

WHILE IT'S FRESH: WHAT WORKED WELL AND WHAT COULD WORK BETTER.

THINGS THAT WORKED WELL

Grading with Built-in Breaks. With a thousand students there will be a myriad of excuses for missed assignments, exams, etc. This is the biggest management headache. By building in breaks, this headache can be minimized. I will give examples of built in grading breaks from my class. There were three mid-term exams, but only the two best grades count. There were four writing assignments, but only the three best grades count. There were ten map assignments, and students were given one "free" late and one "free" do-over. The down-side of this means standardizing testing and assignment grading so that the "numbers" are roughly equivalent, or adjusting numbers if they are not (which can get complicated).

Maximum mercy and flexibility. I learned long ago that judging student excuses was a frustrating waste of time. I could check to see if the student who needed an early final because he had to report to jail on exam day was lying, but why bother? My policy is to offer make-up exams to anyone asking for them, but I do not publicize this policy. To keep things fair, these students take the same exam if it has not yet been released or an essay exam, if the exam is no longer "secure". While this requires some extra time, it reduces the stress of truly anxious students. Unfortunately there are some students who feel "entitled" out there, and who would like to take the exam at a specific time for their convenience. I tend to constrain this option, but usually offer more the one choice--e.g., I offered four choices for anyone taking the final exam. While this may sound like I'm being too flexible, I'd rather err on the side of mercy for students who truly find themselves in a bind (or about to be imprisoned).

Multiple test versions and cheating policies. I made up a different test for each section and scrambled each test into eight versions. On the final and last mid-term we assigned seats to prevent friends from sitting together. This deters, but does not prevent wandering eyes. I encouraged the TAs to be extra vigilant. On the final we pulled six students from their seats who were seen with wandering eyes, ripped up their exams, sat them in the front, and gave them new exams to start over. I might move to the Events Center next time around.

Recitation Assignments. We had three debates, with each student having to participate and hand in written notes on one debate. There were supplementary materials provided on reserve for those participating in the debates. Debates were issue-oriented: trade with Japan, refugees and human rights. Most TAs felt debates went well. In addition we had three writing assignments of two

single-spaced pages each. Each assignment allowed for some creativity, but required specific attention to some element of the class. Most TAs felt that the allowance for some creativity made these assignments work well, given that students were clearly told that the grade was largely based on their attention to the specific course element featured. The first writing assignment was not scheduled until the fourth week, which allowed the musical chairs of enrollment and section changes to play itself out first.

Introduction to the Library. The first written assignment required the students to research a less developed country. The people from Norlin Library (Debbie Hollis from Govt. Docs and Keith Grisham from Reference) gave students instruction on using the library. They came into each class and gave a 25 minute presentation to the entire class. This was followed by an on-site tour for each recitation section. I feel it was a very good thing to get freshmen and sophomores "introduced" to the library. Debbie prepared some very good materials which were included in the course handbook. I feel the introduction was a bit too time consuming, but the general idea of getting student to the library and having them incorporate library materials into a paper (and grading them largely on their "library research") was useful to them and generally appreciated.

TA Preparation. Every Friday all the TAs met for an hour and went over next week's recitation and dealt with other issues as they arose. The Lead TA provided hand-outs each week (and I provided bagels). These sessions were lively and allowed for useful interchanges that increased the commonality of TA approach, provided me and them with mid-course corrections, allowed for the airing of useful suggestions in approaching material, and facilitated a "team" atmosphere.

Faculty Preparation. Despite entering my third decade of teaching, this class took me to a higher level. I avidly prepared lectures much more carefully than in the past. It paid off. I provided TAs (in a "library" on the 3rd floor) with a printed copy of each lecture's notes for their reference. There is little flexibility in this class situation and taking questions just doesn't work well. It is better to simply have solid material that will take you through fifty minutes. One final note on preparation. I went through a ritual before every class of "psyching myself up" for the "event". This works. Coming down is another matter.

Personal Class Contact. The dread of this class is the anonymity. While I do use slides extensively, when the lights were on, I limited the use of overheads to a lecture outline in the beginning and at the end of class and occasional maps, graphs and terms. I think it is important to turn the overhead off, the lights on and talk to the students, trying to make eye contact whenever possible. Walk the aisles a bit before class and say

Hi! Chat to students on the way in and out. Greet students during assigned seating for exams. Try to make contact any way possible.

Academic Skills Program. While I have occasional doubts about some students who claim test anxiety, etc., the Academic Skills Program has provided a reasonable service to students with these and other learning disabilities.

Relevance. While students occasionally appreciate pure scholarship, they tend to be pragmatists (yes, what's the problem?). Lectures on such issues as globalization, telecommuting and America's future had students fully attentive.

Scanning Services and Semester Grading. The folks at the computer center provide a good and efficient service. They provide a lot of reportage that lets one set curves and keep track of trends, etc. They will also take recitation grades, corrections and make-up grades and enter them and provide you with a list of totals. You can curve these totals and they will turn this into a list with letter grades on it. It is useful to meet with these people before the semester to acquaint yourself with their services and procedures.

Review Sessions and Exam "Transparency". To reduce student stress, I provided review sessions, old exams on file, and recent exams with answer keys on file. I also told students the exact format of each exam, kept the format the same for all the mid-terms, and provided them with their "Individual Reports" from Scanning Services which allowed them to check each question on their mid-terms. This had some positive effect.

Thinking Ahead. This is a requirement for survival in this course. Exams need to be made up almost a week ahead so they can be proofed (I had the Lead TA and another TA proof them for content and style), copied and shuffled. Everything needs to be anticipated. Academic Media needs to be notified and prepared for Audio-Visual days. TAs need to be prepped for exam ushering and monitoring. TAs need to be prepped for each week's activities. The entire course needs to be laid out before you begin. Adjustments are just too cumbersome once you've begun. Have your "policies" ready so you can be consistent and fair. Have exam rules and procedures on an overhead for use during the exam. Have an overhead with recitation section numbers, time and instructors' names for use during an exam, since many students rarely remember and exams and individual reports must be sorted by section number for return to students. For every exam you need enough bubble sheets and a supply of pencils. I also tried to get to class 10 minutes before it started--this proved quite useful for dealing with a variety of student concerns.

Second reader on disputed assignment grades
General mentoring of TAs

In addition, assuming a decent Handbook would allow the Lead TA more time, I would add these duties:

"Versionizing" exams
Proctoring and grading make-up exams

Student Contact. I don't know how to solve this, but despite efforts, students are daunted about contact with the faculty who teach these large classes. Office hours were filled with management issues and not with students who wanted to discuss geography. Unfortunately, given the nature of a World Regional class, office hours were also cluttered with students who wanted "travel advice". I used to give this willingly, but after dealing with dozens of students asking "Where should I go in Europe?" I may rethink this. I even told students that after my morning Chem 140 class, I would "hang out" in the UMC with some coffee and they could come chat. This did not work.

Overattention to Large Classes. One of the ironies of teaching a large class that requires more time and effort, is that there are a lot of people who make extra demands on your time in an attempt to improve the situation. This Department Large Class Summit is one such example. On Wednesday I get to meet with Mary Ann Shea (a pleasant enough person), to discuss my participation in a Faculty Teaching Excellence Program offering in the Fall on large classes. In addition, the Large Class Improvement Project roped me in to participate in what I consider a misguided (failed?) effort to involve undergraduates in large class improvement.

Creative Resource Availability. Given the leverage we have by teaching these numbers, it would be useful to apply for a variety of extra support funds. After the fact, I realize that we get lots of folk to campus so they can talk to 15 people. I should have requested funds from Dubin or someone to get Tim Cahill, who is the author of a supplementary required book students seemed to enjoy, here to speak to students in the class. I could also have used a live band in my diffusion of rock and roll lecture, but I doubt Dubin would bite on that one.

Academic Media. The folks that provide AV are highly variable. I had my worst AV disasters (yes 2) in 20 years this semester. Both were preventable. The "hired help" these folks use are just not trained and professional enough.

THINGS THAT COULD WORK BETTER

Registrar. Though this is the nineties, the Registrar was completely non-responsive (did not return calls despite elaborate voice mail messages) about alternative ways to reports grades. It seems very clear that if Scanning Services can provide us with letter grades based on our assigning a curve, the Registrar should have a way of accepting those grades digitally. Now they insist on us filling in "bubble sheets" which I find mindless, time-consuming and, of greatest importance, a source of inaccuracy. Turning over grades to the Registrar which have been checked and verified in digital form seems to me to be a step we need to make.

TA Grading Consistency. Despite the fact that TAs were given grading norms, several failed to follow them. Given the mass of grades and the rush to get them to scanning services before they get swamped with exams, we chose to allow the inconsistency rather than take the days it would take to delete the recitation grades that were entered, adjust them and reenter them. I would suggest that grades from TAs be submitted before being entered and then adjustments to too-generous grades be made before they are entered. Next time. One TA also unilaterally changed the submission deadlines which got us in Dutch with Scanning Services. A tighter oversight is desirable.

Handbook Preparation. These courses should often make effective use of tailored course Handbooks. Don's is a fine example. Unfortunately, in my course, we have a not so fine example. This is due to a myriad of reasons. To prevent this, the first suggestion is to allow very ample preparation time. A year ahead is not too long. We got caught up in getting reprint permissions from publishers and were somewhat unsuccessful (although there is a clearing house that facilitates this). Starting from scratch the semester before the course, getting off to a slow start, and a few other miscues which will remain unspecified resulted in a poor product.

Lead TA Responsibility. Scott Kirsch, my Lead TA, did an admirable job. I did not, however, utilize him as well as I should. These classes are management nightmares, and much of the time-consuming management should be deferred to the Lead TA. Scott spent much of his time repreparing recitation assignments, since our Handbook was so flawed. The Lead TA was responsible for:

- Scheduling of TAs in recitation sections
- Final check of recitation assignments
- Preparing the Friday TA Meeting Agenda
- Recording of all grades (assisted by Scanning Services)
- Proofing all exams
- Preparing bubble sheet masters for exam grading
- Shuffle versions of exams
- All communications with TAs