



**INNOVATIVE PROFESSORS**

# The Top Tactics for Creating a More Engaged Classroom

With frontline stories from Stanford, Wellesley,  
Purdue and other great universities



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# CONFRONTING STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

**AT THE START OF EVERY SEMESTER**, students arrive in class with high hopes. They've chosen their slate of courses based upon what they want to learn, after all, and they are eager to learn it. But, as every instructor knows, any given group of students will fall prey to distraction and disinterest as the weeks pass. The 21,000 faculty members who responded to the [2016 Professor Pulse Survey](#) agreed that their biggest teaching challenge is “students not paying attention or participating in class.”

This e-book assembles stories from 13 instructors from across North America explaining, in their own words, the challenges they faced, the solutions they devised and the lasting impact their changes have had on their classrooms. Faculty everywhere can learn from each other's experience. Some restructure their courses or redesign student assignments. Others find surprisingly simple ways, easily adapted for any course, to keep students coming back to the classroom with the same sense of anticipation they had on day one. The chapters of this e-book are organized according to the stages of a course, with innovative examples of how each prof addressed challenges in the beginning of the semester, midway through and at the end.

## CHAPTER 1

# GET OFF TO A GOOD START



**YOU NEVER GET A SECOND CHANCE TO MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION**—the aphorism applies as much to a university classroom as anywhere else. The professor sets the tone for every class, but arguably never more so than on the very first day, one that’s often treated perfunctorily. Rather than lecturing to students about what the expectations are, these three professors are modeling it for them from the outset. Even simple changes to the beginning of a class can have lasting—and rewarding—impact.

TACTIC

# Write a Class Constitution



**WHO**

**Cathy Davidson**

*Distinguished  
Professor,  
Department  
of English.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 1993*

**WHERE**

City University  
of New York  
New York, NY

**CLASS**

ENGL 89010  
American  
Literature,  
American Learning

**The challenge:** The first day of class sets the terms of engagement for an entire course. And usually those terms are: the instructor will be active, the students will be passive and the students will learn a body of knowledge on which they will be tested. I've found those are not the best terms.

**The solution:** I ask my students to write a course constitution, which is a foundational document that expresses why we are all here. It's also an exercise in communicating shared principles. Students must agree on what they want to learn from the course, and decide what's acceptable behavior in terms of attendance, late assignments and class participation. We do it as a shared Google doc, and everyone's first-day assignment is to contribute to the editing of the document.

**The impact:** The conversation is always lofty at the beginning, a We-the-People kind of discussion. It's a recipe for a lot of disagreement, even radical disagreement, but that's fantastic. It's about students taking responsibility for their own education. The level of engagement is so high I sometimes remind students that they have four other courses requiring their attention! When my students set the rules of engagement, I never have to enforce them because they enforce themselves.

TACTIC

# Learn Every Student's Name



**WHO**

**Lori Peek**  
*Professor,*  
Department of  
Sociology.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 2005

**WHERE**

University of  
Colorado  
*Boulder, CO*

**CLASS**

SOC 205  
Contemporary  
Race-Ethnic  
Relations

**The challenge:** Enrollment in my contemporary race relations class has tripled in the last decade, but I wanted to find a way to keep the discussions intimate. Race relations is such a sensitive and explosive topic, and my classroom needs to be a space where we can explore complex issues. When students believe they're anonymous, to their professor and to one another, it's easier for them to be disrespectful or dismissive of others.

**The solution:** I made a commitment to learn every student's name. It is a simple gesture, but the respect that's embedded in it is powerful. If two students disagree, I can refer to them both by name and immediately the tone changes. When it was just 45 students I could commit to learning 15 per class and know them all by the end of the first week. Now that it's 120 students, I take small group photos, add names and study it. And I make a point of calling every student out by name at least once in the semester.

**The impact:** The first thing I noticed is that attendance went up. One student told me, "I never missed a class because you knew who I was." Students also come to know one another's names, and that translates into a stronger sense of community. I firmly believe that students learn more, too—they're often more attentive because they're known within the classroom environment.

TACTIC

# Critique the Syllabus



**WHO**

**Aaron Kashtan**

Lecturer, University  
Writing Program.  
Teaching higher  
education since 2007

**WHERE**

University of  
North Carolina  
Charlotte, NC

**CLASS**

UWRT 1101  
Writing and inquiry  
in academic contexts

**The challenge:** Profs often complain that no students read the course syllabus. But we are not blameless here. We use a lot of boilerplate language. We often make them long and unengaging, and then merely gloss over them on the first day. There's not a lot of class time in a semester and using the first day to walk students through the syllabus can seem wasteful.

**The solution:** For their first assignment, I ask my students to compare and contrast my syllabus with a syllabus from another course that they're taking this semester. What things do I include that others don't? What policies do I have that others don't? The point is to show them that effort goes into those documents. Choices are being made and rhetorical strategies are being employed that reveal a great deal about the professor and the way they see the course and their students.

**The impact:** The assignment is a good fit for my course. I try to get the students to think critically about things they take for granted, including the course syllabi. This assignment ensures they'll all read it carefully. I get fewer "I didn't know that was on the syllabus" comments. More to the point, it sets the bar for the level of critical thinking I expect of them throughout the semester. It's better to start the course with a discussion question than with a professor talking.

## CHAPTER 2

# KEEP THE CLASSROOM ENGAGED



**FULL-TIME STUDENTS ARE JUGGLING THE WORK OF MULTIPLE COURSES.** Part-timers are trying to manage the demands of jobs and families. When they disengage from a course, it can be hard for any professor to reel them back in, especially when mobile technology makes it so easy for students to turn their attention elsewhere. These seven professors have adopted a wide variety of strategies, some simple and some comprehensive, to keep students focused and to make the most of class time.



TACTIC

# Flip the Classroom



**WHO**

**Steven Penney**  
*Professor,*  
School of Law.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 1998

**WHERE**

University  
of Alberta  
*Edmonton, AB*

**CLASS**

LAW 520  
Criminal  
Procedure

**The challenge:** Distraction. Before laptops were allowed in the classroom, the most disengaged students could doodle or pass notes surreptitiously. Now that they have computers and Wi-Fi, they have infinite possibilities for entertainment. One obvious way to combat engagement problems was to ask them to do more than sit still and listen.

**The solution:** I flipped my classroom. It's not a new strategy, and most universities have teaching centers that will help professors with the transition, but it's still quite rare, especially in law. Prior to each class, students watch online video content that I created that provides the foundational knowledge for that class. When they arrive in class, I quiz them using the Top Hat course engagement platform to make sure they understand the material. Then we move straight into problem-solving situations where they get to apply the knowledge. The magic of flipping is all the class time it frees up. It allows me to take the class further down the path of learning.

**The impact:** The students who seem to benefit most are smart and they have good study habits but they're not gifted learners—they typically make up one-half to two-thirds of the entire class. By flipping the classroom I get to spend more time on the nuances of the material, and they get to practice over and over until they master it.

TACTIC

# Let the Classroom Wander



**WHO**

**David Matthes**  
*Teaching Professor,*  
College of  
Biological Sciences.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 1995

**WHERE**

University of  
Minnesota  
*Minneapolis, MN*

**CLASS**

BIOL 1905  
Genomics: issues  
and applications

**The challenge:** This was a first-year course with 12 students meeting only once a week. I was assigned a typical first-year classroom: a cinder-block room with no windows and 30 chairs facing a pulpit. It was miserable.

**The solution:** I tried to reserve a boardroom, but couldn't book it for a full semester's worth of classes. So I booked it for one class and decided to host each class in a different location, which I would choose based upon each week's theme. For the class on death and cures, we met in the medical genetics center. For the genome's role in immunological defense, we met in the armory. They were all conference rooms with a large rectangular or oval table. No theatre-style seating.

**The impact:** We traveled across the entire campus in the course of the semester. Since these were first-year students, it was a tremendous opportunity for them to get to know their campus and make it their own. And the consistent change of location gave our group a stronger sense of community. We really bonded, and when people are happy and engaged in their learning, and when they care what their classmates think, they do better work. This idea isn't going to work for every course. But if it makes sense for a particular class to be taught in a different, specific locale, then move it.

TACTIC

# Foster Competition



**WHO**

**Justine Rapp**  
*Assistant Professor,*  
Marketing.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 2012

**WHERE**

University of  
San Diego  
*San Diego, CA*

**CLASS**

MKTG 340  
Digital marketing  
@ social media

**The challenge:** Digital marketing is hard to teach in the traditional sense. There are limited textbooks on the subject that are current because the technology we use changes so rapidly. So I focus on giving students real-world experience and skills they can take to the marketplace. Digital marketing interns are in high demand, but there's lots of competition for those positions.

**The solution:** I designed course projects to foster ongoing competition among the students. In one project, they develop a basic text-based Google ad campaign for non-profits in our area. Every four weeks I show them the metrics, and they revise their ads based on the data. It lights a fire when one team's ad got 90 clicks and another's got only four. They also develop and pitch websites for local small businesses, and the firms choose the winner. The best-designed site doesn't always win because the pitch matters as much as the product.

**The impact:** The students are much more invested in their work when it has real-world results, and when they can immediately gauge their success against others. And I don't evaluate them based on their clicks or their success with clients: every student has to provide a report on their project. What I look for is their ability to explain and justify the choices they made and evaluate why they were successful or not.

TACTIC

# Run Classes Like Meetings



**WHO**

**Said Easa**

*Professor,*

Department of Civil  
Engineering.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 1982

**WHERE**

Ryerson University  
*Toronto, ON*

**CLASS**

CVL72A/72B  
Transportation  
capstone  
design project

**The challenge:** As students approach graduation, there's still a gap between the way they work in the classroom and the way they'll be expected to work once they begin their careers. End-of-degree capstone courses are supposed to give students the chance to apply fundamentals and concepts in preparation for work outside the university.

**The solution:** I saw an opportunity to help prepare my students by running classes like real-world business meetings. I organized my class so students work on real projects with the actual industrial firms that might one day be hiring them. The firms provide the data and parameters and the students then go through the steps that would be expected of them. They prepare a proposal that includes multiple design options and evaluation criteria, and create a detailed report for the best design. Instead of classes, each team meets with me every two weeks, complete with agendas and minutes. Students take turns chairing the meeting and focusing on action items.

**The impact:** There is a lot less rambling discussion—the meetings are lively and engaging, but also more focused. The quality of the work the students produce is excellent: it has resulted in many conference papers and national awards. And I think they cap their degree with a strong sense that they're prepared to start a career.

TACTIC

# Let the Students Teach



WHO

**Thomas Hayden**  
*Professor of  
the Practice,  
Environmental  
Communication.*  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 2005

WHERE

Stanford University  
*Palo Alto, CA*

CLASS

ES 277C  
Science and  
environmental  
journalism

**The challenge:** When I first started teaching I was a performer. I had an I'll-act-funny-and-we'll-all-learn-something routine for the lectures. But about five years ago my pop-culture references stopped resonating and the high-energy approach was getting exhausting.

**The solution:** As an introductory assignment, I have the students teach each other about the things they know best. This class is half science students and half journalism students, so the science students teach Science 101 to the journalism students, and the journalists teach their craft to the scientists. The only rule: there can be no lectures and no PowerPoint presentations. It can be an arts and crafts project, a Silicon Valley-style brainstorming session, a song, whatever hands-on exercise they want.

**The impact:** The act of teaching is good for the students' mindset. Because it's for their peers, they do a great job. More importantly, it makes them scrutinize what they know and what they don't know. And what they learn by preparing and presenting, I find, sticks with them at the level of epiphany. As profs we derive a lot of satisfaction from seeing those lightbulb-switch moments happen, but the truth is that they happen more often through self-discovery than from a lecture. As for me, I'm not a performer anymore. I'm the ringmaster.

TACTIC

# Exploit Videoconferencing



**WHO**

**Dr. Hélène Bilis**  
*Associate Professor,*  
Department of  
French.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 2008

**WHERE**

Wellesley College  
Wellesley, MA

**CLASS**

FREN 278  
Court, City, Salon:  
Early Modern Paris,  
A Digital  
Humanities  
Approach

**The challenge:** I teach pre-revolutionary French literature and history, but students are usually more interested in contemporary French culture and history. I wanted to do something that would bring excitement to material that students tend to consider old and fusty.

**The solution:** I teamed up with another prof from Smith College who also teaches this course. We decided to take a digital humanities approach and assign projects such as digital timelines and network analyses. We also decided to bring our students together through a videoconference. We each had eight students in our class, for a total of 16, which is a good number. Both groups worked on the same projects, with responsibilities divided up between them, and they'd return the following week to present to one another.

**The impact:** My colleague and I quickly realized that, if we'd been each working solely with our own groups, we wouldn't have been able to do all the projects we did, or cover as much material as we did. By videoconferencing the students together, for example, we were able to assign the 17th century timeline to one class and the 18th century timeline to another. But the biggest impact was in presenting work to people from beyond our own community. It was great for the students' oral French. And it resulted in a much higher caliber of work.

TACTIC

# Let Students Figure it Out



**WHO**

**Christopher Bone**  
*Assistant Professor,*  
Department of  
Geography.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 2011

**WHERE**

University  
of Oregon  
*Eugene, OR*

**CLASS**

GEOG 181  
Our digital earth

**The challenge:** For course projects, I used to give students a clean data set and detailed instructions on how to process and analyze it. This wasn't helping them develop any problem-solving skills, and it was also ignoring how digital technology has changed the discipline. People used to pick up a map if they needed one. Now they pick up devices with maps and other data sets already in them.

**The solution:** For most assignments, I provide minimal guidelines, and ask students to mine their own data from available sources. We do a project on urban food deserts—areas with a dearth of places to buy healthy, unprocessed food—and the correlation with certain socioeconomic factors. Instead of giving them a prepared data set, I tell them to go find a food desert in any city they want. They have to find their way to Google Maps, to census data, and to whatever other relevant sources they can find. They all take different pathways, but they figure it out for themselves.

**The impact:** Students become more engaged, but it takes time for them to adjust. They don't think very highly of their prof at first for only providing vague instructions. But over time, it helps them learn that there's more than one way to resolve things. And I find it fascinating to see how they get to their solutions.

## CHAPTER 3

# EVALUATE BETTER



**EXAMS AND ESSAY QUESTIONS ARE DESIGNED** primarily to test for memory and assign students a mark. In truth, student evaluations are about more than grades. They're about making sure students can accept feedback on their work and incorporate it into future projects. And they're about assessing whether students have come to comprehend and master a course's subject matter. Here are three professors whose tactics have turned student evaluations into teachable moments.



TACTIC

# Gamify with Badges



**WHO**

**Tim Newby**  
Professor, College  
of Education.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 1984

**WHERE**

Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN

**CLASS**

EDCI 27000  
Introduction  
to educational  
technology

**The challenge:** I have been teaching this course for about 20 years. It's a project-based class of 200 students that covers many educational technologies, and we can never explore all of them properly. I was able to give students lots of exposure but not much instruction. When I graded their projects, some had clearly not mastered the technology, but they had no chance to try again.

**The solution:** I turned the projects into open digital badges. I grouped them into categories of different types of technology, and each badge has a number of challenge levels within it. Students have to earn at least one badge from each category, and there is no deadline for submissions. Once their work is submitted, I can provide feedback and either accept their work or offer the change to update and resubmit. It's mastery learning. Students who arrive in the course with some of the required skills can easily earn a badge. It's a way of giving credentials for what they already know.

**The impact:** Students took a while to adjust to the absence of deadlines and the revisions—many are in the habit of turning in work and forgetting about it. A few semesters ago I split my class into two groups: one I conducted using badges, the other without. Everything else was the same. The badges group enjoyed the course more and their grades were higher.

TACTIC

# Shake Up Final Exams



WHO

**David Yearwood**  
*Professor,*  
Department  
of Technology.  
Teaching higher  
education  
since 1989

WHERE

University of  
North Dakota  
*Grand Forks, ND*

CLASS

TECH 211  
Electronic Circuits  
and Devices

**The challenge:** I've never been comfortable with final exams. When we come to the end, I don't know if the final exam should be just about the final few weeks of learning, or a comprehensive review of the entire course. I don't like tests that stress memorization. And if students suffer from test anxiety, it can have a detrimental impact upon the entire final month of the course.

**The solution:** I came up with new ways to evaluate students. One week before the end of class I pair them up and give them each a different, complex question that requires them to understand fundamental concepts, including design basics, and to actually build something. They work on it for one week, and then in the final class they present the results to their classmates and answer questions. Students earn points for asking substantive questions, and the presenting pair earns extra credit for correctly answering them.

**The impact:** These exams make my last class the best class of all. Students are relieved to work with a classmate. The comment I get most often is, "That was weird—I was learning as I was being tested." And anytime students are learning, I'm excited. I don't care so much about whether they know the right answer. I want to know how they got there, and how they came to discover the right answer.

TACTIC

# Give Video Feedback



WHO

**Riki Thompson**  
*Associate Professor,*  
Writing Studies.  
Teaching higher  
education since 2002

WHERE

University of  
Washington  
*Tacoma, WA*

CLASS

T-CORE 101  
Introduction to  
academic writing

**The challenge:** I was frustrated with how much time I was spending writing comments and instructions on papers that weren't understood or followed. The revised work came back with the same problems. It took me some time to see it from my students' perspective: faculty feedback can be hieroglyphic.

**The solution:** I started giving them "veedback." I record my comments on their work in video format using free apps, and submit a .mov file to them along with the marked-up assignment. I have 20 students per class, so it's a big commitment on my part. The videos are usually less than five minutes long, so I have to think clearly about the direction. It's an alternative to meeting with them in person because we avoid missed appointments and re-scheduling. And they can rewind the video and play it again as many times as they need.

**The impact:** I give more global comments in the videos about how and where an argument is veering off course. The papers are still marked up in detail, but the students no longer see the red pen and think they're a bad writer. They receive the comments as a conversation instead of a negative evaluation. In surveys, they say they understand the comments much more thanks to the veedback. And it provides them a kind, approachable and thoughtful person talking to them about their writing.

# THE REJUVENATED CLASSROOM

**COLLEGE FACULTY ARE KEEN AND INSIGHTFUL OBSERVERS** of their own classrooms. In each of these 13 stories, professors confronted the same issue: student disengagement. They each describe, in unique detail, the problem's different sources and manifestations, and the specific solutions they devised to curb it.

They also describe, through their individual observations, the same lasting impacts upon their classrooms. After the professors introduce classroom innovations, students become more invested in their work. They learn about themselves, and they learn from each other. They take greater ownership of, and responsibility for, their education. They expect the classroom to be a place of continuous learning and discovery, and they arrive better prepared to meet those expectations. For students, engagement becomes a habit. As for professors, from their wide range of tactics they each derive similar satisfactions: rejuvenated classrooms, better student outcomes and more successful courses.

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## THE AUTHOR

PHOTOGRAPHER: ASH NAYLER



## PHILIP PREVILLE

Philip Preville is an award-winning journalist and a former Canadian Journalism Fellow at Massey College at the University of Toronto. He's currently a member of the Professional Advisory Council with the Department of English at Ryerson University.



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