

INTERVIEW 1 – ONE PAGE VERSION

Introductory Social Psychology writing course

Taught for the 3rd time by a 5th year Social Psychology PhD student

There's a common book and grading [rubric] across sections, and there's always 2 midterms and a final and 6 papers, but it's up to you what the questions on the midterm and the final and the papers are. [So] when you become a new TA [for this class] they'd give you a CD of previous things past TAs had done, previous paper prompts they'd used, all the way down to here are the lecture slides. It was unofficial, the TAs did it themselves. It was a wonderful resource, because why reinvent the wheel -- if there's stuff from someone who's taught this 7 times, I can just use that.

I started off with copying questions from the CD, and [the initial essay and exam questions I gave] were more about having my students define terms. I took a 10-week summer teaching class before I [first] taught, [but] I was a complete newcomer to teaching, so the CD of materials was very comforting. You're expected to be a subject matter expert and you're just a 2nd-year grad student!

[In the beginning] I'd use things from the people with good credentials, like did they win a teaching award, ok, I'll use their stuff. Sometimes I'd combine their materials, look at a couple slide decks and sort of synthesize my own slides from that, because from looking at that CD I could tell there were different teaching styles, that different people taught different ways. Midway through the first time I taught it I got more comfortable and started changing questions and writing my own questions, less about defining terms and more about moving into usage, how would you apply this [social psychology concept] in real situations.

[The nature of the midterm and paper questions I assigned] kept changing the second and third time I taught the class. It was an evolution. I would reuse [questions in subsequent years] if I thought they were good. It wasn't so much about making everything from scratch, it's not that on principle I had to create new things, because I think that once I have a good idea I should stop and just use that because my next ideas would not be as good. Sometimes I would update questions -- if something was really big in pop culture I'd write a question about that -- but not making [new questions] for the sake of making things.

[As I modified my curriculum more and more, it was comforting] knowing there were mentors and peers around, because it was a required course so there were a lot of sections and other people teaching the course. Even if you didn't actually ask [those people for help], they were there. That support was definitely helpful, that availability.

As I went on I started making activities and games for my students to do [instead of using materials from the TA CD] and actually this last time I taught it I didn't use slides at all. And I think one of the things that made that work was that I was clear up front. Here's what I'm going to do, and if you don't like that you can leave [and go to another section]. And I also addressed their learning goals: what do you want to get out of this class? I had my goals, but we had theirs too.

For my student evaluations [of the last, most heavily-modified curriculum] I asked them about specific learning goals, both mine and theirs, and I found I got much better feedback when I asked "how did we do in meeting this specific goal?" -- then listing the goal -- than when I asked them just about "what did you like about the class, what didn't you like about the class." I got probably the best student feedback I have ever seen.

Now it's not a big deal, and now I know that I've done it and could do it again. You can recover from your mistakes. And even if you screw something up, the next class is a blank slate.