



Teaching For Success®

Quick Answers

No. 815

Q: My Students Are Unhappy: What Can I Do?

A: Six Guidelines to Keep Your Teaching on Track

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Partnership; the prime directive

Design and manage your course to first and foremost meet your students' needs. If you can accomplish this, they will return the favor and satisfy your need for positive feedback and a positive class evaluation. Treat them as partners in learning; honor their time and effort.

Commitment to students

When in doubt, refer back to the prime directive and make learning even more active and relevant to your students than it was before. Commitment to solving their problems and adapting activities and assignments to their specific capabilities, preparation and energy level. This does not mean dumbing down your course and lowering performance standards.

Preparation and planning

Many, but certainly not all, students prefer a well-organized, planned sequence of instructional events to help them do their best. Others will do better in a more discovery or problem-based learning situation. Ideally offer students choices in assignment types and learning activities.

Success in teaching begins with completing the following planning tasks without fail:

- Prepare yourself mentally before each class meeting by visualizing just how you want the class to go. Use good self-talk (I love teaching; I'm a terrific instructor; etc.) and decide that you are and have every right to be their teacher. In other words, you have to communicate confidence in your abilities. Even if you don't feel confident, you have to be willing to adopt a confident demeanor until you begin to believe in yourself and your abilities.
- Decide what's practical for your students to learn given the time and abilities, equipment and class environment. Determine what is must-learn material and nice-to-know information, and concentrate on successful learning of the most know content first.
- Make a list describing exactly how your students will be different at the end of your course. Detail precisely what you expect them to learn even if this could be somewhat different for each student.

- Communicate to your students what you expect them to be able to DO at the end of the class. This is your list of outcomes or benefits that your students will achieve. Share this list with them; this is vital because your students want to know what's in this class for them.
- Prepare a detailed course syllabus or outline, and distribute a printed copy to each student.
- Go over the syllabus items with your students and get consensus on such things as learning activities, grading and deadlines for projects and homework.

Communicate the plan and expectations

Prepare, plan and execute your plan. Good classes are a result of excellent and detailed course and class-by-class planning before the first class meeting ever occurs and before every subsequent class meeting:

- Create a description of your teaching activities. Describe your teaching activities, demonstrations, lectures, peer teaching, workshops, small group learning, etc.
- Your students need to know what you will ask of them and how you expect to communicate to them new ideas, principles, procedures and techniques.
- An easy and basic teaching pattern is: Tell them, tell them what you told them with examples, and ask them to tell you what they think you told them. Then present them with problems and challenges to put the new knowledge to work and to discover new meanings.
- Add energy and variety to each class; students love surprises—novel activities, games and solving real-world problems.
- Add some kind of review activity to each learning session. For example, ask them to put what they have learned in their own words and record it in writing.

It's about getting honest feedback

Teaching is as much listening as it is presenting, directing, facilitating and demonstrating. Use active feedback to let the students know what you heard them say, or ask, before responding.

Find out what student think by distributing 3 x 5 cards, sending e-mail or text queries, or create a web page survey or wiki. Ask students to write what they expect to gain from the class. Follow on by asking them to state their learning goals, or express why they are taking the class and what they hope to accomplish. Ask students to summarize the most important thing they have learned after each class session and what gave them the most trouble.

Take mistakes in stride and keep focused on your desired outcomes

Teach hard, but have fun, make mistakes, and don't worry. No teacher has to be perfect. Sports greats can outplay and outperform their coach, but they still need someone to help them analyze weaknesses and perfect their techniques and encourage them when times get tough. Art teachers don't have to paint perfect pictures, English instructors don't have to write the next great novel, and science instructors don't have to win a Nobel Prize to receive rave reviews from their students. But they all must be able to project their authentic personal concern for each student's success and turn that concern into active and organized instruction, corrective performance feedback, efficient class management, insightful leadership with a good helping of inspirational mojo to inspire achievement.