

OSHER LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE

at George Mason University



A Teacher's Manual



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AUTHOR'S CONCEPT

For some time the program committee has been encouraging OLLI members to consider teaching a subject that interests them. While we know that our members come from very interesting backgrounds and have had special interests in particular subject areas, we don't know who those people are, nor can we then approach them personally to consider teaching their subject. Of course, coming from various backgrounds, these potential teachers may have had no experience whatsoever in the teaching field. We contend that this should not be a problem in the OLLI world.

Sometimes a potential teacher may be concerned about one aspect of teaching at OLLI that right off the bat convinces them they can't do it. Usually it is a question such as, "what if I am asked a question I can't answer?" That's an easy one; you say right out that you don't have the answer or you might ask if someone else in the class knows what it is, or, "I'll look it up and get back to you next week." And then you do just that.

In the interests of heading off these concerns, we have written this teaching manual. It doesn't purport to offer all answers to the questions a new teacher might ask, but is the accumulation of many ideas seasoned OLLI teachers have provided.

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All of this said, the proof of the manual's worthiness lies in how many reluctant teachers it brings into our wonderful faculty fold. We guarantee that's a happy place to be.

Debbie Halverson, June 1, 2009

TEACH? YES, YOU CAN!

INTRODUCTION

Good teaching begins with enthusiasm. What top-notch class that you have enjoyed hasn't had a teacher bursting to share his or her knowledge because the teacher thinks the topic is interesting and/or exciting?

OLLI finds its teachers everywhere: in the community, among George Mason University faculty, and among OLLI's own members. Whether their professions have brought them to share their favorite topics or a side interest has done the same, they teach because they derive satisfaction from talking about what they enjoy thinking about most.

Among OLLI's large membership there are many more who thrill to some specific interest and are generous enough to want to share, but who may never have taught before. No school or university teacher certifications are required to teach at OLLI. Our teachers only need a deep down desire to bring someone else to the appreciation of what it is that they find exciting in a field of interest. Whether that field is literature, music, art, economics, history, drama, science, technology, or something never offered before, that passion could well be contagious. Some of our longest-running courses have begun in just that way.

We'd like to provide you with advice that will spur you to approach the program committees with your own course ideas. Thus, a group of seasoned OLLI teachers put together this handbook to share with you what they have learned about teaching a class at OLLI.

PREPARATION

No teacher should go into the classroom with only a vague idea of what he or she wants to teach. Bearing in mind that our members will set aside 90 minutes a week to study this topic with you, they expect to know much more when they leave the classroom than when they entered. Be careful that you do not make your topic so broad that it lacks focus. Don't take on more than you can comfortably fit into the number of sessions available in the term.

DECISION MAKING

1. **“Prepare, prepare, prepare,”** says one of our seasoned teachers. Anticipate what you will need to know and do to help your students learn the topic. This may depend upon the topic, but think how you will run your class by considering the following:

- **Format:** Lecture or discussion class or a combination of both.
- **Research:** Add to your own knowledge of your topic; is enough information available?
- **Use of AV:** DVDs, audio, PowerPoint presentation, slides.
- **Handouts:** Outlines, maps, timelines, bibliographies.

- **Questions:** Plan for them within the time allowed, and decide whether you want them as you go or all at the end.
- **Guest presenters:** Experts in your field whom you think will enhance your topic coverage may be invited to one or more sessions.

2. Format

Number of students: Envision the ideal number of students who would register for your class. This may not be necessary for all courses, but those that lend themselves to discussion may need to be limited to a smaller number of students than the large informational classes. For advice on what to expect, you should consult with your program resource chairperson. Some classes are closed when the total reaches a maximum that the teacher feels is appropriate for the class to work best.

Lecture setup: If you will be using a lecture format, the classroom will be set up in the usual way; if discussion, you may want tables and chairs set in a special configuration. You will need to alert the staff of that so they can make the room ready in advance.

Lecture aids: If your basic presentation will be in the form of a lecture, consider whether you will use a script, talking point notes, or work from your AV material as it is projected on a screen. Again, the staff needs to know about any AV requirements you will need, as they are the only persons permitted to access the equipment. You should know what your major points are and work from those, but if you are dealing with a wealth of material, you should plan on having all of your facts at hand so that you don't skip any small detail that is important to your topic.

Research time and help: You may be teaching a topic about which you know a lot, but where there are gaps in your knowledge or details that you must research. Allow plenty of time to do this research. Some research sources may be unknown to you and how to access those, via the Internet or in person, may require new skills. We can make instruction in research skills available to whomever requests it.

PREPARING YOUR MATERIALS

1. **Notes:** Prepare your notes and/or script.

2. Materials

- **Duplicating:** Gather your slides and other AV materials; get help from the staff for duplicating materials well in advance of the date needed.
- **PowerPoint:** Prepare any PowerPoint presentation that you will be using to amplify your story. Again, if you are unfamiliar with how to create a PowerPoint presentation, instruction in that skill can be made available to you.

3. Rehearsal

- **Timing:** Once you have all your materials in hand, you will want to estimate how much time the presentation will take.

- **Questions:** If you have decided to take questions at the end, you have more control over the timing because you can plan on finishing ten minutes before the end of the session. Questions in the middle of the talk can often sidetrack the discussion and steal from your topic time. Expect to keep control of the questions and answers to suit your needs. (Those questioners who may inadvertently run away with your class time don't realize that other students want you to continue with your line of thought).
- **Rehearse ahead:** You may wish to rehearse your presentation if you have time, making sure that your notes are in order, that you are in sync with the AV and that everything moves smoothly. At this point, you may wish to make changes, additions or cuts that will improve the presentation.

4. Finishing early or running out of time: Once you have determined that you can fit your material into the 90 minute time frame, decide what you will do if you finish early; it happens. You may keep a few discussion questions on hand to fill this gap. Be prepared for the possibility that time will run out before you finish; OLLI folks can sit for 90 minutes only. They will get up after this time, no matter how interesting what you have to say. Consider whether you could cut as you speak or if your too-long presentation can be picked up the following week.

5. Guest Speakers: If you have arranged to include a speaker in your course, confirm the date, timing, and driving directions so that there are no misunderstandings. Be sure when you engage this speaker that the speaker has some idea of what to expect from the OLLI group.

6. Office Staff: If you will require AV connection help, or a special configuration of the furniture, let the office know well beforehand of that fact. If you will be using your own equipment, be sure it is compatible with the OLLI equipment. For example, if you use a Mac laptop, you will need a special cable to project your slides.

ARRIVAL

1. Come early: Plan to arrive at your classroom with plenty of time to set up before your class is to begin. This avoids last minute problems.

2. Check Setup: When you enter the classroom, be sure that it is set up to your specifications and that the AV equipment is as you wish. With the help of a staff person, you may want to do a dry run to be sure all is ready for you before the staffer leaves the room.

3. Relax and chat: Once you have laid out your materials at the lectern, getting acquainted with the early arrivals for class is a good idea. A relaxed teacher is a good teacher. If you think you may need water during your talk, there is water in each of the classrooms.

4. Use the mike: Note that the podium should have a mike earpiece available. While you may feel that your voice carries without using the mike, some of our members with hearing loss find this additional amplification helpful. Try it out before you begin.

5. Meet the Liaison: Your class will have been assigned a liaison who is available to accomplish certain duties, including making any announcements, introducing you on the first class day,

helping with lights if necessary, or handing out printed materials that you have brought to the class to support your topic. The liaison will do his or her thing before turning the class over to you.

PRESENTATION

1. Handouts: If you have prepared an outline of the lecture, reference it at the start and make sure everyone has a copy. They can then follow along and know where you are within the framework of the class topic. Let them know at what point you will take questions, whether during the talk or only at the end.

2. Beginning: Some instructors like starting with an amusing anecdote, a joke, or whatever will relax the group before settling down for the serious business at hand. Some topics may lend themselves to humor as you go along and you should remember that at OLLI, members are learning for the joy of learning. Be sure to keep the joy in there.

3. Move: It helps to keep audience attention by movement on your part; within your script there may be times when you can step away from the lectern and cross to another side of the room for off-hand remarks. You can step into the group area to make a point or to answer a question from someone in a back row.

4. Vary your voice, especially if you will be reading from a script. As you read, emphasize the important points; slow down, change the pace, or laugh at your own words if that is appropriate. Think of this as a performance, even though the topic may be very straightforward.

5. Questions: If you have opted to take questions during your talk, and you should tell your group at the outset of that fact, always repeat the question for the others to hear before you answer it.

6. Eye contact: As you speak, make eye contact with one or another in the class, moving your attention from people in the front to those in the back or on either side. Don't be concerned or put off if someone's eyes are closed; they may be listening or even have nodded off; that's common enough for seniors. It's not likely they are bored.

7. Pitching your voice: Even if you are using a mike, be aware that you should keep your voice constant. Speakers sometimes tend to drop their voices at the end of sentences and their listeners miss the total thought conveyed.

8. Mutual respect: The teacher should not talk down to the students, although at times you may be unsure about their level of understanding of the subject or a term, and may have to ask if every one knows what a _____ is before you use that term. On the same point, you should remember that OLLI students want the teacher to succeed. They will be very understanding if you can't answer a question, if your notes get muddled, or if something unexpected occurs. Complicated concepts or arguments should be presented as simply as possible. Offer people the opportunity for information clarification and/or ask a follow-up question of the group to see if they understood. Anticipate such questions by having available charts and maps, etc. Use

anecdotes to illustrate your point. Here is where good discussion works; break away from the lecture for the flexibility of give and take. Such activity can bring stale talk alive and give knowledgeable students the opportunity to shine.

If there are still questions hanging without clear answers, offer to research during the ensuing week and be sure that you return with answers to discuss first thing.

9. Conclusions: Keep your eye on the clock so that you have a few moments to tie up your points at the end and offer some enticing clues about what they can expect in the next session.

DISCUSSIONS

Lest there be any question about the importance of discussion in a classroom, educators would list the following reasons:

- To recall information
- To determine comprehension
- To encourage analysis
- To enable one to apply what one has learned
- To further evaluation of the materials
- To synthesize thinking on the topic

PREPLANNED DISCUSSIONS

There's no argument whether OLLI members enjoy diving into a discussion. However, they also respect the time and effort instructors spend preparing lectures and they defer to the instructor's words as to when to participate, ask questions, and offer comment. Therefore, the instructor must make clear at what point class involvement is welcomed.

OLLI members in a class may have particular knowledge about the topic. In fact some may know more about one or another aspect of that topic than does the instructor. (A knowledgeable student would be wise not to reveal that fact, but as a courtesy to put a finger to the lips and listen quietly. A comment or two would be acceptable; however, one's classmates signed up for the class given by the teacher standing in front of it.)

Discussion typically follows questions, either within the lecture format, at the end to clarify material presented during the lecture portion, or independent of both. An example of the latter is a book club in which readers talk about what they have read. If that is the case, begin with an open-ended question, one that may have more than one answer, or leads to other questions. While single answers to questions may be useful for clarification, for the most part they dead-end at the answer.

An open-ended question calls for thoughtful consideration on the part of the group. Allowing time between the questions asked and expected responses permits thinkers to digest the issue and decide on what to say. Expecting a quick answer, the instructor may conclude that no one in the group has a reply, understands the question, or chooses to speak up. In fact, the group members may each be framing a response in their own minds before uttering a word. Prepare your group in advance by telling them they'll have plenty of time to consider their answers.

Sometimes a full-blown discussion of open-ended questions follows close-ended questions that remind students of the facts upon which the discussion will be based. Trying to get all participants on the same page before analysis or evaluation avoids communication issues as the result of not all knowing details of the topic to be discussed. Another way to avoid that problem would be for the teacher to give a quick run-down of the facts before putting the question.

In situations where a discussion period seems stalled with no responses, you can be prepared as follows:

- You may have offered a handout at the beginning of class that lists questions you'll be asking. This will focus students' thought before the appointed question time. Remember, however, that if you become impatient for an answer, you may break your students' frame of thought and deprive the group of a unique opinion or point of view.
- Certainly silence could indicate that no one has an answer or quite understood what the instructor was going for in the discussion. This may require rephrasing the question, breaking it down into more manageable components or narrower questions with logical progress of each. The discussion leader then actually leads into a full-blown spontaneous discussion.

Divisive Statement: Not all discussion arises from questions; a controversial quotation or a stated opinion on a topic could result in a spirited discussion as in a political forum, or religious or social situation.

- Sometimes in a situation like this, the leader or a member of the group may take the "devils advocate" position in order to widen the discussion or cause a more in-depth consideration of the topic. He/she may announce that is the intention in advance or remain silent about his/her personal belief.
- The leader in this sort of altercation should be careful to maintain control of the discussion as emotions can lead to lack of order, too many persons speaking, and, sometimes, chaos.
- Let it be known that not all questions have conclusions or problems have solutions based on one or two discussions, or ever. Suffice it that these matters were aired and that maybe just one aspect of the issue has been clarified. It's likely each participant will walk away with a totally different sense of what they learned during the session.

Helpful to have on hand at a pre-planned discussion:

- Handout with questions, statements to be considered in the discussion.
- Supplied paper, pencils, reference books, maps, charts, photos and/or diagrams.
- Syllabus: purpose of discussion, outline of topical questions.

NOTE: All instructors should be aware of, and use, the "DocStore" component of the OLLI Website to cut down on printing costs.

APPROACH OF DISCUSSION LEADER

General procedures:

- Set up room in an arrangement that encourages interaction, with chairs and tables and those seated facing one another as much as possible. In some circumstances ask someone to take notes if the topic should include information that may be useful at a later time.
- Set up rules of the discussion if they are not already known.
- Acknowledge the speaker (unless it's a very small group.)
- Depending upon acoustics, repeat either a question or response, or both, so that all may hear it.
- Determine when to close the discussion of one topic and move on.
- Encourage students to raise new questions that come from the previous discussion. The discussion should "bloom" as fresh thinking takes in new ideas offered.

Homework Assignments: Expect participants to come prepared having read material under discussion, but do not be discouraged if all have not. OLLI advertises that we don't do homework and we are non-judgmental of those who come unprepared. Usually enough will do it to get the talk going; unprepared students may participate in a general way once they get the gist of the discussion.

Be prepared to read from the document enough that the group could focus on it on the spot. Alternatively, the leader may have everyone turn to the material and someone can read from it. Then all can discuss.

"Know-it-alls" should be treated with respect but not permitted to ramble on or take over. The leader might say, "Let's have someone else's opinion"; "good point"; "let's move on"; "is there another comment?"; "Let me give that some thought and we can take this up in greater depth after the class."

Sometimes the opposite occurs and you will note that one or more class members do not join in the discussion. If the catalog specified that this would be a discussion class, each member should feel some obligation to get involved. Sometimes that member is only interested in the thoughts of others or is intimidated by the apparent expertise of other classmates and feels ill at ease speaking up. You can let it go or you might try simplifying the questions. Here is where a simple, closed-ended question may elicit an answer that will boost the courage of the weak respondent. (Hearing his own voice could be therapeutic for the shy member.) It may be just what is needed to provide confidence for a more complicated question. It's important that the leader somehow makes the answer work; here is where a negative reaction would be detrimental to the class member.

Invite responses from the group:

- Use plurals: What are some of your insights? What do you want to know?
- Express tentativeness: possibilities rather than certainties. For instance, ask "How might you address the problem?"

- Embed positive pre-suppositions: “What are some of the benefits you will derive from engaging in this activity?”
- Encourage inquisitiveness: Use words such as: “*explore*”; “*observe*”; “*enthusiasm*”; “*creativity*”; *How come? What if? Tell me more? Where else can I get that information? This reminds me of... I enjoy...*”

With exceptions noted above, limit these types of questions:

- Verification questions: Questions where teacher and student already know the answers.
- Closed ended yes or no answers.
- Rhetorical questions: no answer expected.
- Defensive questions: leading to defensive responses.
- Agreement questions: phrased to encourage students to agree with the questioner.

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

During the class you can ask a student if he understood a particular point and get some feedback without putting that person on the spot. Showing your students that you are open to discussion about the class will encourage comments.

Another way to tell if the class is going well will be obvious the next week if all students return. However, this is not always a reliable measure because sometimes one or another factor may keep many away for a particular session. Some will warn you that they won't attend; keep a mental or specific note in that case.

Soon after each class you will want to evaluate what has just occurred. Was the purpose of the discussion accomplished or was there at least movement toward your goal? You will be the best judge of that, but your students may have already spoken to you about how well it went; some may want to talk about certain points at the end of class. There may be a buzz when they are leaving the room and you yourself will have a sense that all went well.

Upon conclusion of the course, OLLI has an evaluation questionnaire that you have the option of using or you may design your own. Consider sending an email thanking the group, summarizing the discussion and conclusions, if any. And then ask for opinions on how well it went or how to make it better next time.