

Using Class Time Well: Suggestions to Make Every Class Memorable

By Regan A. R. Gurung(<https://www.teachingprofessor.com/author/tp-gurung/>) | February 6, 2023

“How do I *fill up* four hours a week of class time?” At first, this exclamation from a first-year graduate student preparing to teach her first class seemed alien to my experienced teacher mindset. Perhaps I have long stopped thinking about how much time per week I am responsible for. Even for one class, for one term, 40 hours of preparation seems like a lot. Add more classes and perhaps a semester, and you are really faced with an intimidating number. I have been teaching for 24 years now. I often ask myself the opposite question: “How can I make everything *fit* into four hours per week?” The same thought should go into how one answers the first and second questions. They are both great and bear some reflection. Have you recently thought about *how* you use class time?

If you are reading this, here, I am certain your answer is not “keep talking.” When I first started teaching, I tended to fill class time by sharing content. I wanted to show my knowledge and establish my credibility. I primarily lectured. While lectures can be engaging, entertaining, and educational, I would much rather have students weigh the merits of coming to my “class” rather than my “lecture.” How we think about class time and what we call it (not just “lecture”) is important. Not treating it as time to only transmit content is important too. Sure, in days of yore when books were not freely available, the lecture was the primary means of content transmission. That is not the case today. Synchronous time together is valuable.

What you plan to do on a specific day requires you to consider your course as a whole. While this piece is not a venue for a treatise on backward design, the key components are important. Start with your course learning outcomes. Plan how you will assess whether your students have accomplished them (e.g., assignments, exams). Decide how you will

use class time to support your students' achieving those outcomes. Mapping out your class so you know what you will cover and when enables you to then plan the specific class periods and is essential. You should have a good sense of what knowledge and skills you will cover each week. Then comes the scripting of each class day.

It helps me to think of each class as having some key components. It will reduce a lot of planning pressure if you always try to incorporate each of the following key items. Not all classes need all of them, but by the time you use many of them, you will see that your class time has been accounted for. (See **Amobi, 2020** (<https://blogs.oregonstate.edu/osuteaching/2020/09/02/a-framework-for-engaging-students-in-synchronous-class-sessions-interactive-lecture/>), for an integrative lecture framework for more.)

Start strong. You do not have to be an entertainer or advertiser to know that hooking your audience is important. Yes, having an outline of where you are going that day is good, but use even the moments before class starts. I like to play music that is timed to end when class starts and that relates to the day's topic. Even the first slide that students see as they come in has a cartoon or news article that relates to what we are studying. It is OK to be human and start with a reflection on the week, the weather, or something going on in the world, on campus, or in town. Get students to share how they are doing and what is on their mind. Then pose a provocative, attention-grabbing question that the day's class will address.

Use retrieval practice. Cognitive science suggests repeatedly testing yourself is good for learning and memory and a great way to study. Consider starting each class by fostering this skill. Ask your students to recall something from the last class or from the assigned reading. Do not have them use their notes or book. Given them just a few seconds. You can have a slide with your questions or even make them up on the spot. Have the students write down their answers in their notebooks, on their computers, or even in the learning management system's chat. After a free recall period, give them a clue or some choices. Then go over the answers (you might have students discuss them with a classmate first). This is a valuable skill and a great way to start class. Beyond using this technique to start strong, there are other key class design components to build into each class.

Script set pieces. Nearly every class session, I try and have an exercise that is that is not me talking and them taking down notes. This is either a video clip or a demonstration where students get up and take part in an activity for the rest of class. Demonstrations are a nice change of pace. Even if they're not chemical reactions or lab-type activities,

they can have students work on a problem (mathematical or conceptual) out loud to show a process. Demos can be vivid and offer a key memory hook. Sometimes you have to get creative. One of my favorites is when I have two students act out being brain parts so I can show how structure relates to function.

Even short videos are great to make a point, and students really appreciate the use of visual media (remember to use closed captioning). Once I thought it was a waste of class time to show videos that students could watch on their own. Remember this: they will almost definitely not have time to watch a video on their own time. In class you can set it up, provide context for why you are showing it, and then give students questions to guide their viewing. Then after watching it, discuss the answers to the questions. A video every week is a great way to mix things up.

Play to your passions. When you are excited about a topic, your students will pick up on it and feed off of it. Every week I try to select a topic that really excites me intellectually and relates to the week's planned content. It is fine and even better if it is not in the book. Take class time to discuss it, expand on it, and get reactions to it. Having topics that represent why you are doing what you do models intellectual curiosity and provides new avenues for discussion. If you do not want to bring in brand new information, create what I like to call "seed slides." This riff on a technique used by Stephanie Byers, a graduate student in my research team, uses slides with content that you could spend variable time on. If you are pressed for time, you can spend five minutes on the topic, but given that it is something you happen to know a lot about or have looked into a lot, perhaps you could spend 20 minutes on it. Having such slides that could seed a longer discussion is always handy.

Get CATy. By now you should know that active learning is a good thing. What's the best technique to use for your class? There are over 100 classroom assessment techniques (CATs) that you can use to instigate active learning (see this [infographic for suggestions \(https://ctl.oregonstate.edu/sites/ctl.oregonstate.edu/files/2021-06/interactive_lecturing_a_framework_for_active_learning_1.pdf\)](https://ctl.oregonstate.edu/sites/ctl.oregonstate.edu/files/2021-06/interactive_lecturing_a_framework_for_active_learning_1.pdf)). Not all will resonate with you, your class, or your students. That is fine. Just because everyone you know likes a think-pair-share does not mean you or your students will enjoy it. There are enough CATs out there that you will find something you like. Use one, or the same one, every class period so you can go beyond mere content delivery. You can use a CAT to close your class (e.g., a mini assessment) and then summarize the day's material and provide a heads-up for what is coming next. Closing well is important too.

As you consider how to script each class, do not forget that even though you do not want class to be a content dump, the more content *you* know, the greater flexibility you have in what set pieces to design or what passion plays and seed slides to use. Always know your material well, and build time into reading beyond your assigned material to get more ideas of what to put into your class period. While this knowledge builds over time and with the repeated teaching of a course, you can jump-start it by exploring peers' syllabi and accumulating additional textbooks and readings that relate to your class.

Once you have your set menu of items to pick from, planning an hour, two, or more, becomes a lot easier. Then you have a new challenge. What do you take out? Sift and winnow. Be open to change. Be locked down to little. Happy teaching.

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