



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range (434) 982-2815 trc-uva@virginia.edu <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/>

Spring 1998

Summer Session Strategies

by Michael Cholbi, Graduate Student Associate,
TRC (Philosophy)

Teaching in the Summer Session presents special challenges, even for seasoned instructors. Although the summer atmosphere on Grounds is more casual, the pacing of Summer Session courses and the special needs of summer students can make summer teaching a demanding assignment. Here are a few suggestions to keep the stress down and to ensure a pleasurable summer teaching experience.

First, keep in mind the sorts of students who are likely to enroll in summer courses. Some of them are hoping to catch up after having fallen behind in credit hours, while others need summer credits to graduate in August. Others will enroll in your classes intending to graduate early. U.Va.'s Summer Session also attracts many students from other state institutions.

This diversity of student backgrounds and goals means that the summer instructor must pay special attention to motivating her students. Some, such as those trying to graduate early, will be highly motivated, while others may resent having to take summer courses just to keep up pace with their peers. Charlottesville is fairly sleepy and slow-paced in the summer, so students have fewer distractions from their social lives, but at the same time they may lack motivation to study and to attend class due to the apparently more casual summer atmosphere.

The best way for instructors to address this situation is to take a professional and innovative approach. Summer courses are an ideal time for pedagogical experimentation; students are more susceptible to innovation in the summer, and the generally smaller class sizes are especially suited to such experimentation. Instructors also need to

maintain a steady pace that encourages students to attend and makes the Summer Session appear serious. Generally, students will follow your lead; if you act as though the summer is a normal semester with the same rigorous expectations, so will they.

The breakneck pace of summer teaching underscores the need to motivate students and maintain a consistent learning atmosphere. There is little time to correct your errors as a teacher, and little time for students to make up for not attending. Remember that in a typical summer course, each class meeting is the equivalent of about one week of semester learning, so every minute (literally) counts! Your syllabus will need to be thorough and well-planned but flexible. Because classes meet so often, you will probably need to review less frequently to refresh students on the material, but you will also need to install more "checkpoints" to assess how well your students are learning. After all, students who fall behind on day two may never recover well enough to understand the material presented on day three and after. You will also need to assign major projects and papers well ahead of time. The fast pace also puts a premium on the energy of the instructor, so eat well, get enough rest, and stay organized.

The keys to successful summer teaching are enthusiasm, planning, and awareness of your audience. Many instructors report that summer teaching is the source of many of their best relationships with students, relationships fostered by the dedication and enthusiasm of the instructor and catalyzed by the warmer interaction among instructors and students that summer sunshine seems to nourish.