

Excellence in Teaching Organization— A Fundamental

**David Jackson, Regents' Distinguished Professor,
Associate Professor, Chemistry, Gordon College**

“He is so unorganized.” “She is so unorganized.” These are the most frequent unsolicited criticisms I hear from students regarding their instructors. On the other hand, the most frequent favorable comment on my student evaluations involves the manner in which I organize my classes. These observations are consistent with the results of a recent survey of the Academic Honor Society students at our campus. In this survey, we asked that the students identify and rank order the most important characteristics of an instructor as they relate to excellence in the teaching and learning process. The top three characteristics they identified were knowledge of the subject, clarity of presentation, and class organization.

My fascination, some might call it a “hangup,” on class organization stems from a twenty-nine-year career in the U.S. Army. During that career more than seventeen years were spent in various military and civilian schools either as a student or as an instructor. Each assignment as an instructor began with mandatory participation in an Instructor's Training Course to study methods of instruction. In each of these courses, they stressed organization as a key fundamental to success. With this background, one could suppose that it is only natural that I have very organized classes.

The organization of classes is not a revolutionary idea and in no way do I claim to be an authority on the subject of organization. With these two cautions in mind, the following organizational tips and suggestions are offered. These are techniques most frequently cited by my students as enhancements to the teaching and learning process.

COURSE ORGANIZATION:

- Provide each student a syllabus containing the course objectives and how they will be met, the dates of each examination, the tentative dates for covering each portion of the course, homework assignments for the entire course and the grading policy of the course.

- Follow the course outline in the syllabus. If a change is necessary (for example a change in an exam date is required), allow the students to help you set a new date. This encourages the students to take partial ownership in the syllabus and course conduct. On a more practical level, it may remind some students that there is a syllabus!

- Relate the course to other courses already completed by the students and those courses to be taken later. If possible and reasonable, relate the course to the designated majors of the students. This helps to show the course as a step

in their education process rather than an end in itself. This works well when done as a part of the first class meeting, and then followed up in later classes with short referrals of pertinent material to other courses or majors.

CLASS ORGANIZATION

- Prepare and review your class notes before entering the classroom. A strong beginning sets the tone for the class. Uncertainty and fumbling through your notes at the beginning also set the tone, a somewhat less desirable one, for the class!
- Test all demonstrations and visual aids before the class begins. You want to be sure they work and will work at the time you want to introduce them. The teaching point to be made as well as class attention dwindle rapidly as an instructor struggles to remember or find out for the first time how to turn on the video projector, overhead projector, computer, etc. You may also want to know where the spare bulbs are located.
- Review the highlights of the previous class at the beginning of each new class. At the same time outline the objectives of the current class and show how they are related. This one simple technique continues to receive the highest praise from my students.
- Summarize the highlights of the day's lecture at the end of each class.

As stated earlier, these are very simple and basic suggestions for organizing a class. Yet, as simple as they are, they do demand a significant amount of preparation time by the instructor. The result will be well worth the price, for if organization is not the most important characteristic of teaching excellence, it is certainly one of the essential fundamentals. •