

## "How to Teach Effectively to a Wide Range of Student Ability"

Megan Stotts, Department of Philosophy

During my first discussion sections as a TA, I was excited to find that my students were able to answer most of my questions, and they seemed to understand everything I taught. I thought my sections were bringing everyone up to speed. But then the first exam rolled around, and quite a few of my students did poorly. I felt disappointed and confused.

I soon realized that the responsiveness and comprehension of the top third of my class had lulled me into thinking that *all* of the students were following along at the same level. This is a very easy mistake for a grad student to make: most of us were strong students as undergraduates, so it can be hard for us to imagine what it's like to be a struggling student. This is something we have to learn, and it's crucial to becoming an effective TA.

But learning to relate to our struggling students is only the first step. One of the biggest challenges I have faced in my TAing experience at UCR has been teaching to the wide range of student ability that confronts me in the classroom. Some of my students come to section already understanding most of what I have to teach them, and there is a serious risk that they will become bored and disengaged.

Other students come to section totally lost and will be left behind if I don't start with the basics. And of course, some of them are in the middle, needing additional help with some concepts and already comfortable with others. Fortunately, there are several strategies that can be effective for teaching successfully to a wide range of student ability.

### **1. Check in with all of your students, not just the most vocal ones.**

As TA's, we all care about whether our students are following what we say, and the simplest way to check in with them is to ask, "Does everyone understand?" But if you ask that question, you will most likely hear, "Yes!" from a few of the students who understand, and silence from everyone else. Don't assume that those few students speak for everyone. Instead, ask for a show of hands of who feels comfortable enough with a new concept to explain it to someone who's never heard of it before. Another option is to ask them to write down what was most confusing at the end of section and then review those topics again the next time you meet.

### **2. Give students time to think.**

When we ask questions, it's always satisfying when a student raises her hand to answer right away. But when one student provides the answer immediately, the other students don't have enough time to think through the question

themselves, which would be much more valuable for them than just hearing the answer. One way around this is to ask a question and then give the students one minute to write down their own answers to it. Students who are struggling a little will have more time to figure out the answer, and students who are excelling will be able to develop their answers in more detail. And then, when someone gives the right answer a minute later, they will all be able to compare it to what they wrote and hopefully notice subtle mistakes.

### **3. Let students teach each other.**

One way to simultaneously avoid boredom for students who are ahead and help students who are behind is to use group work or have them check each other's answers on small quizzes and come to a consensus. Advanced students may enjoy and benefit from explaining things to students who need help. Also, struggling students may have an easier time understanding their classmates' explanation of the material, because the gap between their levels of understanding is smaller.

### **4. Correct their mistakes.**

Of course it's important not to shut your students down when they make mistakes, but it's also possible to take that advice too far and fail to correct serious errors for the sake of encouraging class participation. This won't harm students who are already doing well in the class—they'll realize what the mistake was. But it can add to the confusion of students who are already struggling. Just find a way to correct students' errors that emphasizes what was good about their answer, but is very clear about what the problem was as well.

### **5. Vary the level of difficulty and complexity.**

When you're explaining important concepts to your students, be clear about when you're providing the basic information that they really have to know to understand the concept. That will help students who are feeling lost know where to focus their attention. But don't forget to also delve a little into relevant higher-level connections and applications. Students who already know the basics will appreciate that you had something new and interesting to add, and students who are in the middle may enjoy the challenge. Sometimes it can be a good idea to say explicitly that what you just added is something extra that they shouldn't worry about if they didn't understand it or find it helpful.

We all want to teach in ways that are beneficial to each and every student who enters our classrooms. These five strategies will not erase the challenges of teaching to a wide range of student ability, but hopefully they provide a place to start.