Similarly, we all come with teaching and communication strengths that we can call on to help us cope with difficult situations. A sense of humor, the power to observe closely, or the ability to work at different levels of abstraction may all be used to handle effectively the kinds of pitfalls we have been discussing.

* What medium would be the most effective to use in this situation? Is this a situation that is best handled by a meeting with the student? By writing a memo or letter? By addressing the issue with the class as a whole? Each strategy has its own benefits and liabilities, and sometimes using a combination of media is best.

* What cultural variables are affecting the situation? Cultural variables are at work in the classroom on several different levels. Every course and classroom has its own climate, every university has its own distinct culture, and your students bring the norms of their home countries and/or of their peer groups into the classroom. Recognizing this diversity of norms will help you understand their impact on the situation and respond accordingly.

7. Think about ways a difficult situation might be turned into a learning opportunity.

All kinds of learning take place in the classroom in addition to mastering a certain subject area. Students are learning how to learn, how to work with others, how scholars in the field think, and so on. Often difficulties in the classroom can be used as vehicles that contribute to these kinds of learning.

8. Remember that each student is a member of a larger group that comprises the class as a whole. Keep issues of fairness in mind.

Often the thorniest dilemmas in teaching involve balancing the needs of the individual students with the needs and rights of the class as a whole. To use the quiet student as an example again, if a student is from a culture where silence in the classroom is a norm, should that student be penalized for not contributing to classroom discussion? On the other hand, is it fair to have two sets of standards in one classroom? And are the other students in the class missing valuable contributions because the expectation of particular modes of classroom behavior impedes the ability of some students to speak in public?

Another challenging situation is that of the monopolizing student. Students talk too much for a variety of reasons, including genuine excitement about a topic, insensitivity, nerves, and problems with impulse control. Generally, a good approach to dealing with both the excessively talkative or quiet student is to meet one-on-one outside class to talk and establish strategies to ameliorate the situation.

Similarly, recognize that once a student has asked a question (raised an issue, or expressed a viewpoint), that question may then become the question of other members of the class, and it may no longer be sufficient to respond to that individual student alone.

These suggestions are not meant to be inclusive. Instead, they are an attempt to help TAs think through ways to handle the problems, pitfalls, and surprises they will face in their teaching careers. We hope these guidelines will provide a springboard to an ongoing conversation about teaching in higher education.

From the chapter Problems, Pitfalls, and Surprises in Teaching: Mini Cases, by Lori Breslow, J. Mark Schuster of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the book, *Strategies for Teaching Assistant and International Teaching Assistant Development: Beyond Micro Teaching*, Catherine Ross, Jane Dunphy, and Associates. Published by Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint. Fourth Edition. Copyright © 2007 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved. 989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741