

Ten Teaching Tips For Teaching at CUNY

1. Know your students, their stories, their aspirations, and create meaningful discussions and assignments that allow them to bridge their personal biographies with the larger social histories.

For me, the mantra has been “the atypical is the typical”. Over the past 18 years or so, my students have included: Homeless, AIDS/cancer patients, children of professors, high school drop outs, had to stop out b/c they were being stalked by their abusive partners, had to discontinue school cause of an arranged marriage, teen mothers, felons, college educated in the Caribbean, victims of stop and frisks, injured athletes from 4 yr. schools, nannies for the wealthy, sex workers, recovered addicts, raised by people not their parents—grandparents, aunts/uncles, caretakers of younger siblings, older relatives, spent time in shelters, children of community leaders/activists, immigrants from all over the world, and more.

Assume difference, assume a wide array of experiences and view this as enhancing sociological inquiry. Have their authentic experiences provide the basis for discussion. Allow them to be experts on their social world, one that you may not inhabit, and challenge and guide them to revisit their experiences in a larger social-historical context, Try to get an idea of why they are in school. What do they hope to attain? What do they want to become? Some of the recurring professions I hear most often include nurses, owning their own daycares, teachers, police officers, business people, hotel and restaurant workers, music industry, forensic psychologists, speech or occupational therapists, social workers, etc.

On the very first day of class, after thoroughly going over the syllabus so they have a clear idea of my expectations, I have them do a short writing assignment. I ask them to introduce themselves, and tell me something “unique” about themselves. I ask them to tell me why they chose to take this course and for the last question, I ask them to write about one thing in the news that has happened recently that they were following and why they found this interesting. The purpose of this exercise is two fold—it gives me an early writing sample, and more importantly, it allows me to get to know them and remember their names. One of things I strive to do is to make the students feel like valued members of the classroom community. Their presence matters, their ideas matter, their experiences matter. When they feel validated (rather than judged, or assumed to not be college material) they are much more open to learning. And I use their lives, and refer to their interests/hobbies/work experiences throughout the semester.

2. At the same time, I create boundaries between me and them. They don't want to be friends—I think for some it is not only uncomfortable, but insulting, even demeaning. They want good teachers who care they are there, who support them, but they expect there to be boundaries. Most are not comfortable calling teachers by their first name, especially immigrant students. For pedagogy to be really liberating, we can't impose on our students cultural norms or ideals that may be foreign to them. They are not liberated that way, as much as our intentions are “good”.
3. Be constantly aware of cultural dynamics—from frames of references (gender, race,

ethnicity, class, age, etc.) to patterns of social interaction. For example, though our teaching styles might be such that we demand and desire eye contact, this might be difficult/uncomfortable for students for whom this is not an expected part of interaction, especially with authority figures. Secondly, for those of us who completed our undergraduate work in a more typical fashion, without having to work much and/or without dependents and other family obligations, be sure to be mindful of how such experiences are not often shared by our students.

4. Use their own issues (homophobia, racism, sexism, etc.) as teachable moments. Try not to alienate anyone by letting comments go that may be demeaning to others in the classroom. Encourage an honest discussion and bring out the social dimensions from which to analyze sociologically.
5. Share your story as a grad student, as an adjunct, etc. Unfortunately, many CUNY students do not know the important history of CUNY nor are they in tune with the history and political and economic forces behind the rise of contingent labor and its implications for them and you. Incorporate this into your course content—perhaps as illustrations in chapters on the sociology of work, social stratification, or education, etc.
6. Know the policies/ organizational culture of the campus. Know your rights as an adjunct faculty. Know the benefits of union membership. If possible, go to union meetings. Don't be in the dark.
7. Be careful not to lose yourself too much in the teaching. Your master status is and should be that of graduate student. That is not to say you should not take this responsibility seriously. You should, but be kind to yourself. If it is going to be a particularly heavy semester for you, use more informal, non-graded writing assignments, reduce the amount of grading you have to do and try to stagger it so it doesn't get so overwhelming that you feel paralyzed. And this comes with practice. It's difficult to know what is going to work for you until you do it. If you must use test banks, be sure to read over carefully the questions. You may want to re-word, re-phrase, the questions, especially making examples that are more relevant to our students' lives. It is not CUNY students who are often in the minds of the authors of many of these test banks. When you construct exam questions, whether multiple choice, short answers, essays, be sure to think about whether the questions make sense, that the choices are comprehensible to students. Constructing a good exam takes time.
8. If you are using power point, try not to overuse it. It can be a wonderful mechanism for showing text, images, hyperlinks to youtube, etc. that can really enhance a lesson/discussion. But be mindful that many come in very ill prepared for what it means to take notes in class. Try to incorporate some "lessons" on this into your lectures/discussions. For many students in CUNY, they are not only learning the course content, but they are also learning about what it means to be college students. You are part of transmitting some of that cultural capital to them.
9. Be introspective. Reflect a lot, without beating yourself up. You will make mistakes, learn from them. Strive to be a better teacher with every semester. Keep a journal when you first start—what worked, what didn't, and why. What would you do differently next time, etc.
10. And finally, inspire, challenge and respect your students, they will thrive, and you will benefit from rewarding teaching experiences.

by Robin G. Isserles