**Troubleshooting III. Preparing the Presentation**

**I don’t know how to answer a student’s question**

It is easy to feel you have to know everything on the spot; this is simply not true. Pause, think, and if you don’t know the answer, tell them so. By pausing, you are showing students it is okay to stop and think before answering. You may also wish to say “I don’t know, but maybe we can figure it out together,” or ask if anyone in the class knows the answer. You can also tell students you will look into something; do it and get back to them. Students will respect your willingness to be open, honest, and learn something yourself, and your ability to follow through.

**My students seem unprepared for class**

Try to determine the appropriateness of addressing it in class. If you find that students are habitually unprepared because they simply lack motivation, you might consider giving a short quiz at the beginning of every class. Knowing they will be evaluated on their preparation can be a terrific motivator for students. Another excellent way to get students to think about the material is to give them short (1-5 minute) writing assignments in class. You can ask them to respond to a key question, problem, or quote in order to improve their preparation. Such an exercise can also serve as the introductory step to discuss larger or more important concepts or issues scheduled for the day.

Alternatively, a student may be unprepared because he or she is having personal or emotional difficulties that prevent him or her from keeping up with the rest of the class. If this is the case, it is more appropriate to speak with the student individually, by inviting him or her to your office hours to discuss progress in the class.

While some students may simply not be up to date on their reading, others may, in fact, have prepared all of the material for class, but with the wrong focus in mind. Providing guiding questions before they do the reading and come to discussion, especially for first-year students, will enable them to read more effectively. For more advanced students, you may want to ask them to write short response papers to questions you give them about the lecture, a major theme, or the text, and bring them in as the starting point for the next meeting.

**I cannot cover enough material in class**

Consider what might be contributing to the problem. Most often, Graduate Student Teachers tend to “overshoot the mark”; that is, they want to cover more issues than is reasonable in a given session. Most people feel that sections are typically the place for depth over breadth. Think about your agenda and stick to it. Are your questions at the right level for the students? You will never cover what you intend to discuss if your students are lagging behind in their understanding of basic material. If this is happening, you should discuss it with
the professor. It is possible he or she does not know that the students are getting lost and that you have to spend all of your time rehashing old material. Are some students asking many questions that do not seem pertinent to the rest of the class? Suggest that students come to office hours if they wish to pursue a topic in more depth. In all cases, always consult with a faculty member or more experienced graduate students on how to set priorities in class.

**I cannot prepare adequately for a class**

Sometimes life gets in the way of being a teacher. If that happens, the best thing to do is to be honest with your students. This does not mean you have to divulge to them any details of your life. You may simply apologize, do your best, and try not to let it happen again. If you are really stuck, ask the students what they would like to focus on in class time and follow their lead. Most students will respond favorably to an impromptu review or a question and answer session.

**Some of my co-teachers are not prepared for lab**

Particularly in large courses, lab Graduate Student Teachers teach as a team. When some Graduate Student Teachers are unprepared, students quickly detect that and go elsewhere for assistance. If a pattern evolves where some Graduate Student Teachers become “free riders” and students wait in line for the attention of an overworked few, make your concerns known to the head Graduate Student Teacher or professor. You do not have to be accusatory.

**My students’ educational backgrounds vary or seem weak**

While you do not want to lose weaker students in your class, it is important that your major goals be achieved and that stronger students are afforded the opportunity to move ahead. If you know students’ skills vary widely, it is useful to monitor your plans for each class to make sure the examples and levels of explanation vary widely as well. If a few of the students are clearly lagging behind the others, it is helpful to offer to review important material, either individually or as a mini-group discussion, during your office hours. You can also tell students to use more basic books as a refresher to get them up to speed in a course (e.g., an algebra text for an economics course). In more advanced classes, do not be afraid to suggest that students assume considerable responsibility for reviewing material they need but have yet to master.

**My students are not respectful of each other**

As the teacher, part of your responsibility is to facilitate respectful discussion among students. Make sure that students know there is room for many opinions in the class, so long as they are based on evidence, examples, or testimony. If students begin to insult each other or lack sensitivity in their discussion, it is up to you to address it gracefully. There are several ways you
can do so. You may wish to make a general statement to the class that emphasizes the need for balance in the classroom, such as “I hear we have some differences of opinion in the class. Let’s try to hear what everyone has to say, but it is important for us to respect each other as we talk about this.” To deflect tension between two students, you may want to open the discussion up to others in the class. Another approach is to “go meta” in the discussion; that is, talk about what is provocative about the material itself. This can help the students to take a step back from their personal reactions and re-orient themselves towards the course ideas. Sometimes, simply flagging specific behaviors and comments as inappropriate can limit negativity in the discussion. If the students cannot avoid incendiary remarks, it may be useful to break the group into a more structured debate format, and give them explicit rules about language and interruption.