Tips for New Teachers at Community Colleges

Brian Taylor

Enlarge Photo

By Rob Jenkins

The first time I ever taught a college class, nearly 25 years ago, I was convinced that, at any moment, one of my students was going to stand up and expose me as a fraud.

Of course, I had good reason to worry: As a brand-new graduate assistant, I *was* a fraud, as Henry Adams reminded us all recently in his thought-provoking essay, "Academic Bait and Switch."

Luckily for me, there was no public denouncement, that first day or any other. Yet even as I finished graduate school and began a full-time teaching career at community colleges, the nagging fear persisted. Only after about 10 years, when I still hadn't been summarily drummed out of the profession (the opening scenes of the old Chuck Connors TV series *Branded* used to play in my head), did I finally start to relax.

Perhaps that's why I've always empathized with new faculty members—even when, as an administrator, I've had to supervise and evaluate them. I understand firsthand the anxiety nearly all of them share (whether they admit it or not), and I've observed the different strategies they use to cope. I've also watched as they fail to cope.

Some new teachers, for example, appear timid, indecisive, and apologetic in the classroom, as if to say, "See, I'm not such a bad person. I may not be the greatest teacher, but at least I admit it." Sadly, that strategy usually results in undisciplined classrooms, compromised standards, and artificially high grades.

Others come across as arrogant, authoritarian, and patronizing. The fact that they may merely be compensating for feelings of inadequacy doesn't prevent students from growing resentful, complaining to the department head, and writing ugly comments on the student-evaluation form (not to mention RateMyProfessors.com).

Obviously, the key to succeeding as a first-time instructor at a community college lies in finding the middle path. Since so many seem to have problems identifying that path for themselves, I'd like to offer a road map.

Appear confident. From the moment you step into the classroom, you must act as though you're in total control and know exactly what you're doing. (Never announce, for instance, "This is my first day" or "I'm kind of new at this.") That your confidence may be entirely feigned is irrelevant, provided you do a good job selling it to students.

Remember, good teaching is largely performance theater. If you act confident in your abilities, students will have confidence in your abilities. For you, confidence might not equal competence, but for them it will.

So do whatever it takes to gather your courage. Practice your "I know what I'm doing" face in the mirror. Review the objective evidence that you actually do know what you're doing: degrees, transcripts, CV, shelves of well-thumbed books, teaching contract. If nothing else works, I guess you can always try Stuart Smalley's mantra: "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and, doggone it, people *like* me!"

Be consistent. Perhaps the single most important thing you can do to establish your credibility as a teacher and earn students' confidence is to do what you say you're going to do. Nothing says "rookie" like indecisiveness.

Remember that students will try you, especially if they know you're new. They'll beg you to push back test dates, throw out low scores, cancel assignments—anything to make the course less work for them. If they discover you're a soft touch, watch out. They may like you well enough, but they'll have little respect for you. Worse, they won't learn as much as they should.

So determine in advance what you intend to accomplish in the classroom and how best to go about it, borrowing as necessary from experienced colleagues. Know ahead of time which assignments you're going to issue, when you're going to give tests, how much they'll count, and whether you plan to offer

extra credit. Publish that information clearly in your syllabus, then stick to it even when students pressure you to change.

If, in the interest of fairness, it becomes necessary to modify the course—perhaps you realize that several test questions were problematic, or you need to spend more time on a particular concept—make that decision objectively and in private. Then present it to the class with a clear explanation of what you're doing (giving a retest, for example), and why.

Whatever you do, don't make a change that will create additional work for students. You might as well just lead the entire class down to the department chair's office.

Don't take yourself too seriously. Few students, if any, are as interested in your subject as you are. Nor are they likely to think it's as important as you think it is. After all, they're probably taking four or five courses, none of them in their major, and each of them taught by an instructor who believes his or her subject is the most important.

That doesn't mean your subject isn't important, or that they don't need to learn it. It just means you aren't going to accomplish much by constantly lecturing them on their priorities, or treating every assignment as if it's a matter of life and death.

Try lightening up a little. Tell a few jokes at your own expense, or at the expense of your subject matter. Share a conspiratorial wink with students from time to time. They're much more likely to conclude that some aspects of your course really are important if you don't act as if everything is.

Keep your distance. Perhaps the most difficult thing in teaching is to establish a user-friendly persona while maintaining an appropriate professional relationship with your students. Some teachers seem to accomplish that effortlessly, but the rest of us have to work at it.

Indeed, new teachers usually err on one side or the other: Either they're too distant, which can make them seem cold and arrogant (even if they're not), or else they're too buddy-buddy with their students, which can lead to a different set of problems.

The trick is to be courteous, approachable, and (at times) even self-deprecatory—in short, keeping it real without becoming chummy. To that end, I suggest that you dress like an adult rather than like one of your students. (This is especially important if you're young enough to be mistaken for a student.) Expect students to call you by your formal or professional title—"Dr. So-and-So," "Professor So-and-So," or "Mr./Ms. So-and-So"—rather than your first name. And don't socialize

with students outside of the classroom, except during college-sponsored events at which other faculty members are present.

Remember whom you're teaching. Always bear in mind that your students are freshmen and sophomores. They're not graduate students or even upper-division undergraduates. For the most part, they're not majoring in your subject.

I say that because one of the most common mistakes I've encountered in supervising new teachers (especially those fresh out of graduate school), is that they tend to bring with them the techniques and material they've experienced most recently—that is, in their graduate courses. But those techniques often fail to connect with first- and second-year students when the material is over their heads.

For example, I once supervised a new instructor who expected students in her survey course to write three 500-word essays in a single 75-minute class period. When I confronted her (after half of her students had come by my office to complain), she responded by saying, in essence, that she'd had to do that as a graduate student and, by golly, her students could do it, too.

Clearly they couldn't, nor should they have been expected to—not because they were community-college students, but because they were sophomores. I'm not talking about watering down the curriculum. What I'm talking about is having realistic expectations and then helping students live up to them.

Despite your initial (and quite understandable) anxiety, following those few steps should help you get your teaching career off to a good start. After that, there's no limit to what you can accomplish—just like your students.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College. He writes occasionally for our community-college column. If you would like to write for our regular column on faculty and administrative careers at two-year colleges, or have a topic to propose, we would like to hear from you. Send your ideas to careers@chronicle.com.