Teaching Unfamiliar Content with Confidence

A new course presents an exciting challenge, particularly if you have the opportunity to teach what you love and know well. However, if you are called upon to teach outside your expertise, fear can outweigh that excitement. But don’t despair—research on the topic has led to the development of a set of best practices. Combining research on teaching and learning and interviews with experienced faculty, Therese Huston collects some of these strategies in her book, Teaching What You Don’t Know (Harvard UP, 2009). This article summarizes some of her most useful findings for graduate student instructors.

Why should we care about this?

While we would like to think that teaching outside our comfort zone is a challenge faced only by graduate student instructors, Huston found that both full-time and part-time faculty are quite frequently called upon to stretch their expertise in the classroom. This is increasingly common for several reasons: disciplines are broad and rapidly changing, faculty at all levels are often called upon to teach general education or introductory courses, changing budgets can lead to smaller teaching staffs, and in a tight job market candidates often have to agree to teach new courses in order to land a position. Whatever the reason, you are likely to be asked to teach outside of your expertise throughout your career, and developing strategies for success now will help you to flourish rather than flounder in those situations.

Establishing Your Credibility

When teaching new content, you are often learning the material along with or just ahead of your students. While a novice perspective has the benefit of making you better able to anticipate where students will struggle with the content, it may not always feel beneficial when you are convinced that your students can see through your shallow understanding. Huston’s research suggests some key strategies for gaining traction with the new content while establishing your authority.

Demonstrate that you care about students’ learning. Students respond positively when they can see that you are willing and able to help them learn, that you will treat them with respect, and that there is a clear path to success in your course. Don’t just show them how much you know; let them see that you care about their success. Research shows that these behaviors lead to greater instructor credibility:

- ask students whether they have questions or understand explanations,
- attempt to answer all students’ questions,
- give clear expectations and answers to questions about course policies and graded work,
- show up on time for class,
- follow all of the course policies outlined in the syllabus,
- demonstrate familiarity with the assigned text(s),
- work to explain difficult concepts in terms students can understand, and
- remind students of upcoming due dates.

Recognize your own expertise. Even if you aren’t a capital E “Expert” in the specific focus area of your course, you are an expert thinker and learner in your field. You have developed highly effective strategies for organizing new information and integrating knowledge effectively, so don’t forget that those will serve you well as you prepare to teach in a new area.

Start your course in an area of your expertise. It’s important to realize that students will enter the course believing that you are the expert. Sometimes, though, you need to find ways to boost your confidence so that you can feel comfortable in that role. One strategy is to identify content where you have a deeper or more expert understanding, and start your course there. If there isn’t a way to get your area of expertise into the course, spend some extra time mastering the content for the first couple of weeks to enter the semester with a feeling of authority. Alternately, you may be able to find an intersection with your research area to develop a deeper understanding of the content you’re teaching, or use the perspective of your expertise to understand new content and make relevant connections. If you can contextualize the course content in this broader way, students will appreciate the breadth of your knowledge and won’t question your expertise even if you are treading in less familiar waters.

Carefully read everything you assign—but not everything else. This sounds elementary, but students will be much more likely to question your knowledge and your ability to help them learn the material if...
you aren’t highly familiar with the assigned texts. They don’t expect you to know everything, but they do expect that you can help them navigate the course readings. Instead of spending a lot of time researching additional information, focus on developing comfort with the materials that you ask them to read.

Your perspective as relative novice can actually make you more effective if you read to anticipate where students will struggle. Ask yourself: What was hard for me to understand? (Those are things that will likely be hard for your students as well.) What background knowledge will students need in order to understand this? What are the three questions you want students to be able to answer by the end of the class on that content?

Handling Difficult Questions
Even when you’ve prepared the readings carefully, students will sometimes ask questions that you can’t anticipate, and this can lead to anxiety. The good news is that if you’ve taken the steps above to establish your credibility, you won’t lose it just because you can’t answer a question. However, you do still need to be thoughtful and deliberate about responding when students ask questions that you can’t immediately answer. Huston recommends three steps: clarify, acknowledge, and answer.

Step 1: Clarify
It can be easy to misinterpret questions about newer content. If you find yourself stumped, start by making sure you understand what the question actually is. Rephrase the student’s question in your own words to make sure you understand what’s being asked. Sometimes this clarification will show that you actually do know the answer. In either case, you have established the source of the confusion and bought yourself time to think.

Step 2: Acknowledge
In your fervor to try and respond, especially if you’re stuck, you might forget to stop and acknowledge the question in a way that demonstrates respect for the student’s thinking. Take a moment to recognize that the student has asked a good question.

Step 3: Answer
There are different ways to handle this. You could throw the question out to the class to harness the collective wisdom of the group. In some cases you may challenge students to go and find an answer for themselves and bring it back to the next class; if you do this, make sure you do return to the question so that students don’t just see this as a brush-off. You may offer an educated guess but only if you make it clear that this is what you’re doing then go find the right answer and bring it to the next class.

Managing the Workload
Of course, handling what happens in class is only part of the equation. Teaching unfamiliar content requires a significant amount of preparation time, and if you don’t enter the process with strategies for minimizing the workload, you will find yourself burned out before you reach the midterm. Huston found that instructors who succeed in teaching new content take similar approaches to avoiding overwork, distilled into three key behaviors.

They use active learning strategies. You may have noticed that “knows everything there is to know in the field—and shares every detail in lectures” doesn’t appear on the list of behaviors that establish credibility. Why? Lecturing puts the focus on your teaching (and on you), and this can make students believe that you are more interested in the content than in their learning. Rather than delivering labor-intensive lectures, design class meetings around students practicing key skills, not you demonstrating your expertise in the content through lectures. Active learning strategies will keep students engaged, give you feedback on their learning, and develop their fluency with the content.

They select content carefully. Because it is hard to make distinctions between what matters and what doesn’t with new material, there is a danger of overloading courses with “interesting” content that doesn’t necessarily lead to a conceptual understanding of the field. Huston recommends thinking of your content at three levels: what students must know in order to gain mastery, what they should know, and what they could know. Aim your course at what they must know, and only include other content if you genuinely have time.

They minimize assignments. When you are excited about learning something new, it’s easy to become overly ambitious and assign too much work for your students. Don’t get caught up in the excitement of designing fun new assignments and forget the amount of time required to keep up with the grading and feedback these require. To decide which assignments belong in a course and which ones don’t, go back to your goals and priorities, asking yourself

• What is most important to the objectives of this course?
• Why am I having students do this assignment?
• How much time will I have to spend designing and grading this assignment, and is that time worth what students will learn?
• How much prep work will students need to be successful on the assignment? Do we have time to do that prepwork?

Also, instead of focusing just on large assignments and projects, make sure that you are including small, in-class assessments throughout the course that will help you gauge student learning without requiring a substantial amount of time for grading.

Concluding Thoughts
A central theme emerges from Huston’s research: put student learning at the center of your course. This is great advice for any instructor; for those who are navigating new content, it can be the difference between success and failure.