TEACHING AT OLLI

A brief guide for first-year faculty

Osher Life Long Learning Institute
at
The University of Southern Maine
Introduction:
The Education Committee’s Subcommittee for Faculty Assistance offers the following observations and suggestions for the optimum classroom experience for both you and your students.

The course offerings at OLLI are many and varied, indicative of the energy, enthusiasm and breadth of experience you bring to the classroom. Alongside traditional information delivery courses, rich in content, one finds others that focus on writing, reflection, and spirituality; art, photography, music, and movement; practical life skills and enrichment. In addition, there are student-initiated study groups or seminars and coordinated courses in which the instructor/facilitator invites guest speakers and directs the discussion. Some of these courses are highly structured; some flow with a lighter touch.

Whether your prior experience is in education, the professions, other adult education programs, or if you simply and beautifully bring only your passion for a particular subject or activity to the OLLI classroom, you may be in for a surprise. OLLI students, though they may be as old as 90, may also be as young as 50, and are, invariably, lively and intellectually curious. You will find them to be sophisticated as well, and most have lived engaged, even extraordinary, lives. They enter the classroom eager to learn and expecting to be involved in the process. Nevertheless, lifelong learning, as opposed to K-12, college and graduate education, and most adult education is not outcome-driven. Term papers, extensive reading or homework, quizzes and tests have no place in this environment.

Lifelong learning educators suggest that instructors think of their classroom time in twenty-minute segments and allow liberal time for social interaction (focused of course on the material) as well as opportunities to stand, walk, and stretch. It is well to be aware that some students may need to be accom-
modated for hearing or visual problems. A 10-15 minute break midway through the two-hour class session is always welcome. Your classroom culture will, of course, reflect your personality, preferred teaching style, and the nature of the material. The following overview describes some of the more common types of teaching methods in use today throughout the OLLI national network. Some may work for you, some may not. We invite you to share your own best practices with us.

**Teaching Methods: A Selective Overview**

1. **Lecture/Discussion**
   Teaching by means of discussion is generally a lot more fun for both students and teacher, even though the preparation and the process (including preparing oneself for OLLI students’ perspicacious questions) may be more work than preparing a lecture. While I give small lectures for background and context, my primary teaching method requires deciding on important and interesting aspects of the work being read, determining the information that will provide helpful background for each question, and then shaping the question. Thus the students, in the course of their discussion, will not only themselves arrive at those important insights, but may also generate additional perspectives and interpretations. Flexibility is essential, since the discussion may not follow my planned agenda as the students make connections other than mine. Also key is the willingness to be patient, to wait at times while students think, so as to create an atmosphere in which they feel safe trying out their ideas. (This contribution came from Evy Newlyn, whose course offerings in Classical Literature are content-driven.)

2. **The Instant Lecture**
   When new material is being introduced, the instructor can create an “instant lecture” by asking students at the beginning of the class to call out what they already know on the topic. These opinions and ideas are written on the board and used as talking points for the lecturer’s opening remarks. In this way those who
are already churning with ideas have an opportunity to express them and are less likely to sabotage the direction the instructor wants to take. (Alternately, the instructor may ask students to write brief responses and comments on 3x5 cards before the break. This will generate more talking points and point out the need, if any, to clear up misconceptions or misinformation.)

3. **Collaborative/Interactive Lecture**
The interactive lecture provides a suitable environment in which to deliver content-rich material while at the same time giving students a sense of ownership in their learning process. Some instructors effectively use the collaborative learning approach (see below) or, in especially large classes, student pairs. Others incorporate in-class writing exercises in which students write brief responses to a posed question on 3x5 cards; the instructor collects these and responds to them. This is advantageous for several reasons. First, it challenges extroverts to formulate thoughtful responses; second, it gives shy students an opportunity to offer their opinions in a private space out of the spotlight.

4. **The Mutual Invitation Process**
A dramatic strategy used successfully in large group settings has been developed by Eric Law, an Episcopalian priest in California who specializes in dialogue between and among Asian, Hispanic, Black, and Caucasian groups. It is called The Mutual Invitation Process and is particularly effective in helping to maintain balance and control when discussion is desired and there are many voices to be heard. In this startlingly easy process students sit in a circle or seminar format, and the instructor/facilitator poses a question. After modeling a response she or he then “invites” someone to respond. This person either accepts the invitation or refuses it, instead inviting another. In this manner, the opportunity to speak passes back and forth, eventually ending with the group facilitator, who may then re-invite those who have remained silent. At that time the discussion becomes general and cross talk is allowed before a second question is posed. Besides offering a non-invasive opportunity for the timid or marginalized to speak, this process sensitizes the unbridled extrovert or the more entitled participants to the subtle but real
issues at work in all group interactions. It is effective in small
groups also and has been known to work in a family setting.
(Try it out on Thanksgiving Day and see what happens.)

**Alternative Teaching Methods**

1. **Collaborative Learning**
   Collaborative learning was introduced into education on all
levels in the 1970s. It builds on the beliefs of John Dewey that
the retention of material is best achieved through social inter-
action.

   The primary feature of collaborative learning is the small
group. At appropriate times the instructor breaks the class into
groups of 3-5 with a unique task or set of questions, the same
or different, depending on the desired direction he or she
wants the discussion to take. The instructor does not engage
with the groups but carefully prepares the material beforehand
and sets a definite time limit. One member may be chosen to
report on the group consensus (or lack of).

   Care should be taken that individual students do not domi-
nate, so small group guidelines are advised and groups are
encouraged to assess in writing whether or not they have
been followed. Usually a large group discussion follows. It is
important that students have an opportunity to reflect on the
experience immediately after and to give feedback to one an-
other and the instructor.

2. **Writing across the Curriculum**
   Writing-across-the-curriculum, so called because it encour-
ages learning through writing in all disciplines, including the
hard sciences, technology, applied sciences, etc., blossomed,
like collaborative learning, in the 1970s and has been largely
accepted since then in classrooms from K-12 through college.
Its premise is that the writing process itself intensifies and so-
olidifies learning since, unlike speaking out loud and “off the
cuff”, or merely recording the words and thoughts of the lec-
turer, it requires a mental process in which ideas must be formulated in some order or fashion. Characterized by brief in-class writing tasks, WAC can be used effectively in conjunction with collaborative learning and the interactive lecture.

Freewriting is a common method used in WAC. The instructor puts a word, phrase, statement, or question on the board, usually at the beginning of a class, and asks the students to write on it, without stopping, for five minutes, then to pause and formulate one sentence that sums up the rambling thoughts, to use that sentence as a springboard for another freewrite, and so on and so forth as long as it continues to generate new ideas and insights.

One-Minute Papers are an effective way to renew flagging interest, spark dialogues in pairs or triads, and provide feedback. The instructor provides a list of possible topics related to the current material and asks students to write their “one-minute” responses on 3x5 cards. This ensures brevity and is non-threatening.

Sentence Completion exercises can be designed to focus discussion on the material, particularly when it is content-driven.

Letters to the editor or legislators, extended emails, and opinion pieces are especially effective for current events classes. Blogging is becoming an accepted way to share information. To simulate the experience, instructors can put forth a provocative statement or question and ask students to write brief punchy responses which are then circulated among the other class members for their comments and additions until a body of material is created. If the class agrees (USM privacy protection guidelines must apply), this can be done via email.

3x5 cards are useful aids for in-class writing. Because of
their size, they encourage brevity and reduce the resistance to writing felt by many students. You will find many uses for them. One is to pause for a minute before, during, or at the end of class and ask students to write down questions that remain unanswered, then to share these in pairs or small groups. This strategy affords them an opportunity to interact and to collaborate in the learning of the material; it also gives the instructor clues as to what has or has not been successfully presented.

**Nuts and Bolts**

1. **Course Information Sheet**
   Students like to know what they are going to be doing and when they will be doing it, what they are going to read and when they are going to read it. A simple course information page can satisfy this need. Include your name and contact information, a brief description of the course, a list of the materials/texts you will be using, an outline of the topics to be covered, and assignments, if they are expected. The need for flexibility, of course, can be built into your information sheet or opening class remarks.

2. **Setting up the Classroom**
   “Classroom design is notoriously conservative,” said collaborative learning proponent Kenneth Bruffee and, even in our brand new building, this is still true. Fortunately the tables can be moved to simulate a circle or seminar configuration. We encourage this classroom setup for optimal student/instructor interactions.

We hope that the above suggestions prove helpful, and we invite you to share your best practices with us for future updates of this document.

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Prepared by Jean Sheridan for the USM OLLI Education Committee January 2010