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ICE INSTRUCTOR / COURSE EVALUATION TIPS

IMPROVING ACADEMIC TEACHING

ICE Factor 5

Individual Rapport

CAID

Centre For Academic & Instructional Development

Improving Academic Teaching

Individual Rapport

The following suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning are keyed to sections of the Instructor/Course Evaluation (ICE), an instrument adopted for the evaluation of teaching at Saint Mary's University and based on the Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ). The ICE factors teaching into nine components, eight of which provide formative information that can be used to improve teaching and learning.

The following suggestions were adapted by Professor Herbert W. Marsh, University of Western Sydney - Macarthur, Australia (developer of the SEEQ) with permission from: Davis, B. G., Wood, L., & Wilson, R. (1983). ABC's of Teaching with Excellence. Teaching Innovation and Evaluation Services, University of California. Minor changes in language were made by Professor Beverly Cameron (University Teaching Services, University of Manitoba) to fit the Canadian context. Teaching Tips is reprinted with permission.

Current resources related to the eight formative ICE factors are available from the Office of Instructional Development, Saint Mary's University. Copies of the ICE questionnaire are available from the Senate Office.

Individual Rapport (ICE Factor 5): Opportunities to accommodate individual differences in abilities and to take account of learners' present knowledge and attitudes depend heavily upon individual contacts with instructors. Furthermore, one-on-one instruction and guidance are available to the extent that instructors are interested in and accessible to individual students. Students who feel welcomed by the instructor also have greater access to motivationally-significant opportunities such as face-to-face reinforcement and encouragement.

Improving Academic Teaching

Individual Rapport

The following ideas and suggestions have been used by outstanding university instructors.

1. Arrive at class ten minutes early each day and talk with students individually.

"I try to target a different section each day," a History professor says, "talking with my students about the course or more general topics, getting to know their names and something about them as individuals. It helps me to remember a name if I can connect it with a place, an interest, a personality trait. An easy example would be Miss Smith from Smithfield."

This teacher, like many others, believes that addressing students by name helps to dispel the excessive formality of a large lecture class and creates a more positive learning environment.

2. Keep the hour following a class open to talk with your students.

Make a habit of staying after class to talk with your students. "The biggest turn-off for students is for a faculty member to immediately gather up his notes and his briefcase and virtually beat his students to the door after class," a professor of Public Health points out. "This suggests that he is too busy for students. I have developed a technique of loitering after class, very slowly erasing the boards and talking with students as they leave. The result is that after the first few days of class, more and more students linger as well, and I get to know many of them in that way."

If another class is scheduled in the room immediately following your class, then do as a Biochemistry teacher does and tell students that you will stay in the hall for ten minutes following each lecture to respond to short questions.

Hold office hours immediately following class. The same Biochemistry teacher also schedules office hours following the class meeting. "That way students who bring up more complicated questions right after class are invited to accompany me back to my office. I've found that students are more likely to have questions or comments at the end of a class when the material is still fresh. This strategy lets me address their concerns immediately."

3. Invite your students to lunch.

Even in large lecture classes, it is possible to make personal contact with many of your students. A Physiology professor for example, takes two of her students to lunch each week. Each week she randomly selects two names which are placed on the board at Monday's lecture. The two students are asked to see her after lecture and a mutually convenient time is set for lunch that week. "In that way I get to know at least 30 of my students in the class fairly well," she notes. "Knowing these students helps my lecturing because I am better able to 'pitch' a lecture if I know the interests and

abilities of students in my class. It's also a lot easier to lecture to familiar faces."

A Business Administration faculty member uses a similar technique. "I set aside three luncheon dates during the semester and invite my students who would like to meet with me informally for lunch at the Faculty Club to sign up." Each term 15 to 20 of my students avail themselves of this opportunity.

4. Meet regularly with your students who do poorly on the midterm.

One professor of Forestry gives the first of two midterms early enough in the course to allow him to identify those students who may be having difficulty. After the first midterm, he asks each student who did not pass to talk with him about the exam results. In these meetings he tries to discover each individual student's problem. "I ask questions such as, 'Did I misread anything you gave as an answer?' or 'What problems did you have in taking the exam?"'

He concludes each meeting by telling students that he is certain that they can do better and striking a bargain with them. "Usually, I tell them that I'll forgive the first midterm and let their grade be determined solely on the second midterm and final on condition that they agree to meet with me weekly to go over homework assignments and to get additional help.

"About nine or ten students take advantage of this help each term. As a result of this technique, in the ten years I have been teaching I have not had to flunk a single student in a course. Giving students a second chance, I find, is a powerful motivator."

5. Schedule an individual appointment with each student.

A Statistics professor felt that he was not being successful in generating class discussion. At the end of the third week, still unable to encourage class participation, he decided to pass around a sheet of paper with a list of 10 minute blocks of time when he would be available for individual appointments. Each student was required to sign up for one of the 10 minute appointments. They were told that the chief purpose was for him to get to know his students better and to listen to any complaints or suggestions they might have.

"I found that this was a real ice-breaker. Even though most of our discussions were mainly chit-chat, some of my students used the opportunity to indicate problems they were having in the course or to make suggestions about course improvements. Perhaps the chief benefit was that it gave me an opportunity to get to know my students. As a result, they seemed to feel more comfortable asking and answering questions in class.

6. Require all your students who do below "C" work on assignments or quizzes to see you.

One teacher of Forestry does this in all his undergraduate courses. Another Forestry professor writes a note, "Please see me" to students who score below 70 on his weekly quizzes. "It's important to find out why students score low. If they are having difficulty understanding the material, I offer to help them. If it's a question of motivation or a student placing less priority on my class, that's OK too.

It helps me as a teacher to know the reasons for the poor performance. Showing concern is also a powerful motivator for some students: they begin to do better."

A Zoology professor concurs. "I call students in who get less than 50% on the biweekly quizzes. In a way, I play parent with them; I 'sit on' them a little. I think I understand better now than when I began teaching the need some students have for external motivation."

7. Consciously use your students' names whenever possible.

"I call roll several times during the beginning of the term to connect faces and names as soon as possible," a professor of Forestry says. "Later, if a student looks familiar but I can't remember his or her name, I simply admit it and ask the student to tell me again. Then I make a point of using the name right away to help me remember it the next time." A professor of Entomology says, "in a class of 100, there are always three or four names that I don't seem to be able to learn. Nevertheless, my students greatly appreciate the effort."

Another strategy is to walk around the class while students are working on a quiz or problem and try to match faces with names. A Science teacher says that he circulates for 10 or 15 minutes and then goes back to his desk and tries to write everyone's name down. "This really reinforces my memory," he says.

8. Use index cards as a mnemonic device.

As soon as you have a list of students enrolled in your class, write each of their names on an index card. On the first day of class, call roll, laying the cards on your desk by seat and row to reflect where each of your students is sitting in class. Throughout the first few meetings of the class, refer to the index cards and use students' names whenever possible.

A faculty member who uses this technique finds it especially effective to return to her office immediately after class and lay out the cards in the same order and review the names. "I set a goal for myself of learning 5 names each time the class meets. With a class of 30, I find I can learn everyone's name within the first two weeks without any difficulty."

9. Enter the class through the same door as your students.

A faculty member in the Biological Sciences says that she always does this when teaching in a large lecture hall. "I enter from the back of the room with my students, pausing to chat with students on either side of the aisle before class begins."

"You have to get into your students' skins to really teach well," she believes. "It helps to see the classroom from their vantage point and to get a sense of the class from their perspective. Not enough faculty members do this, and among other things, it shows up on boardwork that can't be seen past the tenth row."

10. Have your students fill out a brief questionnaire about their backgrounds and interests.

Typically, such questionnaires ask for information about students' major, prerequisite or related courses taken, job experiences, and career plans. Faculty members use this information to understand their students and to call on those whose experiences may give them a different perspective on class content.

A faculty member in Political Science, for example, asks students to describe their most memorable experience that relates to the subject matter of the course. A faculty member who teaches an Geography course asks about students' travel experiences or knowledge of the peoples of the area through relations, friends, or through reading.

11. Post your students' names prominently in a lab or seminar.

A faculty member in the Natural Sciences has each of his students write his or her name on an index card and tape it above the assigned lab station. Using this technique, from the first day, he can begin calling his students by name. "This one simple thing may be the most important thing I do to establish a good learning environment in which students feel free to approach me, to ask questions, and to get help if they need it."

An Engineering professor follows a similar routine in his seminar classes which tend to have 15-20 students. "I use 5x8 cards folded lengthwise. On each card I write a student's name as large as possible with a bold felt-tip pen. I set these cards around the table so that students can quickly learn each other's names in the same way I do."

12. Provide a relaxing informal atmosphere.

"I bring coffee and donuts periodically to my seminar," says a professor in Engineering. "This helps relax my students and lends a congenial tone to the discussions. I find that this simple act seems to make the sessions more interactive. People tend to discuss issues over coffee and donuts more readily than in a fixed formal classroom setting."

13. Pair students up to introduce themselves first to one another and then to the class.

In seminar courses, most faculty members ask their students to introduce themselves briefly to the group. A professor of English has students pair up for a few minutes to interview each other about their backgrounds, literary interests, and expectations from the course. Then members of each pair are asked to introduce each other to the group as a whole.

"I think this approach helps students feel free to talk," the professor explains. It also helps set a pattern for discussion in which students are expected to listen to one another and to address their comments and questions as much toward one another as toward the instructor.

14. Make a game of learning students' names.

A professor of Forestry uses what he calls the "Name Game" with students to get everyone in the class acquainted. First, students introduce themselves and tell the class something about their majors and their interests. Then he says, "Okay, let's try that again with just the names; only this time you will have to listen very carefully because I want you not only to introduce yourself but give the names of students who came before you."

The first student gets off easy, since he or she has only to introduce herself. The second person has to give his own name and the name of the student before him or her, and so on. "I put myself in last position," he explains, "and by that time I try to name all students in the room. I find that it is not only an effective way to learn their names, but the game-like quality of it breaks the ice and helps to create a sense of community."

15. Schedule specific topics for your office hours.

"I find it useful to identify in advance a specific topic for my office hours," says a Linguistics professor. "I encourage students who are having difficulty in that area to come for help." Based on past experiences she knows which concepts and ideas cause problems and she schedules office hours to provide further elaboration and discussion on these topics. "This way if one of my students misses a class or doesn't fully understand the topic, he or she has another chance at the material during office hours. My TAs are also encouraged to attend these sessions so that they better understand areas of student difficulty."

Another professor uses one office hour a week in a similar fashion, although the specific topics are not necessarily ones covered by the course. "Sometimes they are enrichment topics; sometimes they are remedial, like how to do a term paper," he says. As an added bonus, students and professor get to know one another in a small informal setting.

16. Hand out brief excerpts or abstracts of contextual material to fill in cultural gaps in your students' knowledge.

One professor of Near Eastern Studies distributes such handouts fairly often in a lower division survey course. "I don't expect my students to know a great deal about the geography, religions, and literature of the Near Eastern countries we are studying," she says. "However, more and more, I find that I cannot make many assumptions about what my students know about Western culture either."

"This poses some difficulty for me as well as for students, because I believe one of the best ways to teach something 'foreign' is by analogy to something that is familiar. Yet, in order to do that, I find it is increasingly necessary to provide information on the so-called familiar Western examples as well." Among the contextual materials she distributes in excerpted or abstracted form are fables, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, biblical stories or quotations, and Greek mythology.

17. Give a diagnostic test at the beginning of the semester.

One Biochemistry instructor frequently gives a diagnostic test covering knowledge and skills prerequisite to the course. The test, which is given in the first week of the course, is not graded. "Its sole purpose is to help me identify those students who need extra help so I can begin working with them early in the course.

"Students need to recognize their weaknesses and begin to correct them if they are to succeed in my course. But they have to be given the means for correcting deficiencies. I meet with students whose preparation is inadequate and assign them special problem sets on a regular basis."

18. Make special efforts to integrate weaker students into the class through small group work.

One French language teacher divides students into small groups. "I pose a question to each group. One student in each group gives the answer orally; a second student corrects the first student, if necessary, and the third student writes the answer on the board. Each student has a role, and these roles are rotated throughout the quarter."

"Initially I assign weaker students to do the boardwork, although I am careful not to do this in an obvious way." This allows the weaker students to participate, but in a way which will reinforce their own learning without holding back the others. "Also I often ask a better student to help out if a weaker student is having difficulty responding. Then I have the second student repeat the question to the first student to give him or her another shot at it. Peer teaching can be extremely effective, especially when a class takes responsibility for its weaker members. I find this approach superior to one-on-one tutoring during office hours."

Several other excellent teachers also form small peer teaching groups in discussion/tutorial classes or labs. They integrate weaker students into groups of average and above average ability. Some instructors explicitly suggest ways in which their better students may help other students or ways in which students who are having difficulty may learn from others.

19. Go to class before it begins.

A Physics professor makes a point of going to classes a half-hour early (if the room is vacant) to erase the board, check out the equipment and the demonstrations he will be using and to write a brief review on the board (e.g., pertinent equations, key phrases, topic areas). "This activity gets me in the teaching frame of mind and refreshes my students about the important points we covered the last time. It also has the intended value of increasing the opportunities I have to talk informally with students. Five or six students come early to the class each time to ask questions, share ideas, or just talk."

20. Give your home phone number to students in your classes.

Several faculty members encourage their students to call them at home if they have questions about an assignment. "Just not after 2.00 a.m.!" says an English professor. He finds that students rarely

abuse this invitation. "I usually get about six calls per term out of several hundred students since it is a lot less time-consuming to clarify an assignment the night before it's due than to negotiate a grade or an incomplete for a student who did the wrong assignment. I've found it's cost-effective to be a bit more cooperative and flexible at the front end."

A professor of Political Science agrees. "Even in my large classes (over 450), I rarely get more than a dozen calls, but the fact that I give out my number lets students know I am available if they need me."

21. Do some of your own work in your campus office.

Several professors do non-teaching work in their campus office with an open-door policy. "I tell my students that if the door is open they should feel free to come in and ask whatever questions they have," one teacher of Dramatic Art says. "On the other hand, if the door is closed, it means either that I am not in or I prefer not to be disturbed."

An Engineering professor follows the same policy. He tells students that even outside formal office hours, "If you catch me in my office, I'm fair game. This is my number one job, so I'm around the office a lot."

22. Keep your office door open unless you really cannot be disturbed.

"My students should have first priority on my time," one Engineering professor says. "I always keep my office door open when I am in and am willing to stop whatever I am doing if one of my students comes by. It's important not to appear standoffish, to act put-upon, bored, or too busy to spend time with your students out of class."

When working in the lab, he leaves a note on his office door inviting students to drop by the lab if they want to talk. "Actually, I like to have students visit me in the lab because there they can really see me at work, and can get some idea of what I do."

Finally, because he has discovered that some students never come to the office or lab, he tries to spend several hours a week in the department course center where students study, socialize, and eat lunch. There, he talks with students informally and gets to know them better.

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Centre for Academic & Instructional Development (CAID)
Room 202C, McNally Main
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS
B3H 3C3
Phone: 902-420-5088
Fax: 902-420-5015
Email: caid@smu.ca

www.smu.ca/administration/caid

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