The Muggles’ Guide to Good Teaching
(with apologies to J.K. Rowling)

Maybe you’re not a Harry Potter fan—and you aren’t sure whether you believe in magic. Still you have found yourself under the spell of great teachers, convinced that they wield pedagogical powers you can never possess. Don’t despair! You don’t have to be a master magician to be a success in the classroom. Here are a few practical tips that non-wizarding folks (“muggles”) can use to get the semester off to a great start.

1. Think of the syllabus as a contract with your students.
Your syllabus should clearly document and communicate your plans for the course. It should explicitly articulate what you expect of your students, what students need to know to plan their semesters, and grading procedures, as well as what students should expect from you as their instructor. A well-conceived, comprehensive syllabus minimizes confusion and misunderstandings throughout the semester. By accepting the syllabus, students are agreeing to abide by the contract it provides. Your responsibility in this contract is to be consistent throughout the semester and adhere to the expectations and timeline delineated in your syllabus. If you have to make changes to the course calendar, make sure to communicate those changes to students clearly (in writing if at all possible) and in a timely fashion.

2. Allow (and plan for) flexibility in class.
One of the most difficult tasks a new teacher faces is adapting to the restrictions imposed by the classroom clock. In some classes you will need to spend more time on a topic that stimulates a lively discussion or on a concept that students are struggling with; at other times, you might find that you have covered all of your planned materials and have class time remaining. The key to handling these frustrating situations is flexibility. You can’t always anticipate how students will respond to a lesson or where a discussion may go, and it is important to adapt to these inevitable changes. Your students will appreciate your willingness to adjust your plans to respond to their needs. It’s better to cover less material and have your students understand it than it is to cover all of the material you had hoped to and have “lost” students!

3. Engage students in active participation.
The more active students are, the more engaged they will be with the material and the more they will learn. (And this takes some of the spotlight—and the pressure—off of you to “perform” for the entire class period.) So try thinking about a class as a series of blocks of time, and vary the types of activities you plan over those individual blocks. One good approach is to give the students something active to do at least every 20 minutes. For example, have them work in small groups to answer a question, solve a problem, or think of their own questions about the material you just covered. In long class periods (75 minutes and up), you might even want to let them get up and stretch for a minute at some point in the class.

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4. Give “wait time” for students to answer questions. The awkward silence after you ask a question can feel unbearable; seconds may seem like minutes. After you’ve asked a question (especially if it’s a good, thought-prooking one), students need time to think through their responses. To give them time to process your question, count to 5 slowly before speaking again. If all of them still look confused, don’t just offer the answer; instead try rephrasing the question. If students know that you will give them the answer when they don’t respond, they’ll learn to be silent instead of participating.

5. Don’t go it alone. One way to improve your teaching is to seek—and listen to—feedback about what you are doing in the classroom. Ask a peer, a faculty member, or an ITLAL staff member—or all three—to observe one of your classes and offer suggestions. You can also arrange for an ITLAL staff member to videotape one of your classes and then meet with you to discuss and reflect on your teaching. Finally, ask experienced teachers whom you respect for advice about handling matters from the pedagogical ("How do you help your students understand photosynthesis?") to the practical ("How do you minimize your grading time?")

6. Be approachable and available for students. Be available before and after class for consultation, and encourage your students to take the time to meet with you individually. Keeping regular office hours is not only important, but it is also a requirement at the University at Albany. Let students know that you are available and willing to help. Try to learn students’ names and address them by their first names when calling on them, greeting them, or encountering them outside of class.

7. Balance conflicting demands on your time. Teaching will take more time—and energy—than you ever imagined; in fact, it can expand to fill all the time you have. Instead of letting teaching take over your entire life, set aside blocks of time each week that you will devote entirely to teaching-related work, and stick to that schedule as closely as you can, trying not to let that work bleed over into time that you reserve for other activities. Set a clock or an egg timer when you’re grading tests or papers, allotting a fixed number of minutes for each one. Avoid the temptation to add assignments in the middle or at the end of the semester. Design attendance and deadline policies that minimize make-up assignments. Finally, don’t overextend yourself with activities outside of teaching in your first year.

Good teaching doesn’t happen magically; it is an ongoing learning process, and even highly accomplished teachers will face situations when their plans for a class fall apart. Yes, even Dumbledore has had bad days! The key is to reflect on those experiences, learn from them, and, most importantly, move on.

For more suggestions, please feel free to stop by ITLAL or visit our website:

http://www.albany.edu/teachingandlearning

You might also want to consult some texts about teaching in higher education. We recommend the following:

