

From the issue dated October 26, 2007

# A Dozen Teaching Tips for Diverse Classrooms

By PIPER FOGG

For the majority of community-college professors, teaching is the most important part of their jobs. And it's not easy. Community-college students are a diverse bunch but often face a particular set of challenges. Many entering students are not prepared for college-level work. And while some students plan to transfer to competitive four-year colleges, others struggle to complete remedial courses. Some students commute long distances, and many have jobs or families. In one class, a teacher may face an 18-year-old who is fresh out of high school, a single mother who works part time, and a first-generation college student who doesn't speak English well.

Community-college students require teachers who are engaging, creative, responsive, and energetic — and who understand their students' needs. Professors have to be up on the latest teaching methods, know which of them work for their students, and be flexible enough to change when something isn't working. Here are a dozen tips — many from seasoned professors — for those just starting out, or for veterans who want fresh ideas.

## **1. Remember that your students are freshmen and sophomores.**

One trap new faculty members fall into in their first jobs out of graduate school is to harbor inflated expectations, says Robin D. Jenkins, director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College. "One new instructor in my department, for instance, asked students to write four lengthy essays during one 75-minute period," he says, "because that's the sort of thing she'd been expected to do in her graduate courses."

Mr. Jenkins advises new teachers to look at what their more-experienced colleagues are assigning, and to check out their syllabi. Even better, take them to lunch, he says, and pick their brains. "We all want to have the appropriate amount of rigor in our classes," he says, but that doesn't mean piling on the work when students aren't ready for it.

## **2. While setting realistic expectations is important, you must also share them with your students.**

If you are a stickler for grammar, let it be known on Day 1, advises Delaney J. Kirk, a professor of management at the University of South Florida at Sarasota-Manatee. Tell students if you give grace periods for assignments or if you will not tolerate tardiness. "Have a rationale so the policy is seen as reasonable," says Ms. Kirk, the author of *Taking Back the Classroom: Tips for the College Professor on Becoming a More Effective Teacher* (Ti-berius Publications, 2005). After explaining your philosophy, take time to learn what students expect of you as well: Teaching is a two-way street.

## **3. Take advantage of the technology-training courses your college offers, but don't feel pressured to use technology for its own sake.**

Sample everything that interests you, find the applications that best fit your teaching style, and try to incorporate them into your teaching. Just because your college offers fancy technology with a big "wow" factor doesn't always mean it will help you. "Experiment with what works for you," says Georgia Perimeter's Mr. Jenkins. "Feel free to ignore the rest."

**4. Look at the whole experience — including the syllabus, the textbook, and the classroom from your students' perspective.**

Are the books affordable or easy to find in the library? Is the classroom comfortable? Are assignments well spaced? It pays to think like your students, says Ellen J. Olmstead, an English professor at Montgomery College, in Rockville, Md., who was the 1999 Carnegie Foundation Community College Professor of the Year.

**5. Consider keeping a teaching journal.**

Verna B. Robinson, a professor of English at Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, says it's a great way to keep track of your experiences, including successes and failures, challenges, aspirations, inspirations, expectations, and, yes, complaints.

**6. Be mindful of the pressures on students, some of whom have families, jobs, or long commutes.**

Use the Internet, for example, to make course material, assignments, and feedback available online, so students can log in any time from home.

**7. Know what services are available at your college to help struggling students.**

It's great if your college offers tutoring, English-language help, or career counseling, but they're useful only if students actually use them. Distribute a handout at the start of the term and approach individual students if they seem to need a hand. Have a counselor come and introduce himself or herself to the class.

**8. Make sure students understand why the subject matter of the course is worth learning, and how it relates to the real world.**

If you get students invested, they will put in more work, says Richard L. Faircloth, a biology professor at Anne Arundel. Mr. Faircloth, who teaches anatomy, asks students to find a topic in current events that relates to the week's assignment and write a short essay on why the topic is relevant in everyday life.

"I've always found these aha's that occur outside of class, when we've learned something in class, help to reinforce it," says Mr. Faircloth. Expanding students' media diets, he says, helps them find those everyday connections. It also gives them fresh perspectives and "gets them out of their little circle of e-mail and their circle of cellphones and text messaging."

**9. Encourage your students to give you feedback on your teaching.**

Anne Arundel's Ms. Robinson suggests passing out index cards midway through the semester and asking students what they would like to see more of and less of. Or ask students to grade you in one or two areas of your teaching. "Students appreciate being asked," she says. Listen to what they have to say and try to incorporate their reasonable responses.

**10. If you are concerned about plagiarism, consider increasing the load of in-class work, such as problem sets and essays.**

You will learn quickly who is struggling, and it helps procrastinators and those who might otherwise turn work in late, says Tiina Lombard, an associate professor of English at Miami Dade College. It also teaches students to work better under pressure.

**11. Develop at least one assignment that requires each student to meet with you, one on one, in**

**your office.**

The meeting could be devoted to reviewing an essay or homework assignment. Then use that time to discuss the student's progress and answer any questions. "You will be amazed at how beneficial even a brief face-to-face meeting can be for you and the student," says Ms. Robinson.

**12. Identify at least one quality you appreciate in each student, and keep it in mind every time you come in to class.**

"It'll make you smile when you walk in to the classroom and look around at everyone," says Ms. Olmstead, of the English department at Montgomery College.

<http://chronicle.com>  
Section: Community Colleges  
Volume 54, Issue 9, Page B12

---

[Copyright](#) © 2007 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#)