

Wharton Teaching Excellence¹

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The strength of Wharton is not only in our creation of knowledge, but also in the sharing of knowledge. While each outstanding instructor has a unique style, there are best practices that have been suggested by faculty that could be widely helpful and applicable.

This document provides a guide to best practices on how to achieve teaching excellence at the Wharton School. It has been developed based on the feedback and experience of our students and faculty. It is recognized that instructors will find many, but surely not all, of these practices to be relevant for their teaching. The instructor is the best judge of which are most suitable to their style of teaching, subject matter and student characteristics.

We begin with a high-level overview of the requirements for teaching excellence. Next, we list specific policies and practices that contribute to teaching excellence. We conclude with additional resources to help instructors with teaching.

1. Engage & Apply

Simply put, excellent instruction engages students and demonstrates the applicability of what they are learning.

The classroom is engaging when it motivates interest, when students are naturally focused rather than compelled to give attention. This can be achieved through intriguing content delivered effectively, with enthusiasm and clarity. But more often than not, the engaging classroom makes students active participants in the learning process. At Wharton, active learning includes encouraging students to apply a theory to a new setting, or to implement a method to a new data set, or to practice a skill with other students, etcetera.

The classroom is applicable when (i) students clearly see the usefulness of the content to their future career and (ii) they are adequately trained to implement the offered tools. In some instances, applicability is obvious, and implementation is easy. In others, the instructor needs to explicitly link the classroom tools and ideas to practice, and (of equal importance) to ensure that students know how to use those tools or ideas correctly.

¹ This document was developed in AY18-19 by the Teaching Excellence Committee (Sigal Barsade, Jennifer Blouin, Gérard Cachon, Michael Roberts and Jagmohan Singh Raju). It is based on an earlier document with a similar objective (The Wharton Instruction-Checklist) and adapted through our experiences as well as discussions with students and other instructors. It is our intention to update the document over time. If you have comments or suggestions, please send them to Gérard Cachon: cachon@wharton.upenn.edu

2. Policies and Practices

“Engage and apply” is the broad objective, but this section provides specificity regarding the policies and practices that can lead to excellence.

To help organize this extensive list, the items are divided into four categories that represent the roles and tasks for the professor in a course:

- **Coach.** The professor is the central figure in a course. You set the tone and the mood. Students look to you for guidance, support, and, in some situations, compassion. Like a coach, your success is measured through the learning of your “team”.
- **Content.** Naturally, you are the expert who selects the content for the course.
- **Delivery.** You determine course policies and lead the actual delivery of content throughout the course.
- **Assessment.** You are responsible for assessing students and assigning grades. Learning can be challenging and rewarding, but the addition of grades introduces additional stress and anxiety. It is therefore not surprising that students’ perceptions of fairness regarding grades strongly influences their overall satisfaction.

COACH

Professors obviously must teach. They also have an important role that is akin to a coach. Learning can be challenging and stressful. A coach motivates, encourages and supports the team. A team’s success begins with the coach.

Care about your students’ learning

Students will care more about their learning when they feel that you also care. Professors who care often do one or more of the following:

- State that you want your students to do well and succeed. For example, wish for good performance on exams.
- Create an environment that encourages students to take risks to advance their understanding. For example, errors are opportunities to learn rather than failures to avoid or to demean or to belittle or to scold.
- Actively support their learning. For example, respond in a timely manner to emails, provide convenient office hours, be welcoming to students who seek assistance, and post materials (such as old exams) to help them study and learn.
- Make an effort to learn your students’ names – or call them by name. (Assigned seating as well as name cards can be helpful here.)
- Mention the professor student lunch program and let them know you are open to meeting with them. Lunches early in the course are more effective than lunches at the end of the course.

Respect your students

It is far easier to like and respect a person who you feel likes and respects you. Indicate (and genuinely have) admiration for their achievements, talents, intelligence and work ethic. Do not hint at contempt for them (e.g., you suggest, or just think, that they are lazy, ungrateful, or disinterested in learning). Not all students will have your course as their main priority. Wharton students are extremely talented, but they have many responsibilities to juggle. Avoid the temptation to let that turn you against the students.

Bring a positive mood to the classroom

Be enthusiastic. Be nice. Be caring. All of these contribute to engagement.

Demonstrate expertise

All Wharton professors are experts in some domain. It is important to be an expert in the domain you are teaching, from the particular details of the content (e.g., important facts in a case), to the answers for students who need additional clarity or wish to probe the material more deeply. You need to be prepared for the insides and outs (and ups and downs, and lefts and rights) of a session. That said, students also can have some expertise. They feel respected (and engaged) when their expertise is recognized. It helps to read their bios to learn a bit about their experiences.

Support students who are struggling

Don't ignore a student who is struggling in your course (e.g., many missed assignments, particularly poor performance on assessments, lack of attendance). If you are teaching Undergraduate students, you are encouraged to report your concerns via the Course Problem Notices portal with Courses InTouch, which is reached via a link in the Faculty Tools page.

Be inclusive

Your students are diverse along many dimensions (e.g., work experience, learning styles, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, etc.) Avoid alienating anyone, such as through casual humor or more directly. For example, because politics is a polarizing topic, it is best to keep politics out of the classroom unless necessary for the course content. If a topic is included that has the potential to offend, tell students that you recognize its sensitivity and try to not be dismissive of some points of view.

CONTENT

The content is your raw material. Your success begins with the selection of good content.

The content must be relevant to today, the material need not be.

Content that is irrelevant to today is not interesting and therefore not engaging. Recent content generally does not need to be justified as relevant. So, all else being equal, prefer recent over old content. However, old content can be acceptable (even desirable) if the question asked and the answer provided is important for organizations today. However, it is critical with old content to make explicit how it is relevant to today. For example, if you were teaching a case about a company making typewriters, you might introduce the case with something like “The market for mechanical typewriters isn’t exactly booming today. But the question of how broad to make the product line is one that all manufacturers face even today.”

Select the right level of content for the course

Content selection for a core course is different than for an elective.

- Core course. You are responsible for a broad and fundamental level of knowledge. The goal of a core course is to educate a wide range of students, not to identify the super star students. Hence, the emphasis needs to be on content that is accessible to all. This is not “dumbing down” the core. It is a recognition that it is not the role of a core course to cover every topic in the greatest of detail.
- Elective. The emphasis shifts from familiarity with a wide range of concepts (core) to mastery of a specialized set of skills. This is acceptable because students select electives. That said, it is still necessary to select the appropriate level of content for the audience: e.g., undergraduates are not graduate students, and MBA students are not working towards a PhD.

Wharton material is better than non-Wharton, but non-Wharton can work

Wharton content is more engaging, as in everyone prefers drinking water “bottled from the source”. But Wharton content is not always possible. We don’t have to design everything, but our value added to the content must be clear.

Guest speakers

Guest speakers can be engaging because they bring outside perspective and expertise to the classroom. If you choose to have guest speakers, attempt to select a diverse group in terms of ethnicity, gender, and nationality. Coach your guest speakers on the goal of the session and their role towards achieving it. Be cautious to invite too many guest speakers as this may undermine your own credibility.

Group/team work

Group work can be highly effective when the goal is to create a project that is greater than can be done by a single person or to illustrate team dynamics. Be cautious assigning group work if it seems that this is merely to reduce the effort needed to grade.

Simulations

Simulations can be highly engaging, but be sure to give students the needed tools to succeed in the simulation and link the results to the course content.

DELIVERY

The most visible part of teaching is the actual delivery of the course.

Lectures need to be more than what is on the slides

Do not just read your slides. Nothing is less engaging than a professor merely reading slides to students. Doing so disrespects their talent and wastes their time. They can read your slides on their own and in less time. Plus, when you read slides, you lose eye contact, which immediately reduces engagement.

A few ideas for expanding upon what is on the slides:

- Pause to ask students for questions and use those questions as an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on the material.
- Add supporting examples or stories.
- Interrupt the lecture to ask students to implement an idea or a short problem or exercise. Have the students work individually or in groups and then reconvene to discuss the solution.

Be organized

Establish course policies with sufficient detail and justify those policies in the syllabus. Imagine you are a student and ask yourself what you would want to know about a course and how you would want a course to run. For example, what is the attendance policy, what are the expectations regarding class participation and behavior, what use of electronics is allowed, and when are the dates and times for deliverables and assessments? Apply those policies with consistency but also compassion. The Faculty Tools page includes a syllabus template as well as a repository of syllabi across all Wharton courses..

Just as we appreciate when an airline pilot informs us of the time remaining in a flight, provide students with a road map for the course and reminders of where you have been, what you are doing now, and where you are going.

An organized course is predictable, and students value predictability. Thus, avoid changing the course (e.g., due dates for assessments) unless you have a reasonable reason to do so (e.g., to improve their learning). If so, be sure to tell them the reason.

Adhere to the Wharton Learning Agreement

The Wharton Learning Agreement is a set of standards for students and instructors regarding their conduct in a course. The components of the Learning Agreement are found throughout this document, but the Learning Agreement provides an accessible summary for everyone to reference. We should all strive to achieve these standards and encourage others to do the same. The Learning Agreement can be found here:

<https://mba-inside.wharton.upenn.edu/mba-learning-agreement/>

Have a focused and compelling lesson for each session

For each session, ask yourself, and briefly answer (e.g., in one sentence) the following question: What are the main lessons I want students to learn from this session? Do not deliver a session until this question can be answered to your satisfaction. There may be plenty of supporting ideas, but they should all work together to accentuate the central points. A single, compelling and important set of ideas is more engaging than a “grab bag” of loosely defined thoughts.

Explicitly identify and state the application of the material

What is the application of the lesson? If there is no direct application for the lesson, find one, or change the lesson. State who uses (or could use) the material and how they use (or could use) the material. Do not assume that students can infer the application of an idea or theory. Do not assume that students will know how to apply an idea even if they recognize that it could be useful. Show them the application and how to implement the application. Better still, have them practice using the tools or ideas to demonstrate to themselves that they are proficient in their use.

Hold student accountable – constructively challenge them.

When students ask questions or make statements, then there is an opportunity to expand upon their comments:

- If students ask a question, you may choose to challenge them to try to answer the question before you provide the answer (e.g., “what would be your answer at the moment?”). Having them articulate their thinking helps to clarify a concept.
- If students offer an opinion, challenge them to support their opinion with evidence (e.g., “what data are you using to support your idea?”)
- If students offer one solution, challenge them to articulate the potential risks with their approach and possible actions to help mitigate those risks.
- If a student says something that contradicts a previous comment, return to the student who made the original comment and have them defend their position.
- If students assert something for which there was no previous counterpoint, ask the students to imagine who would oppose their idea, why they would oppose it and what would their response be to the opposition.

Students appreciate being challenged, but they do not appreciate being berated or demeaned. And no one likes argumentation for argument sake. Keep your challenges respectful and constructive (i.e., leading to your main ideas/lessons).

No electronics in the classroom (unless necessary)

Mental attention is finite and there are switching costs to move focus from one task to another. Electronics consume and waste this limited resource, limiting engagement in the class. It is also distracting to other students.

That said, some sessions explicitly need (or could benefit from) electronics, in which case they should be used as a tool. For example, if you are teaching students how to use software or to code, then definitely have them work with the tool in real time.

Inevitably, some students will use electronics at some point even if prohibited. Avoid direct confrontation to ensure compliance. A generic reminder to the class can be appropriate. If a student repeatedly goes beyond your guidelines, contact the student outside of class so as to not waste the time of others.

Do not publicly shame students

It may be tempting at times, possibly due to frustration, to publicly shame or “call out” a student for their behavior (e.g., leaving the class session, or use of electronics, or side conversations, etc.) This is rarely effective and generally not well received. A conversation with the offending student outside of class is better. Begin the conversation with the presumption that the student has a good reason for violating norms. For example, “I noticed that you have been leaving the class session frequently. Is everything OK?”

Start on time, end on time.

You should begin promptly when it is time to start class. But you should also not keep students beyond the end of class (e.g., 10 minutes before the start of the next session). Do not worry if some sessions end a bit early (e.g., 15 minutes before the next session). Imagine trying to use the restrooms and/or get food and/or check emails in the span of a few minutes between classes when all other students are doing the same thing.

Handle student requests for exceptions

Students will ask for exceptions to your course policy, such as taking the exam at a different time, excused absences, forgiveness for a late assignment, etc. It is best to minimize the number of exceptions requested of you – it is no fun to say “no”. To do so, anticipate possible exceptions that could be asked and explicitly include your policy in the syllabus. If that is not sufficient, you can refer the student to the MBA or UG Program Offices for guidance (e.g., “please discuss this with your advisor and then they should contact me”). It is also helpful to allow for a limited number of blanket exceptions. For example, if you grade attendance, explicitly state that a certain number of absences (e.g., two) can occur without penalty (i.e., for any reason). This relieves you of the pressure to judge the merit of each request.

Conclude

The adage “tell them what you will say, say it, tell them what you said” is true. And the most important part is the last one. Conclude a session with a summary of the main key lessons. Tell the students what you want them to remember from the session.

Assign seats

This is useful for a number of reasons. It helps to learn student names. It helps to clearly identify who is and who isn't attending class, both to you and the students. It prevents students who want to disengage from sitting in the back or in the extremes. In classes with more seats than enrollment, it ensures that students move towards the front and center to help maintain attention. Also, all students are assigned name tags – feel free to ask them to take them out if they do not automatically do so to help you be able to call on them by name, particularly in larger enrollment courses.

Encourage student preparation

Engagement in the class can be increased when students do some pre-work before the session. This is obviously critical for case discussions but can also be useful for lecture and other formats. However, professors can be frustrated when they expect preparation and are disappointed with the perceived level of actual preparation. To increase student preparation, consider the following:

- *Don't ask too much for prep work.* Assign the work that students must do to prepare for a session and no more. When it is absolutely necessary for students to complete a greater than average amount of prework, warn them in advance and explain to them why it is necessary (in advance). Obviously, not every session should have an above average workload.
- *Make prep work count.* Use or refer to their prework during the class session to indicate that the work was valuable. Students quickly observe a failure to do so and then choose to limit their preparation (as in not waste time preparing for something that is not useful). They also quickly observe when their prework is rewarded through inclusion in the class, which makes the session more engaging.
- *Pework quizzes.* You can assign 1-3 questions for students to answer before a day's session. Completion is graded (but accuracy need not be graded). For numerical responses, show students the histogram of responses in class. For text responses, call on students who provide answers useful for the class content. These quizzes serve several important functions. First, students can see that their opinion is not universally accepted, which is intriguing (i.e., engaging). Second, it draws reticent students into the class discussion by alleviating the fear/stress of cold calling because you know what the student will say and that what they will say is useful. As

- long as the prework is used in the session, students take their responses seriously even if they are not graded for accuracy.
- *Short in class quizzes.* A graded 5 minute quiz in class based on the prework can provide motivation. Some professors create some in-class excitement by choosing whether to have a quiz or not via an in-class lottery (e.g., the flip of a coin, or roll of a die).

Use informative visualizations in slides

Cliché but true, a picture is worth a thousand words. Whenever possible, use visualizations (graphs, figures, charts, diagrams, etc.) to illustrate and support course concepts.

Tablet and stylus for writing on the board

The technology is now available to give you the option to use a tablet and stylus in the class. When done with wireless communication, you have the ability to roam the classroom while your writing appears on the front screens. During a lecture you can add annotations to the slides as needed. During a case discussion it becomes easy to “flip” between multiple boards (just swipe on the tablet). The slides can be recorded and posted for the students.

Make handouts available for students

Handouts could be posted electronically in advance or hard copies could be brought to class sessions. Students especially appreciate the availability of handouts if there is a no-electronics policy and it would be challenging for students to write out complete notes.

Religious holidays

It is University policy to accommodate students who wish to observe a religious holiday. Details of the policy can be found here:

<https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/secular-religious-holidays/>

Use technology to support your teaching

A number of tech tools are available to support your teaching. Canvas allows you to organize and distribute materials, conduct quizzes and surveys, establish teams, and

much more. A number of potentially useful plug-ins to Canvas are available (e.g., Piazza manages classroom discussions). As already mentioned, you can use a tablet and stylus in the classroom. PollEverywhere allows you to collect and display in real-time information from the students. See the Faculty Tools page for additional resources, or contact your department's IT support team.

<https://inside.wharton.upenn.edu/faculty/instruction/>

ASSESSMENT

Let students be successful

Have high expectations for assessments, but give students that work hard the opportunity to be successful on those assessments. Exams with low means are demoralizing to students that work hard. In those cases, instead of attributing their performance to a lack of effort, they may assign blame to the quality of your instruction.

Be clear about grading

Students are naturally anxious about grades. You can help to avoid some anxiety by being as clear as possible as to how they will be graded: indicate the dates and times of deliverable and assessments; set expectations by providing examples of assessments; tell students who will do the grading and what is your appeal process.

Return graded material promptly and with feedback

If you were a student, you would prefer to see your grade sooner rather than later. And feedback is highly appreciated. Individualized feedback may require too much time, but generic feedback on typical good responses or errors is often sufficient.

Grade attendance

If you grade attendance, students are more likely to attend. Attendance is likely to lead to more learning because it occurs over time (rather than cramming) and there is (or should be) more content delivered in person than through course materials. To manage the logistics of grading attendance, consider the following:

- Assign seats. As an instructor is it possible to quickly indicate who is absent at the start of a session (i.e., just look for empty seats). This can also be done by a teaching assistant or you could have students indicate their presence on the seating chart that is distributed at the start of the session.
- Use the attendance app.

Grade participation

To encourage discussion in the classroom, grade students based on their participation. Most professors score on a relatively simple scale, such as assigning each student a score of 0, 1, or 2 for each session. It can be useful to allow students to participate in ways beyond speaking in the classroom (e.g. give participation credit for activity on discussion boards). To provide another measure beyond your own impression, ask the students at the end to grade the other students in the classroom. Tell the students how their participation is graded and who grades them.

Timing of final exams

It is University policy that you may not administer a final exam at a time other than the one scheduled by the University. Furthermore, you may not have a final exam (or an assessment that is effectively a “final exam” even if you don’t refer to it as a “final exam”) during the final portion of class time (e.g., the last week of classes). Details of the University’s policy can be found here:

<https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/final-examinations/>

3. Resources for Teaching and Improvement

The Faculty Tools page provides a collection of links to useful teaching tools:

<https://inside.wharton.upenn.edu/faculty/instruction/>

For example, through this portal you can create a seating chart, grade attendance/participation, view course syllabi, submit final grades, report a student who is struggling in your course, and view the course evaluation report for you sections.

If you would like further assistance to improve your teaching, to increase your satisfaction as well as student satisfaction, then consider the following:

- Record your class and watch it. You might observe some interesting patterns. These videos can be a useful resource to you in subsequent iterations of the course.
- While fresh in your mind, write down after each session notes to yourself on possible changes that you think might be helpful. The subsequent iteration of the course will benefit from these ideas.
- Visit classes taught by colleagues. Note how they “engage and apply”. Observe the behavior of students – when were they most engaged and why.

- Contract your department chair or member of the Teaching Excellence committee if you would like to work with one of your colleagues or an outside consultant. The level of engagement could be brief (e.g., a short conversation), or could involve multiple sessions and class visits. You can decide what will be most effective for you and the school will support your goals.