

Teaching Do's and Don'ts

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Purpose

This paper gives several clear, brief suggestions to be considered whenever an instructor teaches. These suggestions address many variables that an instructor can control and should pay attention to.

Introduction

Many variables affect the teaching process. The most obvious are: the instructor, the student, the subject matter, and the environment. This memorandum concentrates on the instructor variable and how this variable interacts with the student variable.

The suggestions presented here are overt behaviors that an instructor should or should not do. They are not to be construed as an instructional strategy, such as the Balanced Instruction Technique (Explain, Exercise, and Evaluate) taught in Techniques of Instruction. Rather, the suggestions offered here should be used in conjunction with instructional strategies.

Background

The two data sources I used to compile this list of Do's and Don'ts were educational literature and student interviews. From the educational literature, I gleaned many attributes of good teaching. Students were my second data source. I asked them, "Remember past instructors who you thought were particularly good or bad. What can you remember that these instructors did or said?"

The attribute list of good teachers included many subjective items and redundancies. The attributes were distilled and checked for reliability and validity.

Empirical validity was assessed by repeated use in *Techniques of Instruction*. Hundreds of students have recreated the list when posed with the same question. I can say with certainty that the list contains items of instructor behavior important to students. Here are the lists with a brief explanation. The items are more or less sequenced as they would appear in class.

Teaching Do's

1. **Be prepared** - This means having your materials ready, handouts available, audiovisuals cued up, and whatever else is needed for that session. Too often students hear the lame excuse, "Gee I'm sorry, but I left the handouts on my office desk."
2. **Make opening remarks** - Opening remarks are particularly important at the first class meeting. Your students are wondering which text you will use. How much

homework will be assigned" Is a term paper required? Will the class break for coffee? Until you answer these questions, the students' minds will not be completely tuned towards you.

Opening remarks on subsequent class days should include a brief review of what was covered during the previous class session and a brief overview of what will be covered during this class session.

3. **Make class comfortable** - This item has two facets: 1) physical comfort ("Can everyone see and hear?") and 2) mental or psychological comfort ("Feel free to ask questions at any time.") Thorndike (1913, p.217) noted that a motivated class is relaxed and free of irrelevant emotion.
4. **State objectives** - Research (Rothkopf and Kaplan, 1972) has shown that objectives enhance learning. Stating objectives is nothing more than helping a student mentally organize the material you are presenting. This idea is similar to the public speaking adage, "Tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you told them."
5. **Be organized** - Organize your lectures. Follow through on ideas. Don't jump around creating a mish mash of concepts. Many psychologists (Bruner, 1960 and Piaget, 1964) believe that learning takes place when one can organize new learning to fit a structure already in one's repertoire. Organizing your ideas into a structure that the student can follow should enhance learning.
6. **Use audio/visual aids** - People learn better when more than one sense modality is stimulated. Also, audio, video, movies, overhead transparencies, and other training aids add a nice change of pace to lecturing.
7. **Know your material** - This item is the most important. Nothing causes a student to tune a teacher out faster than the instructor losing his or her credibility. Students don't expect an instructor to know everything. But, if you give wrong or incomplete information, eventually your students will doubt everything you say.
8. **Answer questions** - This item has two parts. First, answer questions when they are asked. A question asking you to explain the concept of relativity would have to be deferred. But remember, when a student asks a question it is because the student doesn't understand and therefore has cognitive dissonance. To remove dissonance, a barrier to learning, you should try to answer the question when asked. Second, after you answer the question, ask the student if you have answered the question that was asked. Too often

an instructor responds to a different question than the student asked, or to only a part of a student's question.

9. **Provide feedback** - With all we don't know about teaching there is one thing we can state with certainty: without feedback, learning does not take place. An instructor must provide feedback by telling students when they are right or wrong. The feedback serves as reinforcement, a necessary component of learning.
10. **Show enthusiasm** - Your enthusiasm should take two directions. Be enthusiastic about your subject; be enthusiastic about teaching. Students tend to pick up and respond to an instructor's enthusiasm.
11. **Maintain control** - When you assume authority you also assume its responsibility. It is your job to keep personality conflicts, domineering students, or other classroom problems under control. Don't think these do not happen when you are teaching adults. The do.
12. **Be flexible** - A well-prepared instructor has a detailed outline to follow. This does not preclude adjusting the outline to serve the immediate needs of your students. Remember: Your function as an instructor is to service the needs of your students.
13. **Encourage participation** - An active class is alert, and it does learn. A passive class may learn. Encourage questions and discussions. Instead of giving all the information, see if the students can discover some of it.
14. **Establish rapport** - I confess this item is subjective, but one that appeared so often on the list of good teaching characteristics, that I feel compelled to include it. Rapport is difficult to define, but we know it when we see it. Be kind and sensitive toward your students. Treat your students as adults. Rapport should follow.
15. **Evaluate progress** - If something is worth taking the time to teach, then it is worth taking the time to see that you taught it. I suggest you break up your lecture into small time segments and ask questions at the end of these segments. About every five or ten minutes seems reasonable. Then you haven't covered a great deal of information. You can isolate problems or confusion.
16. **Be yourself** - Often novice instructors try to imitate an instructor of whom they were especially fond. Unless your personalities are similar, it doesn't work. A tip for relaxing and being yourself is to imagine you are speaking to a neighbor or friend.

If you have other "Do's", please add them to this list.

Teaching Don'ts

1. **Don't start late or run overtime** - Start classes on time. Holding up a class unduly long or waiting for stragglers only punishes those there on time. If you run past the time for the class to end, you are not only angering your students; they are not listening to you anyway.
2. **Don't waste time** - Classroom digressions are fine. A funny story, something that happened to you on the way to class, and so forth are all right but don't let digressions predominate. Students are in class to learn.
3. **Don't monopolize conversation** - Let's face it, most of us are instructors because we have information to give. And that is the instructor's job -- to communicate that knowledge to the class. But, let students have their say, too. Questioning skills are particularly useful to get them involved.
4. **Don't be pompous** - It is a simple truth that people like modesty and dislike pomposity. Initially, a class, like most audiences is pulling for the instructor. Students want you to do well. Acting pompous will quickly lose this support.
5. **Don't ridicule** - Ridiculing students, at any grade level, is improper behavior. Poking fun at a student or at the student's answer has probably intimidated and turned off more students than any other instructor behavior.
6. **Don't be a dictator** - Your approach to lectures and assignments should create an atmosphere of shared problem solving. No one wants to be dictated to; that is especially true of adults.
7. **Don't speak too fast/slow** - Speaking too rapidly will lose the slow students; speaking too slowly will lose the fast students. There is a happy medium. A clear, well-modulated voice helps an instructor tremendously. Tape portions of your lectures. Use this device to improve your delivery.
8. **Don't read material** - I don't mean never read material. A short article read to preserve the author's original words is fine. Conversely, to read a 45-minute lecture is ludicrous. It would be more efficient to make copies and send everyone home early. Most people learn better by reading than listening anyway.
9. **Don't interrupt answers** - Many instructors develop the bad habit of interrupting student answers and finishing the question they started themselves. A technique I use to remind me to keep quiet is clasping my hands behind my back.
10. **Don't lock horns** - You are not going to love every student you have in class, and every one of your students is not going to love you. Personality conflicts will arise. Don't

abuse your authority. The best time to resolve personality conflicts is during breaks or after class.

11. **Don't lose student's respect** - Losing respect can happen in many ways. Profanity doesn't belong in a classroom. Instructors should maintain a slight veil between themselves and their classes. The instructor must be the authority figure. This is not to contradict my early comments about being friendly. Too many instructors try to be buddy-buddy to win favorable feedback at the expense of teaching. Discipline must always be maintained.
12. **Don't bring your own problems to class** - Before entering the classroom, you may have pumped out your basement, fixed a flat tire, or had a spat with your spouse. Hard as it is, try to brush your emotions aside and come on cheerfully to your class. Students tend to pick up the emotion of the instructor.
13. **Don't fake it** - If you do fake it, make sure you don't get caught. As I mentioned before, an instructor must establish credibility. An honest "I don't know, but I'll find out the answer" works well, or you might try a relay question. This question is so named because you relay the question asked of you to a member of the class who may know the answer. This also gives you a chance to think!
14. **Don't display distracting mannerisms** - A distracting mannerism is anything you say or do that interferes with your students' learning. The most obvious of these are the overuse of "OK" or "all right" and toying with something in your hand such as a pointer. These mannerisms tend to distract your students' attention.

References

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- Piaget, O. (1968). *Six psychological studies*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Rothkopf, E.Z. & Kaplan, R. (1972). Exploration of the effect of density and specificity of instructional objectives on learning from text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 63, 295-302.
- Thorndike, E.L. (1954). *The psychology of learning*. New York: Teacher's College Columbia University.

Additional Resources

- Davis, B.G. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Erickson, B. L. & Strommer, D.W. (1991). *Teaching College Freshmen*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Hoover, K.H. (1980). *College teaching today: A handbook for postsecondary instruction*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

Instructor's Checklist

Do's

Directions: Read over this list of "Do's" *before* going into class. Try to plan your teaching including the activities on the list. After class check those "Do's" which you accomplished and note those which you did not accomplish. Determine why they were not accomplished and how you can include them next time. Keep track of your progress over time.

1. Be prepared _____
2. Make opening remarks _____
3. Make class comfortable _____
4. State objectives _____
5. Be organized _____
6. Use audio/visual aids _____
7. Know your material _____
8. Answer questions _____
9. Provide feedback _____
10. Show enthusiasm _____
11. Maintain control _____
12. Be flexible _____
13. Encourage participation _____
14. Establish rapport _____
15. Evaluate progress _____
16. Be yourself _____

Don'ts

Directions: Read over this list of "Don'ts" *after* you have taught your class. Check those "Don'ts" which you remember doing. Make a conscientious effort not to repeat these "Don'ts" again. Keep track of your progress over time.

1. Start late or run overtime _____
2. Waste time _____
3. Monopolize conversation _____
4. Be pompous _____
5. Ridicule _____
6. Be a dictator _____
7. Speak too fast/slow _____
8. Read material _____
9. Interrupt answers _____
10. Lock horns _____
11. Lose students' respect _____
12. Bring your own problems
to class _____
13. Fake it _____
14. Display distracting mannerisms _____