Teaching First-Years

Teaching first-year students requires a unique set of teaching strategies. Creating an engaging learning experience for first-year students is important because the majority of drop-outs occur in the first-year of study (Tinto, 1987; 2006). Among the main causes of student attrition are:

- **Trouble adjusting to the culture of post-secondary education**. For example, not knowing when it's okay to ask a question or speak in class, not knowing if it's acceptable to discuss difficulties with the course material or assignments directly with the professor, not knowing how or where to ask for help.
- **Confusion over and difficulty meeting academic expectations**. For example, not knowing what constitutes plagiarism or paraphrasing, not knowing what is expected in order to successfully complete assignments like lab reports or research essays, feeling overwhelmed by the workload and feeling ill-equipped with strategies to deal with it (Tinto, n.d.).
- **Social isolation**. First-year students are also more likely to feel isolated. For many students, the classroom may be the only place they meet peers and faculty members (Tinto, 2006). This is especially true on a commuter campus like Ryerson.

To address these issues, Tinto has laid out five conditions for student persistence:

- **Expectations:** Students are most likely to succeed when expectations are clear and consistent. Students should know what is required in order to successfully complete an assignment, a course, and their program. It is important to give first-year students a "road map to completion" for their program of study. Expectations should be kept high and faculty members should encourage students to strive.
- **Support:** Tinto divides support into two areas, academic support and social support. For students who are unprepared for post-secondary education, it is important to both introduce them to academic support programs like tutoring, study groups, and workshops, as well as make sure they are aware of social supports like counseling, mentorship programs, and student groups.
- **Feedback:** Students should get early and frequent feedback on how they are doing in their courses. Early feedback can also help identify struggling students who may need additional support. Feedback should also be solicited from students on their learning experiences through techniques like "one minute papers" so that teaching methods can be adjusted as needed.
- **Involvement:** Student engagement with faculty, staff, and peers reduces isolation. "The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate."
- **Learning:** Student learning drives student retention. The more students learn, and the "more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate." This last point is connected to the previous point, involvement, as "students who are more involved in learning, especially with others, learn more and show greater levels of intellectual development." Tinto points to the importance, therefore, of building learning communities that "actively involve students in learning" (Tinto, n.d.).

Tinto concludes, "students are more likely to persist when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their learning, provide needed academic and social support, and frequent feedback about their performance, and actively involve them with other students and faculty in learning" (n.d.).

Best Practices in Teaching First-Years

The following best practices in teaching first-years have been compiled keeping Tinto's five conditions for student persistence in mind.

- **Get to know students**. Have students answer a few questions, either on paper or via D2L or Google Forms, about who they are, why they are in your class, and what they hope to learn. Whenever possible, learn student names. Distribute tent cards or name tags to assist with this process (WUSTL).
- **Make yourself approachable**. Share personal stories of how you first became passionate about your discipline or about difficulties you had when you were a student (NIU). Encourage students to come to your office hours or to chat with you after class. To seem less intimidating, offer the possibility of group office hours or online office hours (Dalhousie). To get students accustomed to approaching you, consider requiring an introductory meeting with each student, either individually or in small groups. Reach out to "every student who does poorly on the first exam or major assignment for a five-minute appointment to determine what kind of help the student may need" (Eberly Center).
- **Prepare students for post-secondary education**. Include tutorials on time management and "how to prepare for assignments and exams" (NIU). Provide "explicit strategies for successful learning in your discipline" (Dalhousie). Review how to effectively work in groups. Share examples of "previous exams and samples of graded papers so students get a feel for how course work is graded" (NIU). Make the expectations you have set for student performance as explicit as possible (Vanderbilt).
- **Give students an overview of academic integrity**. On the first day of class, discuss with students the sort of resources you expect students to use in your assignments, how you define proper citation, and what you consider cheating. Define any "gray areas." For example, if you are using group work, explain what constitutes an acceptable form of collaboration (Eberly Center). Include a description of Policy 60 and the penalties and consequences of academic misconduct in your syllabus. Direct students to the Academic Integrity Office's resources for students: http://www.ryerson.ca/academicintegrity/students/what-is-integrity-and-misconduct/
- **Be aware of and direct students to available supports, from study skills and transition support to mentoring programs or counseling**:
    - English Language Support
    - Study Skills and Transition Support
    - Academic Accommodation Support
    - Writing Support
    - Math Support
    - The Tri-Mentoring Program
    - International Services for Student (ISS)
    - Centre for Student Development and Counselling
    - Ryerson Aboriginal Student Services (RASS)
    - Ryerson Students' Union
- **Give students a voice in their own learning**. Invite students "to help devise course policies and rules related to projects and assignments." Allow discussions to "diverge from the planned lecture" and give students the opportunities to share their opinions or to suggest topics to cover (NIU). Leave lots of space for asking and answering questions—demonstrate that "you are interested in what students are thinking" and value their input (WUSTL).

- **Engage students with the course material**. Help your students see the value and relevance of your course content by including stories, anecdotes, or real-world experiences (Dalhousie). Present the material in a clear and organized manner, with contextual introductions and summaries that break down what students should have learned (Dalhousie). Explain how the required readings relate to the lectures and class discussions and ensure that "course assessments (quizzes, exams, and assignments) include material from required readings" (NIU). Download our *Teaching Tips* on "Making Lectures More Engaging" for more tips and strategies: http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/EngagingLectures.pdf

- **Apply active learning techniques**. At least every 15 to 20 minutes include a break in your lecture to "ask students to apply a theory, solve a problem, or discuss a debated point" (WUSTL). Games and simulations can help students "visualize complex systems" (NIU). Having students work in small groups or pairs can help build a classroom community. Download our *Teaching Tips* on "Active Learning" for more ideas on how to bring active learning strategies into your classroom: http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/activelearning.pdf

- **Teach critical thinking, don't assume students will be able to "pick up" the skills on their own**. Model the process of critical thinking, give students rules and structures for critical thinking in your discipline, and allow students to practice and receive feedback. Give students the opportunity to engage with the course material in the form of complex, real-life problems that resists being answered with a black-and-white, right-or-wrong, solutions (Vanderbilt).

- **Scaffold learning by designing assignments to build on each other**. Think about the ways in which the assignments you've planned will "help your students advance their thinking" (Washington University). Scaffolding assignments can also help first-year students avoid violations of academic integrity.

- **Provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they've learned** (Dalhousie). "Be sensitive to the variety of ways that students excel at learning and include a variety of types of learning experiences in your courses to reach the broadest group of students as you can" (Vanderbilt).

- **Provide feedback to students, early and often** – "give students a sense of their progress and how they are doing in the course as soon as possible so they have a sufficient amount of time to correct their trajectory or catch up with their peers" (Vanderbilt). To do so, Dalhousie suggests providing students with:
  - early feedback on a low-stakes assignment
  - an overview of how the whole class performed on assignments to give students a sense of how they are doing in relation to their classmates
  - opportunities to practices before evaluation
  - opportunities for peer review and self-assessment
  - opportunities to reflect on graded work and to incorporate the feedback into their next assignment
  - guidelines and rubrics
  - timely grades (Dalhousie).

- **Solicit feedback from students, early and often**. For example, administer a course evaluation early in your course – "ask students to identify things that help them to learn in the course as well as things that hinder their learning, and ask for suggestions about ways to improve the course." Report back to students on the results of the evaluation and the ways in which you are able to adjust the course to better meet their needs (Eberly Center).

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