

How to Handle Unprepared Students

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Just what do you do when you walk into class looking forward to insightful interaction with your students and find that you are the only one who bothered to prepare? Or when they seem to have read the material but have trouble retaining it? How do you encourage students to come to class prepared and what to do if they are not?

Noting that students are more likely to be prepared if they see from the start that individual preparation matters, here are some suggests:

- Make routine participation of every class member.
- Use regular written assignments, and vary the questions to add spice.
- Assign discussion leaders to give students part of the responsibility for leading and carrying on discussions.
- Demonstrate your own consistent preparation for class and reward those who are prepared. A participation grade is a good reward.
- If possible, assign group work outside of class, giving each student a unique responsibility.
- Involve students in the choice of topics to be studied, wherever possible.
- Tantalize your students for the next class: read a key quotation, ask them to resolve a puzzle, imagine meeting the author.
- Have your students use email, Blackboard and Wikis to exchange ideas about the readings or discussion topics *before* the class meets.

When students are not prepared, you must have a contingency plan. Expressing displeasure with unpreparedness is important, to show that you care about their studies (and your class!). Some potential scenarios for dealing with the occasional unprepared class follow:

- **Poll:** Try to determine *why* students are unprepared. Outside commitments were overwhelming? Parents' Weekend? Rush? Midterms? Difficult assignment? Be sure that they are aware that in order to learn they must do their share of the work.
- **Feedback Lecture:** Lecture for 10-15 minutes, then ask for students' reactions: problem-solving, formulating questions, speculating on the topic, and so on. Students can work in small groups or pairs for this exercise.
- **Dialectical Notebook:** Write a question on the board, and ask students to write brief responses. Each then trades notebooks with another student and responds to the first response. You may repeat this process 2-4 times to allow students to respond actively to each others' ideas.
- **Quotation exercise:** Put 3-4 key quotations on the board; ask students to work in pairs to determine the relationship between the quotations. You can also use this activity before an assignment to stimulate interest.
- **The Change-Up:** Adult learners can keep tuned in to a lecture for no more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time, and this at the beginning of the class. Build a "change-up" into your class to restart the attention clock.

Additional Reading from the CTL Library:

Joan Middendorf & Alan Kalish. "The Change-Up in Lectures." *TRC Newsletter*, 8:1 (Fall 1996). Retrieved on February 11, 2010 from: <http://www.indiana.edu/~teaching/allabout/pubs/changeups.shtml>

Simkins, Scott, and Mark Maier. 2010. *Just-in-time teaching: across the disciplines, across the academy*. Sterling, Va: Stylus: 25-38.