SIX QUESTIONS TO STRUCTURE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Adapted from the Great Lakes Colleges Association
Course Design and Teaching Workshop

These questions can structure your process of developing a new course, revising an old one, or preparing tomorrow’s class. Virtually all of us are trained to think first of the material. When we think first of the students, our courses and pedagogy can be transformed in remarkable ways.

1. Who are the students? (age, year in school, race, class, gender, major or non-major, generational attributes, learning styles, previous experience with the discipline, values and needs, limitations and strengths, anxieties and passions, recent K-Plan experiences like Study Abroad/Away, SIP, or career internship or externship)

2. Who are you, as a teacher? (How do dimensions of your social identity—race, gender, age, ethnicity, class, religion—affect your relationship with the students you’ve just described? How is your learning style different from theirs? What do you need to teach right how? To understand better? What constitutes your pedagogical comfort zone? How would you like to stretch? What kind of classes and students “feed” you? What kind depress and deplete you? To what features of your teaching do students respond positively? Negatively? What relationship do you want with a class?)

3. What are the contexts for this course? (relationship to Kalamazoo College requirements & policies; role in major, minor, or concentration; time of day, classroom architecture, number of students, academic term)

4. What are the course goals? (contributing to liberal education; meeting college or programmatic requirements; meeting student educational and developmental needs; meeting your aims as a teacher and practitioner of the discipline; knowledge/skills/values you want the students to develop)

5. What strategies will help the course meet those goals? (Pedagogical modes and tools, assignments, activities, and projects, classroom environment, etc.)

6. How will the course assess whether those goals are met? (Assignments designed to seek out different kinds of learning, grading policies, informal conferences, midterm and final student evaluations, etc.)
EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF DESIGNING A COURSE TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING

1. Critical thinking is a learned skill. The instructor, fellow students, and possibly others are resources.
2. Problems, questions, issues, values, beliefs are the point of entry to a subject and source of motivation for sustained inquiry.
3. Successful courses balance the challenge of critical thinking with the supportive foundation of core principles, theories, etc., tailored to students' developmental needs.
4. Courses are focused on assignments using processes that apply content rather than on lectures and simply acquiring content.
5. Students are required to express ideas in a non-judgmental environment, which encourages synthesis and creative applications.
6. Students collaborate to learn and stretch their thinking.
7. Problem-solving exercises nurture students' metacognitive abilities.
8. The development needs of students are acknowledged and used in designing courses. Standards are made explicit and students are helped to learn how to achieve them.

Ten Weeks ≠ One Semester. Do not try to teach a semester’s worth of material in ten weeks. The rhythm of a ten-week quarter is something you must experience in order to learn how to teach to it, but the first time out, it is definitely best to err on the side of assigning too little. When in doubt, consult with experienced colleagues—and with the students themselves.

Course “Architecture.” Think of your course in terms of units, movements, or important points on the map, and try to see its architecture. Make this architecture visible on your syllabus, and explain it on Day One or Two. Provide structure and coherence within which learning can take place; it helps students a lot.

Structure / Freedom. As a general rule, students of traditional college age learn best in a situation where structure and freedom balance each other. Requirements should be clear and rigorous, but where possible a degree of choice or preference should be integrated as well. This rule seems particularly effective with the current undergraduate generation, who thrive on choices but seem to need a high degree of structure provided for them. Make the choices and the boundaries very clear. Developmentally, older students require less structure and benefit from greater freedom to determine their own direction. (Note: This general principle translates into teaching practice as well: give the students the freedom to say what they need to say in class and the structure that helps them shape ideas, make connections, and see directions.)

Reading Load. The younger the students in your course, the lower the reading load should be. One of the greatest adjustments for first-year students is a vastly increased and more difficult reading load. Gauge your requirements by what your departmental colleagues are doing.

Student Level. One of the byproducts of a small liberal arts college is courses that enroll first-year students and seniors, majors and non-majors alike. This arrangement has its benefits, but new faculty often discover its drawbacks first. Two general rules: First, let the older/more knowledgeable students help you out with the younger/less knowledgeable ones; and second, consult departmental colleagues about how to use lectures, discussions, and assignments to bridge differences within the class. A word about seniors: New faculty coming straight from graduate programs often struggle to re-acclimate to undergraduate skill levels. Even the best seniors are not graduate students. In addition, they will be completing SIPs in the fall and winter (and sometimes in spring, too), and this major project tends to occupy a great deal of their time and energy. The SIP constitutes a course credit, so you needn’t cut them inordinate slack; simply be aware of the other demands on them.

Tests and Assignments
Spacing: Try not to schedule more than one “thing” (paper, exam, project, report) per week. Focus is a real issue for students. Allow enough time between assignments for two things to happen: for you to assess and evaluate the first assignment, giving appropriate feedback; and for students to digest and learn from your comments and/or a follow-up conversation with you.
Trajectory: Think of the “arc” of your course, and try to make one assignment lead logically to the next, the second building on the first, all of it complementing the architecture of the course.

Format: Write out all assignments in detail. Include all relevant information about format, evaluation criteria, submission process (Must it come to class? Can it come to your office? Can it be electronically submitted?).

Syllabus: ALL assignments should appear on your syllabus, with percentage of course grade. No surprises.

**Class Structure.** Individual class periods should have a shape, too. Changes in rhythm and focus intensify learning. For a 75-minute class (the length of a MWF class period at “K”), think symphonically, in terms of at least three “movements.” For instance:

I. Lecture (25)
   Small group discussion (25)
   Reporting and whole-group discussion (25)

II. Small-group discussion (15)
    Discussion of questions raised by groups (30)
    Teacher summary, presentation of next assignment, review of recent test results (30)

III. Group reports (30)
     Class responses and discussion (10)
     Lecture (15)
     Peer review of project due next class (20)

If possible, make the first movement one in which the students are active and verbal: this will generate energy, take the focus off you, and, above all, avoid the beginning-of-class energy slump.

**Revision (and re-vision).** Whenever possible, build revision opportunities into your course: chances for students to do something over, incorporating feedback and reflection. Students learn best not by doing poorly and moving on to the next thing, but by re-doing what was done poorly and doing better. When they see the distance between version A and version B, their confidence as well as their learning increase substantially.

**Office Hours (see also “Syllabus Checklist”).** There is actually research that demonstrates a correlation between academic success and contact with professors outside of class. Some of your most important teaching will be done in your office. Set definite office hours (4-6 is about right), but be prepared to meet with students who cannot be available during that time. Think about how to make the set-up of your office and its ambience welcoming and conducive to conversation: these things matter to students, even if they don’t realize it at the time.
Canceling Classes. Be sure to indicate on your syllabus when classes will be canceled, and to remind the class nearer to the date. If you must cancel a class unexpectedly, e-mail the entire class, using the course alias. It is perfectly permissible to cancel a class or two for some legitimate reason: you will be out of town; the students need a research day or a group-meeting day to prepare for a project; you’re reimbursing the students for an evening event or two that you have required them to attend. It is also possible to show a video on a day you will be absent, or to have a guest lecturer—though many faculty believe that they should be present when a guest is present. Many faculty cancel classes on the Wednesday of Thanksgiving week, but some do not; many students who need the time to get home will be absent either way. All classes are canceled on Martin Luther King Day in January; in spring we have a tradition called Day of Gracious Living, during week 7 or 8, for which most of us cancel classes. The Student Commission will notify faculty about the latter. (Note: for the source of DGL, go to the southeast entrance to Trowbridge Hall and check out the inscription over the doorway.)

If you cancel a great many classes, the students themselves will notice and comment (usually negatively) before anyone else realizes it and asks you what’s going on. (Note: When you will be gone, it is a good idea to let your secretary know and to post your absence on your office door.)

Mid-Course Evaluations. Schedule class time—twenty minutes, at least—in the middle of the term for mid-course evaluations. You can design your own, and no one sees them but you. They are, far and away, the best vehicle you have for seeing how the course is going from the students’ perspective, and making legitimate adjustments before it’s too late. Week five is the midpoint; some faculty like to distribute these evaluations earlier, in week four, to allow more time for making changes. A simple format for these evaluations consists of three questions: What’s working well for you so far? What’s not working so well? What could be done by instructor or student to improve things? If you want students to address a particular aspect of the course so far, insert a question to that effect. (Note: Another procedure is to ask a colleague or a student not in the class to monitor a midcourse discussion from which you are absent, and to take notes on what the students say.) It’s imperative that you follow up on this evaluation procedure, discussing with the class what you heard and what you plan to do about it. The affirmation that you care enough to listen hard to their own accounts of their learning experience is worth a great deal to the teacher-student relationship and your ability to motivate them as learners. (Note: asking a colleague to give you a reading on these evaluations is a healthy thing to do too.)

Tenth Week. It’s legendary at Kalamazoo. Try not to schedule exams, papers, or projects during this week; it is too much for students to handle immediately before exams.

Final Assignment. If you will be requiring something other than an in-class final exam, make your exam-week deadlines very clear on the syllabus and orally. Some faculty allow work to come in any time during that week; others stick to the deadline of the scheduled exam day for that course; others identify another deadline. Keep in mind that when you change a final deadline, you may unwittingly increase pressure on students who have at least two other demanding courses to complete.