

## High-Impact Teaching Practices for In-Person Instruction

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## Overview

High impact practices are meant to establish a set of **shared expectations** and provide additional teaching strategies to support high quality instruction in all School of Professional Studies (SPS) courses. High impact practices are drawn from research on teaching and learning. The academic team or the faculty director of your program will also refer to these practices in assessing the learning environment of your course. Faculty development opportunities and teaching best practices at SPS are centered around the high impact practices outlined in this document.

While good course planning is a critical part of effective teaching, planning alone is not sufficient for student learning. Learning is a social process: the instructor's active facilitation of learning and of faculty-student and student-student interactions is essential for students' ability to engage with the course materials and meet course learning outcomes. Students consistently tell us that active engagement and regular, timely feedback from their instructors were the factors most critical to their learning.

The SPS student body is quite diverse, and represents a wide range of identities, backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Research has shown that students learn more effectively when they feel a sense of belonging in their learning community. Rather than ignoring differences, culturally responsive teaching "us[es] cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective" for all students (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching "recognize[s] the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning" (Gay, 2010) and is mindful of how the different subject positions of instructors and students can affect classroom dynamics. The high impact practices described below contribute to the overarching goals of ***fostering inclusive, welcoming learning spaces***, where students feel they can be authentic in their identities without fear of judgment or bias.

## Instructor Responsiveness

Although your primary interaction with students will be in the classroom, please make clear to them how they can best reach you outside of class time. All faculty are required to set aside weekly office hours or be available by appointment. SPS requires that you set up a Canvas course site both to communicate with your students and to use it as a repository for the syllabus, course materials (readings, video links, slide decks, etc.), and student assignments. If you assign group work, students can also contact each other and exchange drafts and materials through the course site. Faculty are *not* required to be available to students at all times, but students should feel welcome to reach out with questions and receive timely responses.

## Communication

- In your syllabus and your course site, list your contact information with specific information about your availability and typical response time (use your NU email; sharing a phone number is optional).
- Use the email or announcement functions in Canvas to send out reminders about upcoming assignments as a follow up to in-class announcements. Monitor assignment submissions and communicate with students to remind them of missed and/or upcoming deadlines. For example, reach out individually to students who are absent or not turning in assignments to offer support and express concern.
- Check email daily; respond to questions (individual or group) within 24-48 hours. If you are unable to respond for several days or more (e.g., during professional travel), give prior notice to your students and to the administrative unit overseeing your course.
- Encourage students to ask questions throughout the quarter individually and in group settings and take the time to respond (Ask after each topic: What questions do you have?).
- When appropriate and as often as possible, provide extensive individualized feedback to students. See the [instructor and group feedback](#) areas of this document for more information.
- Ensure that your late policy is clearly stated in your syllabus and be consistent and considerate in applying it.

## Community Building & Culturally Responsive Teaching

Faculty may feel that, especially at the graduate level, using class time to build classroom community is unnecessary. But research has shown that learners at any level are more successful when they feel a sense of belonging in a learning space. Spending some time during class, especially at the beginning of the term, to get to know your students and let the students get to know each other can help foster an inclusive learning community where diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are valued. Such a learning community often has a meaningful impact on student motivation and success.

Culturally responsive teaching not only “recognize[s] the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning,” but also “teaches to and through the strengths of” students’ diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010). This can be especially beneficial to teaching adult students who bring varied personal and professional identities and experiences to the classroom.

There are many quick, low-stakes activities that can help you learn each other’s names, backgrounds, and experiences and establish classroom rapport:

- On the first day of class, have students introduce themselves, perhaps with a low-stakes question connected to the course topic (for a sports administration course, a question about their favorite sports team; for a public policy course, a question about their last

interaction with a government agency, etc.). Instructors can model how they want students to respond by answering the question first.

- Address students by name or by how they prefer to be addressed and use the students' identified pronouns. (Include your pronouns in your syllabus/Canvas site and consider sharing them on the first day of class to model for students.) (Canvas How to Add pronouns guide)
- Encourage connections among students by fostering student-to-student communication through small group or pair activities as part of class discussion.
- Be intentional with the classroom community on discussion of topics that may be provocative or controversial. Collectively establishing group agreements ahead of time for these interactions is recommended. Be clear to students that if they encounter harmful language or behavior in the learning space, they should bring it to your attention as soon as possible.
- Provide opportunities for students to connect their learning to their own knowledge and experiences and plan activities that foster peer-to-peer learning. Design activities that involve collective effort and co-creation of knowledge (crowd source resources on a particular topic or question, have students prepare discussion questions, have students co-facilitate discussion, etc.)

## Discussion Facilitation & Classroom Management

Discussion is an essential mode of learning that can advance student thinking and reinforce course concepts covered in readings and lectures. There are many ways to facilitate class discussion and more structured discussion formats can allow increased participation of all students and prevent the common problem of having just a few voices dominate conversation. Below are some ideas for structured discussion, but there are many others.

Ideas for Structuring Classroom Discussion: All of these ideas invite collective effort (and therefore collective responsibility) for classroom discourse and idea sharing. As with assignments, try to scaffold discussion by starting with low-stakes questions and steps and then moving into more complex, open-ended questions or tasks. Also, allow students sufficient time to process discussion topics, formulate their ideas, and practice testing out their ideas by having students first discuss in pairs or small groups before engaging in whole class discussions (utilize [Think-Pair-Share](#)).

- Provide clear expectations to students – tell students how long they have to discuss and what the deliverables are (will one student summarize and share, will they need to get up and do a presentation, etc.)
- Ask students to prepare discussion questions ahead of class and share them with you. Group similar questions together and have students tackle specific questions in small groups and then report back to the large group.
- Ask a low-stakes question that everyone answers (give the class a few minutes to think or jot down and then go around the room). You might ask students to come up with an

example of a service provided by local government or a user experience pet peeve from their own lives. After everyone has responded, ask what they noticed or what patterns emerged. Their initial answers can provide fodder for deeper questions and connections to course concepts/theories.

- Introduce a case study or specific scenario. Have students in pairs or small groups prepare specific stakeholder perspectives. Have them role-play a meeting of different stakeholder groups where they ask questions and try to find common ground or come up with tentative agreements/plans/solutions.
- Have students collectively critique a professional product or series of products (published article, policy memo, business plan, website, data solution). For this exercise, it's important to decide on a rubric or checklist of criteria students will use to evaluate. This activity can also be used to create or refine a rubric together that can be used for peer feedback on project or paper drafts.

#### Other Guidelines:

- Create a respectful forum to test ideas (students express conflicting viewpoints, challenging each other) by reminding students to be open to new ideas and to be respectful of the words and opinions of others. (Consider co-creating a list of agreements for how everyone will participate to create more ownership by the students and a sense of community; refer to the agreements as needed.)
- Pose questions or introduce alternative ideas/viewpoints that have not yet been raised to push students' thinking and deepen discussion.
- Refocus the discussion if it goes off on tangents.
- Synthesize comments at some point in a discussion to emphasize and explain core course concepts, to highlight especially insightful student contributions, or to clarify common misunderstandings that arise.
- Use practical examples or vivid analogies to illustrate complex concepts.
- Be aware of and mediate power imbalances that may arise based on [social identities](#). For example, if male students are dominating discussion in a class with few female students, find ways to encourage female student participation and male student awareness of sharing discussion space. Or, if those with many years of professional experience are dominating group work assignments, make collaboration expectations clear.
- For discussion topics that may elicit strong reactions and divergent perspectives, be intentional about establishing group agreements that set clear expectations for respectful exchanges.
- If you notice harmful language or interactions (prejudiced, biased, belittling, shaming, or otherwise hostile, microaggressions), whether intentional or not, speak privately with the students directly involved, but also make an announcement to the whole class reminding them of group agreements and the impact of the harmful language or behavior (without naming individual students). Reach out to your Assistant Director for guidance at any time.

- If a student is disruptive or disrespectful of classroom expectations, speak with the student privately and remind them of the student code of conduct. If the behavior continues, document and reach out to your assistant director/program manager for guidance.

## Group Work

Group work can help students develop key communication and collaboration skills with real world relevance and demonstrate their strengths while working with others. Students may resist group projects due to scheduling difficulties with classmates, concerns over contribution levels, and being evaluated and graded based on others' work. Group project design should incorporate practices that alleviate student concerns and foster a positive learning environment.

- Provide a clear rationale and purpose for the group work, explaining how it aligns with course and program learning outcomes.
- Decide how you want to form groups and communicate that to students as part of the assignment. You can randomly assign people to groups, but you may want to form groups based on student strengths, professional skills, or other criteria.
- Provide clear expectations, such as what the project involves, level of support provided, anticipated participation level for all students, and how the assignment will be assessed.
- Clearly state what will be assessed in a group assignment (the final project, the group process, or both). Some things to consider:
  - What percentage will be based on the assessment of final product vs. process?
  - How much weight will you give to student-provided evaluation?
  - Team evaluations: members evaluate the dynamics of the team.
  - Peer evaluations: members evaluate the contributions of their teammates.
  - Self-evaluations: member documents and evaluates their own contributions to the team.
  - What percentage of the group project will be based on the group performance vs. individual contributions?
- Encourage groups to come up with a “group charter” to establish agreements and commitments: where work will be done, deadlines for intermediary steps, meetings, roles, etc. This can be integrated as part of the assignment ([article/example](#)).
- Foster productive group dynamics: Determine how large each group will be, establish rules for communication, and encourage peer to peer feedback within the group. Create a virtual as well as physical space for each group to collaborate.
- Check in with the groups and provide feedback regularly.
- As with in-class discussions, be mindful of power dynamics that may inhibit full participation by all students in a group. For example, if a more experienced professional takes over a project, or if it seems a student is being ignored or excluded because of a

perceived weakness or difference, reach out for guidance if you have questions about how best to intervene.

## Conveying Real World Relevance

- Through in-class activities, discussions, announcements, and emails, provide practical examples of how to use concepts in professional contexts.
- Create an interest in understanding the relevance of the subject to the everyday or professional world.
- Share current articles or other resources relevant to the topic for students.
- Encourage students to share relevant scholarship and other resources with each other.
- Encourage involvement in professional associations through resources or end-of-course wrap up to further students' professional development.
- Encourage students to connect their own work experience and context to course materials.
- Provide opportunities for students to share with each other about professional work or activities related to course topics and goals.

## Instructor Feedback

Instructor feedback is essential to student learning. Feedback from instructors must be **timely**, as it reinforces engagement with the students and helps build trust. Feedback should also be **relevant and focused** on what the student should reinforce and what the student can do to improve. The purpose of feedback is not just to evaluate a specific performance, but to treat that performance as an *occasion for further teaching and learning*.

## Providing Individual Student Feedback

Understanding that feedback is a teaching opportunity, tailor your comments to engage with each student's ideas. Provide timely, relevant, and focused feedback that makes concrete suggestions for improvement on future assignments or work beyond the class.

- Establish and communicate clear criteria used to evaluate assignments (through a rubric, checklist, or written instructions). Please enter a 0 for any missed assignments, so that students are aware of their current grade status in the course.
- Provide opportunities for drafting and receiving feedback on drafts from you and/or peers before major assignments are due (feedback does not need to be exhaustive, focus on the most important, conceptual aspects of the argument or analysis)
- Make yourself available via office hours (in-person or virtual) and email to clarify assignment instructions and objectives and answer questions.
- Respond thoroughly to assignments, with grades, in time for feedback to be applied to the next graded assignment or next stage of a larger project.

- Provide comments to each student that engages with that student's ideas, noting strengths as well as suggestions for continued improvement/learning. Be specific about what the student should work on (not just "be clearer" or "need more evidence," but "your solution needs to address implementation challenges," or "need to indicate where in the literature the theory is disproven").
- Focus feedback on the most relevant course concepts and skills (i.e. apply evaluative criteria consistently and fairly).
- Always remember the power of positive feedback. Affirm strengths in concrete terms (not just "good job" or "well done," but "persuasive analysis of the weaknesses in the predictive model" or "your slide deck was well-organized and visually appealing").

### Providing Collective Feedback

At regular intervals, provide a progress report on course proceedings, summarizing key course concepts and insights, as well as clearing up misconceptions or confusion and addressing questions that have come up. This group feedback helps guide students by highlighting what's most important, how students should approach assignments and projects, and how specific content is connected to course learning goals and outcomes. Strive to find ways to balance support and dissonance in groups.

- Summarize the weekly discussion and content in class, highlighting key questions, themes, or ideas. Follow up with a class email or Canvas announcement as needed.
- Preview the weekly content in an announcement or email to help students transition from one week to the next and prepare for the next class.
- Reflect on the learning that you're observing in the course at key intervals (and provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning as well).
- Provide the option of group office hours (especially if students are working on group projects). Group office hours can be used to provide clarification and guidance on upcoming assignments or help students provide peer feedback or address similar questions from multiple students.