Spring Workshop for UBC Political Science TAs:
Designing and Teaching a Course

On Tuesday, April 25, 2017, the TA training program held a session on designing and teaching a course led by Dr Allen Sens. Allen spoke on such topics as how to design a syllabus, how to balance lecture and participation, and how to design assignments. The session covered the additional issues raised by teaching a compressed-time summer course. This session was open to everyone—those who had taught already, those who had a course lined up on the horizon, and those who were interested in planning ahead. The session was well attended and generated a lot of discussion. What follows are my notes from the session.

When: Thursday April 13th, 12:15-1:45
Where: Buchanan B219

Overview: introduction and issues
- observations about best practices
- presentation of a core conceptual framework that breaks down the binary conceptions of teacher v. students (us v. them)
- emphasis on the importance of getting students discussing, and making learning a social experience for them
- emphasis on the importance of remembering that students learn in different ways
- emphasis on the reality that students learn by doing, and on thinking about what they will be doing
- emphasis on the importance of reflecting on how a teacher can "animate" learning

1.   Course Design
Designing a course starts with learning objectives
- talk about what students will learn (should be five or so core objectives)
• try to transcend terms like "understand" in favour of action verbs like "analyze, evaluate, create" (note: these terms are taken from Bloom's taxonomy of learning , a set of hierarchical models used to classify educational learning objectives into levels of complexity and specificity —see figure below)
• try to "elevate" students up the taxonomy into a mix of content & capacities (learning & doing)
Designing a course also means paying attention to "alignment"—ask how your objectives are animated in class activities
- what is the assessment strategy (this is a key piece in course design: this is "the spine of the course")
- use a mix of assignments: e.g. poster presentations, simulations…. don't only lecture

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- recognize that the optimum size for group activities is 6-8 students
- and think beyond the classroom (what can we do to get them outside that space?)
- consider connecting with the UBC Centre for Community Engaged Learning for ideas around this

2.   Lesson Planning
- have a plan for each session with about 3 learning objectives (LOs) for each class
- make sure these LOs are aligned with core course LOs identified in your course outline (click here for the Department supped course outline template distributed at this session: http://blogs.ubc.ca/psta/files/2017/07/COURSE-OUTLINE-TEM12BC61F.pdf
- think about class as chunks of time: for example, chunk 1. lecture; chunk 2. video; chunk 3. group activity; chunk 4. capstone lecture, and so forth

BOTTOM LINE, switch modes—do something different every 15 minutes
• distinguish between things that students **need** to know, and things it would be **nice** for students to know
• start with a hook: connect them to the world in a way in which they can understand why your course content should matter to them
- consider having readings-based quizzes (assessment components) before group activities
- like everything else, make sure your assessment components are purposeful and align with course LOs

THE CLOSE, the lecture should have a close if possible (someting that returns to LOs for the class
- start this off with something like: "so what have we learned today?"
- it is important to build in buffer time where nothing is planned (e.g. always plan on running behind)

3.   Classroom technique (Be the professor)

- be the professor
- watch you body language (make sure your eyes are inclusive)
- be in control of your class; learn who your students are and use their names
- use small group activities like "pair-share" or quads
- keep you students engaged

Lower order thinking skills					Higher order thinking skills
Remember	**Understand**	**Apply**	**Analyze**	**Evaluate**	**Create**
recognizing (identifying)	interpreting (clarifying, paraphrasing, representing, translating)	executing (carrying out)	differentiating (discriminating, distinguishing, focusing, selecting)	checking (coordinating, detecting, monitoring, testing)	generating (hypothesizing)
recalling (retrieving)		implementing (using)			planning (designing)
	exemplifying (illustrating, instantiating)		organizing (finding, coherence, integrating, outlining, parsing, structuring)	critiquing (judging)	producing (construct)
	classifying (categorizing, subsuming)				
	summarizing (abstracting, generalizing)		attributing (deconstructing)		

Sample of Bloom's taxonomy: Creative Commons Attribution license. Courtesy Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching