
Teaching Tips and Tricks from the field

Center for Teaching Excellence
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Preface

This publication was assembled to give you, the USMA instructor, tips or innovative techniques to make the most out of your classroom learning environment. MAJT.J. Wright, DPE, suggested the format of this publication, solicited tips and tricks from colleagues, and assembled the original document. This booklet is a modification of the original. The idea behind the publication is that those who came before us had good ideas for getting things done well, and those ideas should be passed on to the rest who follow — thus the idea: “Tips from the field”. Choose from these ideas the ones that help you and fit your style best. All of us, whether first-year instructor or seasoned veteran, civilian or military, humanities or math and science instructor, can benefit from the good ideas of other colleagues.

Teaching Tips and Tricks is organized into ten major areas:

- Class Discussion
- Audiovisual/Laptop Techniques
- Instructor Points
- Quizzes/Tests
- Homework
- Class work
- Papers/Projects
- Additional Instruction
- Assessing Learning
- Miscellaneous

Find a good idea or two that works for you!

Dr. Mark Evans, CTE Director, Fall 2006

Class Discussion

Assign topics to students where they have to use the web to answer questions. Even when the information is wrong, it sparks good discussion.

Find out what your students do in their extracurricular activities (clubs, intercollegiate, activities, etc) in the AMS. Use this information to generate conversation on similar topics.

It's important to allow cadets to speak their mind on certain subjects, as long as you always bring them back to the subject at hand. Meandering discussions that go nowhere lead to big time frustration on the part of cadets.

Role playing always leads to good discussions, especially during the class after your role play. Leave time in that next class for the cadets to discuss what they learned from role playing.

Sometimes the best discussions come about subjects that you covered in the previous class – so don't feel as though you are wasting time if cadets want to talk about something that is not necessarily on today's lesson plan.

Questioning that focuses on only one right answer will shut down cadets. Encourage cadets to engage in discussion and positively reinforce some aspect of their contribution.

If cadets do not respond to your discussion questions, rephrase them.

Prior to a class, ask your cadets three or four key, open-ended questions, explaining that those questions will be the focus of the next class, so cadets should be prepared to respond.

A method for getting cadets to listen to each other is by beginning the discussion sessions with a rule that in order to speak, a cadet must first briefly summarize what has been said by the previous speaker.

Encourage interaction by deflecting comments to the other cadets.

Arrive at the classroom early, greet cadets, and engage in 'small talk' with them to get them more comfortable talking with you.

Be prepared for every class with questions you would like to use to generate discussion.

Learn the first names of cadets, and call on them individually to get them engaged in the class discussion.

Relate the last lesson to today's lesson; then also project today's lesson to the next. Cadets tend to think of lessons as stovepipes and will not typically link them together.

When you prepare a class, assume that you will only be able to address two or three major ideas – otherwise you will try to do too much, and that will limit discussions needlessly.

Develop simple models to articulate difficult concepts. All too often instructors are afraid to do that for fear of appearing to 'dumb-down' the material. Nothing could be further from the truth. Models are a widely accepted methodology for eliminating the complexities of systems for explanatory purposes.

At the end of class, whenever possible, use an example to tie together the all of the main points of the lesson. It's a good way to review and demonstrate to your students how discrete concepts are tied together.

Class discussions should not shy away from contentious issues: provided that you have already established an atmosphere of professionalism in the classroom. You should gauge these discussions to the maturity level of the class.

Audiovisual/ Laptop/ Website/ Email Techniques

Incorporate video clips on subjects within your discussion.

If you use a laptop, make sure the cadets' focus on you and not the screen.

Designate those lessons where laptops will need to be used, and remind cadets that they'll be needed for the next lesson. Otherwise, have them turn them off and keep them in their book bags out in the hall.

Use the discussion board feature in Blackboard to engage cadets in responding to questions from the instructor or from other cadets.

Give an in-class assignment to locate specific information on the web.

Nothing tells a story as well a great picture, map or video clip. However, use these devices judiciously. You want to hit a homerun, not bunt four times.

Instructor Points

Take a portion of your instructor points, and have your cadets come up with how they are going to be responsible for those points. Make sure it is constructive and hold them to a good rubric.

Use them for board work, group work in class, or role playing.

Ensure cadets know what is expected of them in class and what performance corresponds to what grade.

I like to reward good habits. I give 1 to 2 instructor points a day to a cadet simply for showing up on time, or for coordinating a planned absence more than 24 hours out. Sounds simple, but many cadets are not conscientious about this simple rule of etiquette, and will blow it off unless they know that points are at stake. They need to develop this habit now, before they go out into the Army and goof it up as a LT.

Quizzes/Tests

At the beginning of class, have each cadet take an individual quiz. Then they are allowed to work in a group of 2 to 4 people to make their final answers. This works well.

Change your test questions as often as possible. Ask students to submit possible questions. Edit and include good ones on an upcoming quiz/test.

Have cadets prepare quiz/test questions for upcoming assessments. They are good study tools for them and a good check on cadet learning for the instructor.

Use instructor point quizzes to check on student preparation.

Assign quizzes using Blackboard that will encourage cadets to read the chapter assignments prior to when they will be discussed in class.

Let cadets make up questions for quizzes and even exams, some of which may be selected for use. This will get them to study more as well as focus on the most important content to learn.

The art of writing a first-rate examination is an ability that is achieved through coaching, practice, and experience.

Examinations do not have to be hard or “tricky” to be good.

Starting point for examinations: student performance objectives, key terms, and fundamental concepts.

Remember: students are taught and evaluated at discrete levels (i.e., 100, 200, 300 and 400). The examination should reflect the expectation at that level.

Good test questions should discriminate between the various groupings of students: that is some questions should discriminate the A students from the rest of the pack.

Subject matter experts write (or oversee the writing of) examinations.

Evaluate the entire exam unit proportionally: that means integrating segments/lessons of the course should be weighted on the examination.

Cadets are not tested on how fast they can write, but how much they know.

WPRs should be designed to allow average cadets about 5-10 minutes at the end of the exam to look over their answers.

Range between basic knowledge-level questions (i.e., “easy”) and those that require critical thinking (i.e., “challenging”). You should balance this range of difficulty.

If everybody gets an “A,” we haven’t done our job very well And if too many fail. . . .

Multiple-choice questions will be written using the following guidelines:

- Whenever possible, write as a question.
- It must be written so that cadets understand all words in the body of the question.
- It should provoke sufficient thinking to force the student to prove knowledge of a concept, or to link two or more concepts together.
- There should be one correct or best answer
- The question “stems” should be of nearly equal length. Cadets will be naturally drawn to the shortest and longest stems, and characteristically the shortest one is the correct answer.
- Each question should have one clearly correct answer and the other selections should be plausible or closely related to the correct answer; hence the term distracters.

- The problem should be worded so that there is no question in the cadet's mind about what is expected in terms of an answer.

When constructing a problem do not base success on presumed knowledge. For example, in a time zone problem, do not assume that cadets know where Fort Benning is located.

The problem should break down into sub-components that have readily assignable weights. For example, if there are four blanks to fill in, the problem should be worth 4 points (or multiples of four), not six.

Short-answer, PROBLEM and essay questions should be:

- An evaluation of one or more concepts, not just definitions.
- Meticulously written using precise language so that cadets fully understand what we want in terms of an answer. The best question serves as an outline from which a cadet can formulate a response and the instructor staff can develop a reliable solution.
- When possible it is written so that answer for one question does not depend on the answer from a previous question.

Homework

Assign cadets to come up with discussion questions from the homework and e-mail the questions to the class.

If a cadet can blow off the assigned reading and still do well in the course, consider whether the reading really needs to be assigned.

Some cadets, especially plebes, don't know how to learn, especially with everything that is thrown at them during their first year. Take the time, after 6 week grades are published, to find out why certain cadets are doing poorly in your class. They usually fall into a couple of categories:

- Cadet does not read and comprehend well
- Cadet does not know how to use course materials
- Cadet is doing poorly in another course and can't devote time to yours

In each of these cases, you have a wonderful opportunity to help that cadet learn how to learn.

Be thorough with your feedback comments. If they aren't stand alone, follow up with verbal feedback.

Assign individual or group projects that will get the cadets to apply what they are learning in class. These could be to design something, develop a new way of doing something, or make something that will help them learn by expanding their knowledge.

Return all homework (and exams) the class immediately following when it was submitted so that cadets receive immediate feedback.

Classwork

During the first week of class, anonymously ask the students to jot down 3 to 5 of their learning goals for the course and to rank them from most important to least important. It is helpful if you explain the goals need to be specific and not just "I want to do well in the course."

Break your class into groups to work a problem. Monitor which students aren't saying or contributing anything and tell those cadets to discuss what their group came up with... Next time, everyone will contribute.

Organize the class into groups, assign discussion question(s), give them 10 minutes to prepare their response. Have another group critique their response.

Have student's work in small groups to complete an ungraded quiz over concepts addressed in class. Discuss the answers collectively.

After lecturing for a bit with the material and information beyond the assigned readings, have the students, working in groups of 2 or 3, share their opinion of the most interesting ideas presented.

Hand out 3x5 cards to the students and ask them to write down the major points covered in the class or the purpose of that specific class. Have them discuss with those with a partner for a couple minutes.

Have students review another student's notes. Sometimes have the other student provide a written critique.

Have the students keep a journal, using the final few minutes to write down their feelings and thoughts regarding various topics (on technique is to pose a key question for them to respond to for each lesson or group of lessons).

Use practical case studies that cadets can analyze during class to stimulate discussion and active learning.

Papers/Projects

You will spend a lot of time trying to decipher hieroglyphics if cadets turn in hand-written work, typed only.

When grading papers, consider using a green pen instead of red. It's visual, gets your point across, and may be perceived as less harsh. Your students might even take your suggestions!

Assign research papers on a 'topic of cadet choice' to get them more engaged in what they are learning.

Assign cadets to conduct an interview with a person in the branch that the cadet wishes to pursue. For this paper, prepare questions to lead these interviews with an emphasis on the cadets learning from the person being interviewed specifically what they should be learning at West Point to help them in their military careers.

Additional Instruction

Don't answer your phone or email when you have AI sessions with cadets. You might forget where you were (the cadet won't). Focusing completely on the cadet shows you are concerned and not preoccupied with your work.

Putting a desk or another object between you and the student creates too formal of an environment for AI. Close the distance with nothing in between you both.

Ask the cadet what he/she needs help with and work those areas.

Asking students why they cannot understand a concept will shut them down immediately. Ask them what specifically gives them trouble and address those areas.

Be available—hold regular office hours.

Assessing Learning

Pick a cadet at random to solve the problem verbally—that is, he or she should explain to the class how to solve the problem. Cadets in the class are instructed to interrupt the presenter whenever they perceive an error. That cadet (if correct) then proceeds with the explanation. The cadet who completes the problem gets a 'reward' (it could be a

candy bar, points, or simply applause) for the ultimate solution.

In any discipline, select a cadet (either at random or assigned by turn) to summarize the preceding lesson at the beginning of class.

Give the cadets one problem that you believe they know how to solve. Rather than solve in numerically, ask them to write an explanation of how they would solve the problem in complete sentences.

If students are assigned to read literature (drama, fiction, or non-fiction prose), ask them to write down what they consider to be the most interesting and/or significant sentence in the reading and be prepared to explain why they selected that sentence. The review and discussion of student sentences is a good way to get into the reading.

For concept(s) that students may have been introduced to in prior education, create a pre-assessment 'test' to identify exactly what they've retained. This is helpful in designing instruction to insure that no unrealistic assumptions are made about student learning OR students aren't bored listening to explanations of things they already know.

There is a technique known as "Classroom Assessment" that is designed to be employed within the classroom with pencil and paper. The CTE has an electronic version of several of these techniques that can be done online. Check them out at: <http://www.dean.usma.edu/centers/cte/>

I use the two-minute questions ('What have you learned in class today?' and 'What concepts introduced in class today still are unclear to you?') at the end of some classes to enhance learning. These anonymous responses tell me what information has been presented effectively as well as what content needs to be reviewed. I start the following class by discussing these unclear concepts.

Using mid- or tri-semester evaluations, I ask students to tell me what I am doing effectively, or not so effectively, and what I can do to improve the course to enhance their learning. After reviewing these, I summarize the anonymous comments, share these with my class, and attempt to make any suggested changes.

At the beginning of the course, I ask these three questions: 'What are your goals for this course?'; 'What is your responsibility to help achieve these goals?'; 'What is your instructor's responsibility to help you achieve your goals in this course'? Periodically, we revisit these questions to see if everyone is fulfilling his or her responsibilities.

Miscellaneous

Don't ask cadets to tell a joke. His/her idea of what is appropriate may not match yours.
Trust me.

Make sure your uniform and appearance is neat. It distracts you and the cadets when they are looking at your open fly.

Try to remember that your course is not the center of the cadet's universe.

Think about the traits of the best teacher you ever had, and try to incorporate some of them into your class.

You'll get more and better work from an inspired cadet than you'll ever get from a threatened one.

Ensure your graded events cover whatever it is you want the cadet to actually take away from your course.

Ensure your graded events contain some questions from the upper end of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Always look at your course from the perspective of a cadet: time yourself on the readings, time how long a graded event (both in or out of class) takes you to complete, ask yourself whether, from a cadet's perspective, the course material seems relevant.

Decide up front how you will handle sleeping/misconduct/inappropriate comments in class and be consistent in your application of your rules.

Arrange the classroom so students can face one another and the instructor can walk up to anyone easily.

Be enthusiastic for every class and about every topic because cadets will 'feed off' this and be more likely to be engaged in the content.

Be willing to admit that you do not know the answer to a question. But, tell the cadet that you will get the answer for them.

Treat each cadet as an individual.

Hold high standards, but be fair.

Respond immediately to telephone calls e-mail messages.

Sources

The following individuals and sources contributed to the ideas presented in this publication.

LTC Arata
LTC Galgano
Dr. Gandolfo
LTC Krawczyk
Dr. Lumpkin
LTC Messitt
LTC Sobiesk
Dr. Tendy
MAJ Wright
LTC Yates

CTE, Master Teacher Program (some items are also on the CTE website under "Teaching Tips")

"Doing Collaborative Work"

"Preventing Academic Dishonesty" Barbara Gross Davis

"Professors, Stop Your Microchips" Patrick Allitt

CTE website, "Teaching Tips"

"Active Learning Strategies for Enhancing a Traditional Class"

"Promoting More Effective Classroom Discussions"

"Questioning as a Pedagogical Tool"