

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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The Challenge of Teaching the Introductory-level Course

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One of the most challenging teaching tasks in college is providing effective instruction in introductory-level courses. Members of the Study Group of the National Institute of Education recognized this challenge when they recommended that "deans and department chairs... assign as many of their finest instructors as possible to classes attracting large numbers of first-year students" (1984). If teaching the introductory course is a special case, what makes it so and how can college teachers meet this challenge?

Subject Matter One major difference in introductory-level courses is the nature of the subject matter itself. While there is usually little question what the focus and need of upper division courses are, the designing of a beginning course for novice learners is not nearly so universally agreed upon. Instead it requires the designer to consider some basic philosophical and practical questions about the context and content of the course.

Who? and Why? Two fundamental questions confronting the introductory instructor are who is taking this course and why are they there? Consider the range of possibilities. **Are the students predominantly 1. majors, 2. possible majors, or 3. general education students?** If the students are majors, then the instructor has a responsibility to the department and the field illustrated by the following additional questions. **Is this course a prerequisite for other courses in the field?** The answer is most likely yes. Therefore, unlike most upper division courses, the instructor in this case must be

much more concerned with tying the content to what will follow. This implies greater communication with colleagues about their expectations for student skills and background.

Of course, the introductory class cannot prepare majors for all the possible content of the discipline, so the instructor faces another question: **What are the *foundational* concepts of the discipline which must be grasped by all majors prior to entry into advanced courses and how are these concepts to be selected?** Once again this implies a lot of communication with colleagues and a significant understanding of the underlying structure of the field. It is essential to identify critical content which cannot be overlooked and separate it from things which are nice to know but would probably be more appropriate for later courses.

A third responsibility of courses which cater to majors is to introduce them to "**ways of knowing**" in the discipline. Each discipline has a unique perspective and set of customs for thinking and investigating. Too often these are assumed to be obvious because they are so automatic to faculty members, but it is in the beginning courses that students must gain the fundamental sense of inquiry appropriate to their new field.

Alternatively, the beginning course may be made up of students who have not yet committed to a particular major, but are exploring alternatives. The questions appropriate for this course are more tentative. **Does the instructor want to attract these prospective majors into the field?** If so, the course needs to take a motivational bent. **What is it about this field that is so attractive or interesting that students should consider making it their life's work?** And the more complex questions as outlined for definite majors about foundational concepts and ways of knowing apply as well, if not as critically, to these courses.

Some beginning classes are populated by students from other fields, fulfilling requirements, pursuing general education interests, or filling time slots. These students might best be characterized as "intelligent laymen." What is the beginning course's responsibility to this group? **Should the course make these Individuals "literate" in the field?** If so, **what are the most important insights for these students?**

What is the course's societal relevance? It is not necessary for these students to delve into the content with the depth and intensity of someone intending to make it their career, yet they need sufficient exposure to be aware of the important issues and modes of inquiry which will enable them to build a foundation for following new developments on their own.

How much? and How far? No matter which group of students is likely to populate the beginning course, the instructor must also face the questions of how much and how far. Whether for majors or general education students, **how broadly should the course survey important elements in the field? What would be the consequences in terms of student learning if fewer topics were taught in greater depth?** Many instructors at all levels complain that there is too much material to cover in their classes, but few seem to question the assumptions which underlie the practice of "covering the field." Collateral questions which impact this issue are: **What kind of thinking should be required of students? To what degree should reasoning or general critical thinking skills be emphasized? Can topics be used to move students into higher cognitive levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation?** Most beginning students are at a developmental level which emphasizes the accumulation of information and equates that with learning. At the same time, most faculty are more interested in developing thinking and questioning learners. **Can or should beginning courses break the cycle of fact accumulation and encourage students to think independently, even to the point of teaching those skills at the expense of content?**

Content is often thought of only in terms of facts, principles, theories, and other intellectual matters. **What attitudes, values, feelings, or ethical considerations do students need to develop?** Recent attention to ethical issues in all fields suggest that these be addressed in introductory courses as well.

On a more practical note, instructors of beginning courses need to consider **what content background, study skills, or physical skills might be needed to benefit from the course.** Many problems of the beginning student stem from assumptions which instructors make about what students already know or can do. The beginning course

instructor should be sure that such assumptions are warranted before choosing what to teach.

A Sense of Academic Community Regardless of the answers to the above questions, introductory courses have the important common responsibility of giving students a "sense of the academic community." Since introductory courses often represent a student's first experience with academe, it is an important time to establish attitudes about the institution, the academic environment, and learning itself. It is a time to consider **why an "education" is different from "job certification."** Thus the instructor of the beginning-level course needs to look beyond the immediate concerns of the discipline to the long range goals of creating scholars and self-educators.

Professors in these classes are key to providing examples or models of the academic life. Students at this point are not only looking for ways of behaving in the university community, but they are also open to establishing expectations for themselves. **What it means to be an educated person and how this course contributes to that end** can be addressed at this impressionable time.

Beginning courses can also communicate modes of operating as a good student, both in this field and in general. **How does one study this kind of subject matter? How can time be managed to assure adequate study? How can one set priorities among the variety of demands in life? How can one integrate this course's subject matter with other opportunities to learn on campus?**

By demonstrating the methods of the discipline and making its assumptions explicit, by modeling attitudes toward the subject matter and learning, and by personalizing approaches to teaching and learning, college teachers can socialize beginners into the academic community to the end that, even if they don't pursue advanced study, they will retain effective habits of learning and a positive attitude toward academe.

Conclusion Many times introductory courses are assigned to less-experienced teachers. While it is true that the level of subject matter expertise demands breadth instead of depth, the complexity of

decisions about teaching strategies makes this a very difficult assignment. Faculty members who are assigned the task of planning and implementing instruction for beginning students in introductory-level courses need incentive, recognition, support, and resources to teach these students in the best way possible. It is not a task for the fainthearted.

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