# Teaching Tips

## What does it take to teach?

*The critical difference between the teaching profession and other professions is quite simple. Most of our culturally accepted professions are heavily content-oriented and with an adequate mastery of subject matter, theory, application and execution, and a considerable amount of devotion and hard work, one can succeed. In the world of teaching these factors also are necessary. However, they are useless without the additional ingredient of having the personality and the ability to communicate with other human beings. Thus, to be an effective teacher, it is necessary that one be multi-talented and multi-disciplined.* (Brieve, 1986, p.11)

### Three Critical Characteristics of Good Teaching:

1. Knowing your subject content. You need to stay abreast of developments in your field to keep up with today’s students. They expect you to prove your expertise and will challenge you if they feel you are in error or out-of-date.
2. Knowing and liking students. Don’t “expect” anything of your students; take them as they are, with an incredible range of backgrounds, experience, knowledge, and goals.
3. Understanding your culture in general. Be aware of the world around you, and don’t hesitate to engage students in conversation about it; it’s a great way to open avenues of communication and establish your credibility with them.

### The Students

Students are our raison d’être – the reason why we are here; Moorpark’s unofficial motto is “students first” and we mean it. They deserve from all of us the same degree of respect and courtesy that would be shown to a valued consumer. They are in your class because they want to be there, and they have paid for the privilege of being your students.

Students come to class with an amazing variety of talents, skills, and motivations. The mix is often staggering. Some students will be very articulate and highly motivated, while others will be in class because they couldn’t find a job or because their parents insisted they could not spend their time “just hanging around.” Some will be highly skilled in reading, writing, and mathematics, while others need intensive remedial assistance. Some will be working full-time and trying to raise a family, while others seem to have an abundance of time for various “extra-curricular” activities. Our student population is an incredible mixture of individuals and it takes special time and talent to make education relevant to each and every student in your classroom.

### The First Class Session

Without question, the first class meeting is *the most important*. It is not overstating the case to say it is critical to the success of your course. Your students arrive as individuals who do not know each other and they bring with them anxieties and fears: Will I fit in? Will I be able to master the subject matter? Will I be humiliated, bored, or frustrated? Will I be successful? It is your task as an instructor to allay such fears and to bring these individuals together as a group.

First introduce yourself. Next, have the students introduce themselves to each other. Make every effort to get to know their names – fast – and to recognize them as individuals. On the first day find out why they are in your class and what they expect to get out of it. This can be done in a number of ways: (1) by verbally having students share some aspects of who they are, e.g., majors, intended college plan (transfer, certificate, work up-grade, etc.), hobbies, or other such items that would be of interest to the other students and which would set the individuals into the memories of their fellow students in the class, and/or (2)

by having students complete a questionnaire or survey containing critical information about themselves which could assist you in determining the demographics and background of the students in your class. Then introduce your subject matter and the text(s) to be used. Give the students the Class Syllabus and go through it with them. Give special attention to the course objectives which should be included on the syllabus (see “The Class Syllabus” under “Organizing the Course and Your Instructional Materials” in this section). Having a clear understanding of the course objectives will help the students decide if the course is appropriate for their educational and career objectives.

Clearly communicate your expectations to your students. Take the time ***now*** to be sure everyone understands class goals, attendance requirements, and performance expectations. Most of the research on learning has revealed that students will meet instructor expectations if these expectations are clearly defined. Be understanding of special student circumstances, but set your expectations high. Care enough about your students to require them to read, write, and engage in critical thinking about your subject – it’s required. Consider having your students complete and sign a “contract” specifying that they have read and understood the material in the Class Syllabus and your expectations for them and for the class itself.

You must also expect your students to study outside of the class. Credit hours or units awarded in classes are based on the assumption that in lecture classes ***students work 2-3 hours outside of class for each hour they are in class***. Therefore, in a full-semester, 3-unit class that meets 3 hours per week, 6-9 hours of homework per week is expected. However, the same class taught in a late-start session, which meets 4 hours per week, requires 8-12 hours of homework per week. Homework may consist of reading in the textbook or other assigned materials, problem solving, library and/or internet research, writing assignments, group assignments, studying for exams, etc. The Course Outline of Record includes a list of typical outside assignments for the course. Make sure your students are aware of the amount of homework that is expected so that they can plan their schedule accordingly. You can make them aware of this expectation by discussing it during the first class session (as well as repeatedly throughout the semester) and by including a statement in your course syllabus.

Be sure to take roll by going over the names on your roster and making sure which students are officially enrolled in your class. If students are attending your class, but are not registered at the college and/or officially enrolled in your class section issue them an Add Authorization Code (if you are willing to add them into the course, and if you still have room in the classroom). Explain to the students that they are to use this Add Authorization Code within the add/drop registration period for your course – the codes do expire. After the registration period has ended students may not attend your class unless they are officially enrolled. (See the Schedule/Registration section of this handbook for more information.)

Use the full time available at your first class meeting. By doing this at the first class – and at every succeeding class – you are telling your students that your class is important and that they should take it seriously. Remember that your students’ first impression of you is crucial. During that first class session they will conclude a number of things: Whether they are impressed or unimpressed with you, whether the class looks “good” or “bad,” whether they want to stay or leave, and whether the class will be “serious business” or a “breeze.” It’s up to you to sell the class – and yourself – during that first meeting.

## Motivating Students

Thanks to the recent work that has been done in support of the state Student Success and Student Equity initiatives we have some excellent and up-to-date research on what it takes to motivate all our students to succeed, especially that produced by the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group). Particularly recommended is its *Student Support (Re)Defined* study that emphasizes the six success factors we should focus on: our students’ need to be directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected and valued. The study is available at <http://www.rpgroup.org/system/files/%28Re%29designing-For-Student-Success-Oct2014.pdf>; do visit their website for further research at [www.rpgroup.org](http://www.rpgroup.org).

Perhaps the most common lament of the inexperienced instructor is disappointment in the students’ lack of motivation. To be sure, many students are highly motivated, but lack of motivation is a serious problem (and is common to all educational institutions). The most serious result is the great number of students who drop the class before the end of the semester/term. Some early warning signs are: late and/or incomplete homework assignments, repeatedly missing class without notification, repeatedly coming late or leaving class early, failure to participate in class discussions, doing poorly on assignments and exams, and not taking notes. These behaviors also could be caused by reasons quite unrelated to motivational problems. Students are often working full-time and have demanding family obligations that don’t always allow them to make education their first priority. However, in many cases, lack of motivation plays a major role. A common feeling of new instructors is that they have done something to “turn off” their students and that they are somehow to blame for their students’ disinterest. Although instructors must realize that they likely are not the cause of the problem, they also should realize that they are part of the solution. For example, if the student drop rate were used as an index, while many classes have 20% to 30% drop rates, some instructors consistently have drop rates of less than 5%. There are things you can do to help students stay in class and work hard.

### Helping Students Succeed

The most important thing you can do is to want your students to succeed. To transfer that desire to them encourage them in as many ways as possible. A lack of motivation is often rooted in a lack of self- confidence. Many of your students will be quite convinced that they cannot do well before they even begin. Part of your job will be to convince them that they can succeed. The instructor who communicates to students – either vocally or by his or her behavior – that “this class is so hard most of you won’t make it” has no place in a classroom at Moorpark College.

There are very few instructors who fail to care about their students’ success. “Negative” instructors mistakenly believe their negativism will be a motivating factor. All instructors need to be reminded of *positive* ways to motivate their students through:

1. Learning your students’ names and using them often, in and out of the classroom.
2. Using the entire class time during the first meeting and every meeting thereafter. This informs students they and the material are important.
3. Meeting your students with enthusiasm on the first day, the last day, and every class meeting in between.
4. Calling students at home or emailing them and letting them know they were missed when they have been absent from class. One instructor increased her retention rate from 65% to 95% with this method alone. (Phone numbers and email addresses are available through WebSTAR for this purpose.)
5. Providing “early alert” systems for your students and yourself by giving quizzes and providing homework assignments early and often in the semester and by grading and returning these materials at the next class meeting.
6. Seeking out and talking to those students who seem to be having special problems. Tell them you want them to succeed and have every confidence that they will succeed. Inform them of the range of services open to them – from tutoring to specialized services such as EOPS, ACCESS or The Learning Center.

### To Maximize Students’ Potential for Success

To motivate your students and maximize their potential for success in your class, consider the following tips:

1. Challenge each student each class
2. Treat students as individuals
3. Be cautious not to prejudge students
4. Treat students as motivated and educable adults
5. When appropriate, give consideration to students’ personal problems
6. Provide every opportunity for flexibility in the classroom (Grieve, 1984, pp 63-66)

Remember: The best way to motivate students is to be a motivated instructor!

## Organizing the Course and Your Instructional Materials

### The Course Outline of Record (COR)

The first step in preparing your material is to get a copy of the Course Outline of Record (COR) from your Department Chair or Division Dean. The COR has been prepared so that the objectives and content of any course will be the same across Moorpark College, regardless of the instructor. How the course content is presented and how the course objectives are met is a matter of academic freedom and will vary from instructor to instructor. The information in the COR that is of concern to all instructors includes: (1) the catalog description; (2) the course objectives; (3) the course content – including main and sub-topics, estimated time per topic, and related objectives; (4) typical assignments – outside assignments, writing assignments, and critical thinking assignments; (5) typical methods of instruction; (6) typical methods of evaluation; and (7) representative texts and other course materials. Your class goals, objectives, and topics should conform to those on the COR. If you believe the COR does not reflect what needs to be accomplished in the course talk to your Department Chair about how to effect changes to the COR. However, your instruction ***must*** follow the COR until changes have been approved by the Moorpark College Curriculum Committee.

### Planning the Semester

With the COR, the academic calendar, and a copy of your adopted text in hand, you are now ready to write your Class Syllabus. Plan when and in what order you will be covering the material. Decide when examinations will be given, when assignments are due, and the specific days you plan to use films/videotapes or other resource material. You also should indicate which chapters of the text the students are to have read for each class meeting. Planning prevents situations many instructors have experienced such as completing the first two-thirds of the semester but having covered less than half of the material, thus trying to cover the remainder of the material in the last few weeks of class and leaving the students overwhelmed and confused.

### The Class Syllabus

The most important document that you give your students is your Class Syllabus. The Class Syllabus should be distributed at the first class meeting. It is the road map your students will use to follow the course you have charted. If it is well prepared and closely followed the students will learn to depend on itand will refer to it often, making both their job, and yours, infinitely easier. A detailed Class Syllabus encourages and facilitates student success. When “what the instructor wants” is shared with all the students at the beginning of the semester and can be referred to throughout the semester many more students will succeed in the course (Altman, 1989). The more complete and detailed the Class Syllabus the better. A model Class Syllabus contains:

1. ***Personal Information:*** This section includes the course name, course number, number of units, day(s) and time(s) the class meets, and the location where the class is held. It includes you name, office location (if applicable), times and days the students can reach you, and the telephone number(s) and/or email address you wish them to use. [NOTE: You may wish to provide only your Moorpark College number and email address rather than home and/or work phone numbers and email addresses to protect your personal security and privacy.]

1. ***Course Description:*** Provide a brief description of the nature of the course. This may be easily taken from the COR using the Course Description for the Catalog.
2. ***Course Objectives:*** This section includes general or specific objectives that the instructor will be meeting and which students should achieve. The Academic Senate recommends that these should include, at a minimum, the Course Objectives listed in the COR. These performance statements detail what students are expected to be able to do by the end of the class that they could not do at its beginning (the student learning outcomes for the course).
3. ***Class Calendar:*** Your class calendar should provide all the relevant dates for assigned class topics, lectures, readings, projects, exams, papers, etc. If you change your class calendar during the semester, the change(s) should be supplied to the students in writing. College dates from the *Schedule of Classes* such as college holidays, the last date to add your class, to drop your class, to choose credit/no credit grading option, the day and time of the final exam, etc. should also be part of your class calendar. Because the college submits the negotiated yearly calendar to the State as part of the accountability for funding purposes it is NOT within your authority to change the class meeting days or times, including the final examination date or time.
4. ***Course Requirements:*** This section delineates exactly what students are expected to do in the class as well as outside of the class and what will be evaluated by you. Explain specifically how homework, class attendance, class participation, exams, paper(s), etc., will be evaluated. Specificity helps students.
5. ***Text(s) and Other Materials:*** Required and recommended texts and other materials should be listed. Which books and materials are on Reserve in the Library, for sale through the Bookstore, and/or provided by you as handouts? It is a courtesy to the students for you to have checked at the Bookstore ahead of the first meeting of the class to make sure that the book(s) and materials have arrived and are on the shelf. If not, check with the Bookstore Manager as to when everything will be available. Another courtesy is to provide verbally to the students at the first class meeting both the availability and the price of each item.
6. ***Course Grading:*** Students read this section eagerly for it spells out the procedures for evaluating their class performance and achievement. You should indicate what percentage of the class grade you will assign to each class activity (exams, reports, papers, homework, class participation, lab work, etc.) Students are better able to budget their time when they know the relative importance of each class requirement.
7. ***Caveat:*** Since the Class Syllabus is a written legal covenant between you and the students in the class it should end with a caveat of the following sort: “The above schedule and procedures are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances.” This caveat protects you if changes in the syllabus need to be made once the class is under way.

*9.* ***The ACCESS Statement:* All syllabi must include a statement for students with disabilities, such as the following.**

“Students with disabilities, whether physical, learning, or psychological, who believe that they may need accommodations in this class, are encouraged to contact ACCESS as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion. Authorization, based on verification of disability, is required before any accommodation can be made. The phone number for ACCESS is 805-378-1461 and its office is located in LMC 106 .”

**10. *The college “No-Smoking” Policy:*** This is optional but strongly suggested, for example

“In the interest of the health and welfare of students, employees, and the public smoking is not permitted anywhere on the Moorpark College campus.”

1. ***Drop Policy (optional but strongly suggested):*** Please tell students if they need to drop your class that they must do this online or with Registration and Records (R&R). (Do not tell them they will be dropped if they don’t pay for the class. Some students use “non-payment” as their “drop procedure” and this doesn’t always work.)
2. ***Student Services Syllabus (optional but strongly suggested:*** The Student Services Council provides a two-page (front-to-back) syllabus delineating the services available to your students. This document is designed for you to easily attach it to your current Class Syllabus.

## Methods of Instruction

Once you decide on your class goals and objectives and have identified your topics the next step is to decide on the best way to help students learn the material. Often instructors fail to realize the variety of methods available. Use variety in your presentation. Choose methods that will best help you and the students achieve the course goals and objectives as determined by the nature of the material, your own personality and skill, and the nature of your students. The following list is by no means exhaustive and no one method is superior to another all of the time. Never use a single method throughout the class or class session. Methods should be changed every few minutes to retain student interest and attention. One recent book that offers many ideas and alternatives is Dee Fink’s *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*.

### Lectures

The most widely used method, by far, is the lecture. This is not to say that it is the best, and often it could be the worst. Too often the lecture method causes students to become bored and not listen. But a good lecture has advantages, if done well. It can cover more material allowing instructors to observe the responses of their students. Perceptive instructors can read their students’ expressions and know if the lecture should be speeded up, slowed down, changed in direction, another medium should be used, or students should be given a break.

There are no handbooks that can teach an instructor how to be a stimulating and sensitive lecturer. It can be taught, but it’s not easy and, for most of us, it does not come naturally. Some suggestions, though, are helpful. Be organized. Have your objectives and goals for the class period outlined clearly in writing and systematically organize the concepts that relate to those goals and objectives. Discard even interesting material if it does not directly relate to the objectives. Remember that your students are trying to take notes (or should be) on what you are saying so that they can remember it for future applications. Make it easy for them. Using the chalkboard, overhead transparencies, PowerPointpresentations, or other methods, present the major topics of your lecture at the start of the class. Inform your students when you are moving to another concept or lecture point and help them know what you identify as the most important ideas, concepts, and/or points. The use of chalk- or whiteboard, overhead transparencies, or PowerPoint is also helpful in this regard.

The major complaint about many lecturers is that they are boring. Keep your delivery interesting by using examples that illuminate and show application. Change the volume and pitch of your voice and move around as you talk. Always stand when lecturing; never make presentations sitting down or leaning on the podium. Don’t be afraid to use notes, but never read your material. Maintain eye contact so you know if your students are with you or not.

### Small Group Collaboration

Consider breaking the class into small groups of about 3 to 5 students with a specific problem to solve or assignment to complete. Groups can then share their conclusions with the entire class. For more information see the Moorpark College Faculty Strategies Handbook, the master teacher Donald Fink’s *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*, Parker J. Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach*, or for those teaching writing, Peter Elbow’s books such as *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* or *Writing Without Teacher*s. An excellent article on using small groups in the classroom is “Building Learning Teams: The Key to Harnessing the Power of Small Groups in Higher Education” by Larry Michaelsen and Robert Black in *Collaborative Learning: A Sourcebook for Higher Education*, Vol. 2, State College, PA: National Center for Teaching, Learning and Assessment. An excellent article relating to the *perils* of small group collaboration is “Lost in Action” by Gilbert T. Sewall in *The American Educator*, Summer 2000. Perhaps the best sources to learn from are your discipline colleagues using small group methods as part of their repertoire.

There are some problems with the small group method. One relates to the matter of control. If the groups’ discussions go beyond the objectives of the class it turns into a chatting session that wastes time and causes students to lose interest. The instructor must be perceptive enough to know when to terminate the groups’ discussion period, perhaps by saying, “We can take only two more comments.” Another problem is that the instructor can’t possibly listen to all the groups simultaneously and there may be a feeling of loss of control or unwise use of time. This concern is less serious if the group topics are clearly related to the overall course objectives and goals, and the groups work in relatively short time spans of no more than 10 to 15 minutes.

### Discussions

Discussions are often used successfully with the lecture method. Students are far more interested in what is transpiring when they are involved. Involvement should be encouraged by meaningful exchanges of ideas, usually facilitated by questions. Students should feel comfortable enough to ask questions.

Instructors would do well to ask their students some questions. These can be straightforward inquiries relating to materials they should know already or queries requiring them to reason or apply the ideas under consideration. As with small group exercises discussed above, the instructor must pay close attention to the direction that the discussion is going and should terminate the discussion period when the objective(s) has/have been met. An excellent paper on how to facilitate class discussions is our own English instructor Nils Slattum’s “Constructing Better Discussion: A More Effective Learning Environment and More Effective Learning”, available from the Teaching and Learning Center in the Library (LLR 314).

### Audio/Visual (AV) Aids

Films, photos, video clips , filmstrips, PowerPoint, and other visual media can be welcome alternatives to traditional lectures and discussions. To be successful, however, they must be directly related to the class objectives. Watch, also, that the material is recent; nothing turns students off faster than outdated films or videos. In fact AV aids should be used only when the concepts an instructor wants to present can be best delivered by using them . To get maximum advantage of AV materials the instructor should state specifically what students should understand from the medium and the specific things they should watch for. Provide students with a handout to complete while watching the visual presentation. A discussion should take place after the presentation at the points where specific concepts can be reinforced. [NOTE: nowhere is it “written” that an instructor must show the complete recording or film. Stop once the pertinent section has been shown. Better yet, through the equipment available in the Staff Resource Center, instructors can edit films for precisely the material needed for the class, thereby eliminating extraneous material.]

### The Whiteboard

The whiteboard is a valuable teaching aid and should be used frequently. It helps those students who are visual learners by serving to emphasize important points and by ensuring that assignments and particular information, such as test dates, are clearly communicated to the students. Some pointers:

1. Don’t get caught up in your work and lose contact with the class. Turn around often to address the students making sure they are following you, to emphasize points, or to receive questions. Never talk with your back to your students.
2. Encourage students to use the board to demonstrate points, finish problems, or discuss a response.
3. Having used the board, stand in a position in which your body isn’t blocking your work.
4. Use the board in place of handouts except when the material is extensive and which students would find difficult to copy and retain.
5. Use the board to emphasize definitions, steps in performing operations, lists of principles, and/or important concepts.
6. Prior to the beginning of each class session use the board to provide your students with the day’s objectives and outline.

### Handouts

Handouts are useful as a supplement to the text or to reinforce concepts from the lecture. In some situations there is no good substitute. For example when discussing a contract in real estate, students should have their own copies. However, instructors must be careful to comply with copyright laws if using material printed elsewhere. Usually publishers are happy to give permission for use, if you give credit on the copies, make no profit from the reprint, and make copies only for the students in your class. (SEE ALSO: Appendix B and Appendix C for “Copyright Law Guidelines for Classroom Use” and “Computer Software Copyright” statements.)

### Student Reports and Presentations

Student reports can be valuable both for the student(s) making the presentation and for the class as a whole. Presentations can take the form of a single student giving a report, groups of students in a debate, or more elaborate class reports. As a rule keep reports short – usually 10 to 15 minutes is sufficient.

Assign, or at least approve, the student-selected topics so that these reflect class goals and objectives. When groups of students work on a single project keep the groups small: 2 is a good size and 4 students is almost too large. Let the class discuss the presentation and give feedback to the presenters. Inform students that the material presented in class will be on examinations and then be sure to follow through later. If presentations are going to take more than 10 minutes each work closely with the students to ensure all stay on their subject.

### In Conclusion:

Each of the above methods has its own advantages and disadvantages and must be selected carefully depending on goals and objectives of the class, the nature of the students, and the skills of the instructor. Variety is very important – regardless of the length of the class period. The secret of successful teaching, regardless of the method used, is careful planning liberally seasoned with flexibility.