

In the Classroom 107

Why You Should Conduct a Rehearsal Before Your First Class

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thank you ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot I know you can be doing other things. I was going to say the Super Bowl, but that's when I'm recording it. Well, when you hear this, Super Bowl will be done. We'll have a new Super Bowl champion, whoever that may be. Also, right now while I'm recording, we have just a wonderful snowfall going on. It's been going on for probably four hours now, coming down pretty steadily, about I'm thinking six, eight inches right now, and it's expected to go on for a few more hours. Who knows what we're going to have when it gets all done. What else has been going on? Well, we just got our term up and going and I have some thoughts and that's what prompted this episode.

Year after year, I keep seeing the same things pop up. It has been the same at each of the four higher ed institutions I have been at. Basically, I've noticed that some faculty members do not take time to rehearse their first class of the term and then are frustrated and embarrassed by the outcome. If you are interested in having the beginning of your term start off a little smoother, please listen on. If you're content with being frustrated, you can probably skip this episode. No, just kidding. I want you to also listen in.

First of all, teaching is part performance. You would not tolerate sitting through a play that was rapidly thrown together, obviously not rehearsed. You probably wouldn't sit through a presentation that was not thought out and not rehearsed. Teaching not only imparts information to our students, but it is also part performance. To pull off the best performance, you have to take into consideration every aspect of your class. When I talk about a play, putting on a play performance, many things are thought out well ahead of time. The script, the wardrobe, the scenery, the lighting, the sound, et cetera. Well, to have a solid class, you have to do the same thing. These are similar elements to when you are putting together a class.

We can talk about all the classes and ideally you want to rehearse for each of the classes, but I specifically want to address the first class of the term, because this is where I see most of the problems. Once we get past the first class, the first week, I don't see the classroom that often, but the first week I spend a lot of time there. As an instructional technologist, I recognize the first day can be stressful for instructors, and because of that, I make it a point to pop into each class to ensure the class starts without a hitch. It has been easy to recognize when an instructor has deliberately planned a class and rehearsed it, and when they haven't.

Every term has been the same. There are some instructors, I know that they're ready. Then I have a handful of instructors, I know they're not ready. The sad thing is the students see this. The students see when the instructor is flustered. The student can see when the instructor is not prepared. This is reflective on the instructor. I've had some instructors try to shift the blame to everyone except to themselves. This is pretty easy to control because frankly, as an instructor, it's your class. How to start? Where to start?

Well, the first place to start is well before you step into the classroom. It starts with your course design. I recommend that you plan your entire course with backward design. I talked about this multiple times. You can find more in-depth about backward design in Episode 41. I encourage you to check it out, but basically as a recap, we're going to start with our course goals and objectives. Using these course objectives, you're going to create assessments to measure your objectives. Then you will develop activities so students can practice to meet the assessments. Finally, you'll develop content that will help you support those activities and assessments and in the end, the learning objectives.

Now, I typically map this out on a spreadsheet before I build it out in my learning management systems, or before I map it out on a lesson plan. I put it on a spreadsheet so I can see that everything's accounted for and I know where the gaps are and I work really hard to fill in those gaps. Once you finish mapping them out, you can then arrange them in a logical order. This logical order becomes your modules or your individual face-to-face classes that you're going to be teaching. That's where a lesson plan comes in. If you're not using a lesson plan, you should really consider it.

Lesson plans will help you arrange your class to get the most impact. A good lesson plan will identify what happens from the start of the class to the end of the class. It will help you stay on track by indicating what elements you'll introduce at what specific time. In Episode 79, I talked about Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction. A quick recap of that is gain attention, inform learners of objectives, stimulate recall of prior knowledge, present the content, provide learning guidance, elicit performance, provide feedback, assess performance, and enhance retention, and transfer to the job.

Well, that basically is your class. What you're trying to do with the lesson plan is take everything from gaining attention, all the way to making sure that they will carry this information till the next class. As you present your content, you should identify key questions to help guide the instruction. This means if you assign a reading, you also have to read it and develop discussion questions. All this is important because if you try to wing it, your students are definitely going to notice. Additionally, a lesson plan will identify the different technologies you will use and what files you need to have open.

Some of the strategies I have, is I use the learning management system. I have a special section set up for the instructor, which is hidden from the students, but that's where I put links to my files so I can rapidly open my files when I get into the class. I bring up my LMS, one place, boom, there it is. I click on everything. I open them up, I

have them waiting for me in the wings, and then I bring them into the class as I need them. As I said, this is going to save you time and frustration instead of trying to access them ahead of time, it's like, "They're on my flash drive. Well, I can't get my flash drive to work." Always have a plan B and a C. Having a flash drive is great, but putting them out on OneDrive or Google Docs or Google Drive, Dropbox, having those available in the cloud is a great strategy. Then also have them as part of your LMS. I have three different ways that I make sure that I have those files available for me.

Speaking of files, if you are using materials to support your lesson, you need to take time to develop them well beforehand. I recommend that you take time to develop your handouts and your presentations. Don't use your presentation as a handout. Presentations are there to support the presentation. They are not really great study aids. Instead, I would recommend that you take time to build a proper handout. The slide deck should be there as a presentation support and the handout is there for student engagement and a practice tool. It's better suited that way.

When you're building your presentation, make sure that you take time to develop proper visual support. This means cutting out a lot of words. I've seen some recent presentations, it's just packed full of words. Instead of words, create great visuals for your presentation. There's a lot of great open-source content that you can use in your presentation, open-source images. I have to be honest, this all takes time and you just don't throw it together. That's why I said take time well beforehand. I know it can be difficult, especially if you're an adjunct, you may get the class handed to you just mere days before the instruction. Try to stay ahead and build these things out properly. Really tough for your first class. It may not be as refined as subsequent classes, but that's what we're working towards. You don't have to do it all in one time. Each iteration just keeps improving upon itself.

Next, and what I consider extremely important, and this particular item is what prompted me to address this topic today, is prior to your class, go to each of your assigned classrooms and see how the room is set up. Test the technology. Don't do it just a few minutes before your class. You need to do this the week before. Take time, make time, find an instructional technologist to go in there with you and test your classrooms. Make sure that they work. More importantly, log onto the computer system and take it for a test drive.

Are there any issues to logging in? Can you access your course materials? Are you presenting a video? How does the sound work? If you're recording your presentation, does your camera and microphone work? Are you able to troubleshoot issues without the assistance of technicians? You're going to be there by yourself majority of the time. Can you troubleshoot issues? What if the sound is not working? How do you fix it? What if the projection is not working? How do you fix it? You need to know how to do this, otherwise it ruins your class.

You need to become proficient so take the time to go out and check it out. Can students adequately see what you write on the board? If you're using a whiteboard and you write something, can you go to the back of the class and see what you wrote? How about when you display your slides? Can you read them from the back

of the classroom? Ideally, you have pictures, so you probably don't have a lot of writing on them if you did it right, but go to the back of the classroom and check it out. Your students will notice if you do not know how to use your equipment, and this is going to raise your level of anxiety.

Quick rant. If you're using technology in the class, you need to know how to use the tools. Do not wait until the last moment to figure it out. You need to be the master of your domain. I hear over and over from faculty that they're not good with technology. This is an excuse. We have had personal computers on our desks for over 40 years now. What these members are saying is that it is not their priority. However, it's imperative that we become proficient with our technologies because we have students that we are teaching, for one thing, but also those students need to know how to use technology in order to survive in today's world. I don't know if you noticed, but this whole COVID thing is requiring us to use technology in ways that we had not previously, but that's not going away. It's going to stay here well after COVID is done. We will continue to meet virtually. We will continue to teach virtually, so we as instructors need to lead by example.

End of my rant, back to testing your classroom. When testing the technologies in your classroom, also think about your future classes. Test the different scenarios to ensure they're going to work when you actually put them into action. Are you planning to do a polling? Are you going to show a video? Are you going to show a video while you're recording your class? Test all these things out. Put together a number of scenarios and when you go to test your classroom, test to make sure that they work. When you record a video, where does it go? How can I get it back out to students? It's important that you know these things.

If you have instructional technologists handy and they offer to be on hand to demo new classroom technologies or be available to guide you through your walkthroughs, take them up on it. They want you to be successful. Now, that may be a broad term that they want you to be successful. I'll speak for myself. I want you to be successful. I want you to go out and crush it in your classroom. Most of my counterparts who I've talked to, they honestly want the same thing. This comes down to the final item. You need to rehearse. Now that you have all the elements in place, you need to go out and conduct a rehearsal. High-level performers practice or do walkthroughs before hitting the stage.

My counterparts in the military, they would do walkthroughs before they went into an engagement. Walkthroughs, they don't have to be high intensity. They don't have to be really crazy complex. It is just an opportunity to walk through the scenario at least once or twice. If you have experienced teaching, you know that the first day of the class tends to have more bumps than those later in the day, especially if you're teaching the same class multiple times. What a walkthrough does is get you through that first class, before you get to your first class, so that way it will go a little smoother.

By reviewing your lesson plan, walking through the steps, you become more familiar with the content and therefore more confident in delivering it. Now, I would also caution, don't over-prepare. You want to maintain a level of authenticity. Over-

preparing can result in a lesson that's a little too stilted, too formal, and you really want to maintain a conversational tone. Having a little anxiety is a good thing, but it's important to go out there, rehearse, walk through all the steps, make sure that the technology is going to work before you get in front of your students. You want to have a level, a sense of control, of mastery of what's going on.

Part of that mastery is knowing what to do when things are not going right. Having that plan B and C in your pocket. Over the past 30 years, I've watched a lot of instructors on their first day. I can tell when they've taken the time to prepare and have become comfortable with the content and their equipment. It is also noticeable when they have not prepared. This can create an uncomfortable situation for everyone present. I've had instructors use profanity, cussing out technology in front of the students. What are the students thinking at that moment and time?

Well, those are my thoughts. Soon a new term is going to be upon us and I, as an instructional technologist, can't wait to see the rehearsals. Please invite me. I would be happy to help out and make sure that the class you walk into, you're going to just crush it. In the meantime, here's a quick plug for my book.