

In Search of Best Classroom Practices

Hari S. Luitel
Department of Business and Economics
Algoma University
Sault Ste. Marie
Ontario, P6A 2G4
hari.luitel@algonau.ca

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I have developed a passion for teaching. This passion stems from the fact that I have benefitted from so many teachers in my life that repaying these great individuals, who helped me shape my life, is not always possible. Even if it were possible, trying to repay them is not pragmatic. Therefore, I decided to become a teacher so that I could continue the tradition of supporting students and helping them realize their potential. In a competitive world, providing unconditional support to a fellow human being allows one to realize how life has become more meaningful to others. This life reflection has become the underlying tenet of my teaching philosophy.

I welcome a diverse group of students from different cultural, educational, social and personal background. I create a positive learning environment in my classes by requiring students to complete a simple survey within one week before semester begins. I then modify my teaching practices to address each student's specific needs. Understanding students' background early in the semester allows me to make connections, leading students from familiar territory into new fields of inquiry.

There is no single teaching method that is suitable in all circumstances. Teaching methods need to be flexible to accommodate different needs and aspirations of students so as to provide an environment so that all the students in class can develop and expand their knowledge of the world around us. However, I maintain focus on the importance of being in class, being on time every day and being prepared to do the best. I expect, in turn, my students too, to be active and to continue joining me to accomplish the learning process. Because a wide variety of background, learning style and interest students possess, I attempt to facilitate students' comprehension and understanding of material by doing a variety of fun interactive activities in class such as demonstrations, experiments, in-class assignments, quizzes etc.

I have developed many of these activities over time in search of my quest for becoming an effective teacher and students appear to appreciate all the activities. I am committed to continuous improvement in my teaching; therefore, it is difficult to select one activity over others as the best teaching practice because each activity has its own merits and demerits. Below I describe how I conduct in-class assignment -- my most favored teaching practice -- and its advantages and disadvantages. The following is the excerpt from my syllabus:

In-class Assignments/Class Participation

- In order to make you active in your learning process, I encourage you to actively participate in class.
- For the same reason, I will require you to complete an in-class assignment each day that new material is covered in class. Each in-class assignment will take no more than 15 minutes.
- Even if you miss an in-class assignment, I recommend that you complete it. However, late turn in of an in-class assignment is absolutely not acceptable.
- I will also call on you in class to answer questions and/or I may ask you to show how you solved a problem. If you actively participate, you will receive full credit; if you somewhat participate, you will receive half credit; if you seldom participate, and/or if you are absent, late or tardy, you will receive zero credit. Moreover, if you miss six or more in-class assignments, you will receive no points. Three late arrivals or tardiness will count as one absent.
- In-class assignments/class participation will carry a weight of 10 percent in the final grade.

It is apparent that I give in-class assignments partly to gauge students' understanding of concepts and partly in lieu of formal attendance policy. Students receive no point if they miss more than 5 in class assignments during the semester. While student complete the in class assignments, I circulate around the class room answering questions from each individual students.

Advantages:

In-class assignments allow an opportunity to test students' understanding of the material that was presented in class. Students often feel they understand the material when it is lectured in class but

when it comes to doing homework problem or other assignment after they return home, they then realize that they have no idea what they are doing. By immediately testing students' comprehension of the material, in-class assignments help students realize whether or not they understood the material while they still have access to me instead of realizing it later in the day when they cannot ask questions. After completing an assignment, students check their answers with me. If students' answers are incorrect, I give students individual help to uncover why they made a mistake and guide them to arrive at a correct answer. This way answers may be elucidated more rapidly; mistakes may be rooted out sooner; proper techniques may be instilled earlier. All of these, in turn, lead to building students' confidence and further insight into the subject material – both necessary aspects of the learning process. Students really like the personal attention that they receive from me, which results in the development of greater rapport with them.

In-class assignments allow students to actually practice what is being taught. Many times I give questions which students might not have encountered otherwise. They are forced to analyze an old problem under new light. In doing so, it is much easier to become familiar with the material and especially the techniques, both major and minor, necessary for a student who wishes to apply the course material in a practical way.

One hidden benefit of in-class assignment is that it also forces students to pay attention to the lecture component of the material so that they are prepared and able to complete the task ahead. I use both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the in-class assignments in order to develop students' critical thinking skills.

Additional benefits of the in-class assignment are associated with the time frame given and the grade component attached upon completion of the assignment. The relatively short time urges students to focus on the problem at hand. Students learn more from in-class assignment than from lecture alone or from demonstrations, experiments or discussions, which are relatively more time consuming. More importantly these in-class assignments are not graded per se but are weighted in the overall course grade, which encourages all students to come to class regularly and take what they are learning seriously.

Disadvantages:

One disadvantage that is hard to prevent is the complacency that can take place due to the availability of help. Often students tend to over ask questions to kill time or not allowing me to proceed. Likewise, if the problems in the in-class assignment are too demanding, continual failure to comprehend the subject matter can possibly lead some students to copy each other's answers, especially if the class size is big. Similarly, bright students complete the assignments sooner while slackers struggle. Therefore, for the former group, time allotment of 15 minutes is long, while for the latter group, it is not enough to complete the assignment. In such a situation, keeping all students focused becomes difficult.

Lessons Learned:

Because students complete in-class assignment right after they learn the material in class, they may fall for the trap to regurgitate what they hear in class rather than use their own critical thinking. In-class assignments therefore should be designed in such a way that students get really involved. Once in a while asking single dimension questions to make sure that students understand general concepts may be appropriate. However, students really like and benefit from having some trick questions incorporating many concepts that are gradually built upon in the several lectures. This ensures that students are not just memorizing the concepts on the day they are taught; rather they have to look for their notes from the past, helping them avoid becoming complacent and just forget about the information after they learned.

In-class assignment is a very effective low-cost and low-tech tool in a small classroom setting. In large classes, however, monitoring, administering and analyzing in-class assignments can be challenging due to large number of students and time required to ensure individual responses. In-class assignments would be ideal in a class size with a teacher student ratio of 1 to 40 or less.