

Graduate school is full of sink-or-swim opportunities, and teaching, with or without a life vest, can provide the best opportunities. My first graduate teaching associate position was to assist a senior faculty member in Industry Research Methods. This methodological course is a requirement for all Communication majors, involves advanced statistical methods, and has an applied survey component. At week 4 of 10, I had hit a manageable stride with course work, experiments, readings, and TA duties. Suddenly, when the lead faculty became too ill to continue teaching for the quarter, I was thrust from TA to independent instructor of record. I became a quick study of how to assess and redirect student learning, how to throw lecture and laboratory preparation into my juggling act, all with a calm, confident demeanor. One student in their evaluation wrote “Considering you were thrust into the role of instructor unexpectedly, I think you did a good job. I appreciate how you adapted the class to tailor our needs.” I am certain I learned so much from this initiation, but most importantly how when given the opportunity, I can rise to any occasion and grow as an academic.

A college education should prepare the graduate with critical thinking, writing, and organizational skills. In my classes, though, I do not just pay lip service to these objectives. No matter the content, I aim to create an *inclusive* learning environment using *creative* and *accessible* techniques enabling students to develop and apply skills for *utility* in a variety of future environments. I approach my course design with key questions in mind: how can I help my students grow as writers? How can I spark a passion for inquiry? What tangible skills will they leave with to bring to other classes, experiences? When I introduce the course to students on the first day, I make these goals clear and that we are a team in these efforts. A common motto in my class is know your strengths, know your personal challenges, and be open about both so as a team we can reach your best potential. Using an approach of humor, grace, and transparency, I believe my students enjoy my courses and leave with knowledge and an appreciation of the learning process. I have heard over and over, “Kelly’s passion is infectious,” and if students walk away with a greater passion for communication, research, or scholarship in general, I have done my job.

Engagement is key to retention of information and connection to real-world applications. I want my students to enjoy their learning experience in my classroom, no matter the subject. In-class activities give me opportunities to get creative with students and help them open their intellectual wings a little bit. In public speaking, I use mad-libs to help students brainstorm ideas for speeches, distribute hidden objects in a bag of random household items for practice demonstrative speeches, or outline how persuade fictitious characters to change their behaviors (e.g., Santa to go on a diet). These may seem silly on the surface, but each activity includes the key strategies for preparing for and practicing informative, demonstrative, and persuasive speeches. Class discussions start with independent worksheets, then small group discussions, and then we harvest the information as a class. Students in my class serve as peer evaluators for every project presentation, individual speech, or group project. I have been told I have a “big sister” approach to engaging students, where I guide with provided tools and allow students to come to their own conclusions in a safe environment.

An accessible and inclusive classroom to me encompasses Universal Design for Learning (UDL). I believe it makes me more approachable as an instructor, leading to student confidence in skills (theirs and mine) and in the investment of their time in the course. When opportunities arise, I include [materials](#) that aim to reach the visual (e.g., videos, memes), kinetic (e.g., worksheets, small groups), and aural (e.g., specific examples, stories) learners. Minute reaction papers at the end of class on specific topics can serve as communication between students and I

to help me assess their understanding. I believe it is my job as an instructor to not just communicate the mechanics of our topics, but to also build their confidence in their self-efficacy in their blossoming skills. My students recognize my care for their education, performance in my course, and as a person. In Social Media, I recognized a student was missing more classes than attending, but was still turning in quality work and performing well on exams. After speaking with the student, I realized there were some health issues, and I helped the student work with the Office of Disability Services for short-term assistance with other classes and deadlines. The student later told me “were it not for those accommodations, I would not have graduated on time.”

As an instructor, it is vital to know where your students are in their knowledge and confidence in their learning. One example is my incorporation of daily quizzes at the end of each lecture for three specific reasons. First, it serves as both attendance and class participation. Written reflection helps me see how all students understood the material, regardless of extraversion. Second, it helped me assess what parts of the lecture the students understood best and what parts they were missing entirely. If I found the majority of the class answered one question incorrectly, I know readjustments or clarifications are necessary before the exam. Third, a version of one exam question would appear on each 5-item daily quiz (answers would be rearranged or wording would be slightly different). This gave students an orientation to the pending exam and helped connect information from one topic to another. I found this reduced anxiety about the quizzes, allowing students to understand the purpose of the practice rather than the quantitative outcome.

I am to be a reflexive instructor, continually growing and learning myself. In each course I have taught, I have included midterm evaluations of the course and my own teaching. I request students to rate on quantitative scales my approach, pace, and helpfulness as an instructor. Examples of what I do well, and what I could adjust, in the classroom give me a well-rounded report of how students assess my abilities. After the survey is closed, I always report the results to the class in an effort to be transparent in their needs as students and my evaluations as an instructor. One student was troubled by a perceived lack of balance in my choices of professional speech examples. When I received this feedback, I immediately reviewed all the videos and text of speeches I used in class and realized the student was right. I adjusted what I used in the remaining lectures, and in future iterations of the course, to reflect a clearer balance. Evaluations help me learn as a professional and person, and students have no trouble keeping us honest.

Learning is definitely a team sport, and I take my mentoring and teaching philosophies seriously. I aim to be reflective in my approach, make necessary adjustments when student outcomes suffer, while still challenging learners to push themselves a little further than they expected to. I understand not every student will excel or get as excited about the content as I do. Previous students have joined me in the lab as research assistants because they were inspired by my passion in the classroom. Non-majors have enrolled in more classes with me as their instructor because they enjoyed our time together. When given the opportunity, my students and I learn together and I gain a new appreciation of the materials I cover. I am certain I can navigate both narrow and broad subject materials in a variety of classrooms based on my experience and feedback.