
INSPIRED
CONVERSATIONS

THE
PRINCETON
PRECEPT

NOTE: This booklet is sprinkled with quotations from preceptors and students—many anonymous and some recognizable. Although the rhetoric of some of the older pieces of advice is rather dated, their wisdom remains undiminished. These remarks are meant to provide you with a variety of approaches, pedagogical philosophies, and concrete ideas. They are intended, not as the final and incontrovertible word on the precept, but as a set of thoughtful and occasionally provocative remarks to stimulate your thinking.

The precept is one of the defining features of a Princeton education. While much has changed in undergraduate education over the century since Woodrow Wilson first introduced the preceptorial system, the basic principles have proven to be remarkably durable. Put simply, precepts afford students the opportunity for active engagement in their own learning. Small groups of students (these days, the average size is 12) meet weekly under the guidance of a preceptor to discuss assigned readings as well as ideas and questions stimulated by course lectures. At their best, precepts enable students to develop and test their own thinking through vigorous intellectual interchange with thoughtful, knowledgeable peers.

At various times over the last century, with the inevitable and growing distance between the Wilsonian ideal and present realities, faculty and students alike have called for the reinvigoration of the preceptorial system. This guide stems from the most recent of these periodic reconsiderations—the Undergraduate Student Government’s Precept Reform Initiative (2002). The USG’s goal was to revitalize the preceptorial system so that “precepts once again will consistently provide a forum for vigorous exchange of ideas and lead towards deep understanding.” This guide borrows freely from several earlier documents—some published, some not—especially those written in 1953 and 1983.*

Inspired Conversations is the product of a collaborative effort in the academic year 2002-03 among the members of the Faculty Committee on the Course of Study, the staff of the Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Center for Teaching and Learning, and the leaders of the USG Precept Reform Initiative. Although many individuals helped to shape it, six people deserve the lion’s share of the credit for the hard work of shepherding the project from initial conception to final execution. They are Georgia Nugent, Dean of the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning (now President of Kenyon College), Sara Curran, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Karen Malatesta, Senior Lecturer in Molecular Biology, Amy Saltzman ’05, chair of the USG Academics Committee, Joshua Anderson ’04, chair of the USG Precept Reform Initiative, and Hank Dobin, Associate Dean of the College.

Inspired Conversations addresses multiple audiences—undergraduates, preceptors, and course heads—with the intention of making all parties to precepts aware of their own as well as others’ expectations, roles, and responsibilities for the success of the venture. While there is no single formula for a successful precept, the ideas and examples contained in this guide should provide important assistance to students and preceptors in making their precepts engaging and intellectually satisfying.

Nancy Weiss Malkiel
Dean of the College
September 2003

* *Points for Preceptors*, Jeremiah S. Finch, Dean of the College, September 1953

Points for Preceptors, J. Merrill Knapp, Dean of the College, September 1962

A Guide for Preceptors, J. Joseph Burns, Special Assistant to the Dean of the College, November 1983 (unpublished draft)

WHAT IS A PRECEPT?

Precepts are at the heart of Princeton's academic experience, and a precept can make or break a course. For the most part, my precepts have introduced an opportunity to hear different views of my fellow students, challenge my opinions, solidify my own beliefs, and come to a more in-depth understanding.
-- Student

I am continually awed at my classmates' ability to interpret reading or concepts. I love the chance to discuss deep issues with other really intelligent people, and I love that the precept program exposes me to the wide range of views and strengths of students here. -- Student

Precept feels to me like my one chance during the week to make an intellectual contribution to the material we're studying. If precept doesn't go well, it feels like the week was academically disappointing. -- Student

Woodrow Wilson introduced the precept at Princeton in 1905, modeling it loosely on tutorials of Oxford and Cambridge. His goal was to give students “first-hand command of the leading ideas, principles, and processes of the subjects which they are studying.”

Although the precept has evolved over time, Wilson's focus on the student remains intact. The key distinguishing feature of the precept is that it is student-centered, rather than teacher-centered. As a component of a larger lecture course, the precept is a unique opportunity for students to learn from each other through discussion and debate. Based on assigned reading and facilitated by questions posed by the preceptor, the precept discussion is the forum in which students share their insights, challenge each other's ideas, apply broader concepts or skills to the analysis of particular problems or issues, clarify their thinking, and argue through controversial topics. In all these aspects, the precept is different from the lecture and other course components such as “drills” in

language courses or “classes” in economics or the natural sciences, in which the instructor typically prepares and manages either the review of material or the collective working-through of problems.

A 1956 article in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* characterized the precept experience eloquently as “a way of teaching and a way of learning, which rests on the direct, intimate contact of individual minds in the pursuit of sharpened understanding.” That collaborative quest for clearer and deeper knowledge is at the heart of the preceptorial system.

The ideas and suggestions that follow are intended to provide students and preceptors with a variety of tools to enhance learning and foster an inclusive and supportive environment for the expression and development of ideas. More material is also available at the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning Web site:

web.princeton.edu/sites/mcgraw/

The chief purpose of the Method is to induce the student to work for himself, with no idea of 'reciting' on his work, but...his understanding of the reading he has done will be discussed and clarified... -- Woodrow Wilson

The difference between classes and precepts might also be addressed in terms of closure. The class exists to answer questions raised in lectures and readings...Precepts, on the other hand, are much more open-ended. -- Committee on the Course of Study Report, 1981

CREATING A SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

The precepts that work best are those where the instructor takes time to introduce people, where they get to know one another; the social dimension is important for learning.
--Student

I had a better experience in those precepts where the preceptor—either by using name tags or calling on people by name—made a targeted effort to ensure that we knew each other's names.
-- Student

At its best, the precept constructs a scholarly community. The first day of precept is the initial opportunity to create that term's community of scholars. This community should take responsibility for the course material, provide a supportive learning environment, and meet the learning goals of the students and preceptor. Learning about each other and becoming comfortable with one another is crucial for creating a climate conducive to taking risks with ideas and respectfully engaging in critical discourse.

On the first day of precept, it is important to connect with each other on a human level, not only in the roles of student or preceptor.

Ask students to give brief self-introductions. The effort students and preceptors put into learning each others' names or finding out about each member's background and interests yields collegiality and mutual respect in the classroom. Preceptors will also want to introduce themselves, perhaps sharing with students their interests and enthusiasm for the course and subject matter as well as their teaching style.

Suggestions for preceptors:

- Distribute name tags or table tents.
- Create a seating chart based on where students usually sit in class, or take notes about students' appearances to jog your memory ("curly hair and glasses").
- Ask students to share information about their backgrounds and intellectual interests.
- Ask each student to explain why or how he/she decided to take the course.
- Spend a few minutes of the first precept playing name games that include contributing interesting facts about each other. Or split students into pairs and have them interview each other. Each pair can then introduce each other. Be creative!
- Share with students your background and interests: Where do you come from? Why are you a preceptor for the course? What led to your initial interest in this subject area? What do you expect to get out of the term?

Suggestions for students in advance of the first precept:

- Look through the syllabus carefully and think about what you want to learn by the end of the term.
- Are there particular topics or readings that interest you?
- Are there related subjects, readings, or ideas you would like to see included?
- Is there anything on the syllabus that puzzles you?
- Be ready to answer the question: Why are you taking this course?

Suggestions for course heads:

- In your opening lectures, stress the importance of the precept sessions in your course and your expectations for the rewarding intellectual work that will take place in the precepts.

On the first day of class, I bring in 3x5 cards and distribute them. I ask students for different kinds of information about themselves—what's their major, their hometown, their favorite film... Sometimes I ask them to draw a picture of themselves. -- Preceptor

It doesn't matter whether the preceptor is a professor, a grad student, or someone else. What I like in a preceptor is someone who has a passion for the material, likes to teach, and is willing to help the student. If [the preceptor] is excited about the material, the students will be. -- Student

If the students have the notion that you think the precepts are particularly important and that you think their individual performance is particularly important, I think they behave rather differently. -- Preceptor

The only necessary condition is that the instructor shall be friendly and good tempered throughout, and that he believe in the importance of the subject under discussion and respect the capacity of his students to understand and profit by it. -- Preceptor

Above all, one must give students the sense that it is up to them... that a good precept can be a superb experience (even for the preceptor) and that they will receive every encouragement and support if they are willing to think hard about the vital issues of human experience that we are going to address.
-- Preceptor

CLARIFYING LEARNING EXPECTATIONS

The point of a precept...is to learn to think hard and to talk about what you have thought about; the preceptor's task is to show how interesting thinking can be. -- Preceptor

Precepts tend to be much more effective and successful when the instructor in charge of the course pays a good deal of attention to the precept portions of the course. Excessive regimentation and uniformity in organizing precepts in a large course can undoubtedly be deadening and harmful; on the other hand, I have found from experience that excessive laissez-faire (under which no preceptor knows what another preceptor is actually doing) easily leads to bewildering chaos and confusion. -- Preceptor

Preceptors often assume that students know what is expected of them in class. Similarly, they may assume that they know what the students expect out of a course. However, neither of these assumptions may be true. Taking the time early in the semester to articulate explicitly the expectations for the precept helps to build a learning community. Students need to understand that the precept is an environment where all will be respected, where challenging ideas intellectually is crucial but challenging individuals personally is inappropriate, and where all participants—including the preceptor—are engaged in the joint enterprise of learning from one another.

Suggestions for preceptors:

- Clearly delineate mutual standards and goals for precepts. The group may wish to put these in writing for reference throughout the term, as a type of “learning contract.”
- Provide students with a written document laying out your expectations as a preceptor,

which may include information on preparation, participation, and other pedagogical considerations. Ask them to respond to your list with a similar list of their own.

- Openly discuss with students reasonable expectations for preparation and participation.
- Take time for informal or more formal opportunities for mid-term feedback from your students.

Suggestions for students:

- Make a list of your learning goals for the precept. These might include making an oral presentation, speaking up at least once in every precept, or listening carefully to what a previous speaker has said and integrating his/her ideas with yours to create a novel view to contribute to that day's precept.
- List the characteristics of an excellent precept and, over the term, re-evaluate the precept based on your criteria, including a self-evaluation of the ways in which you have contributed to the quality of the precept.

- In preparation for a mid-term evaluation, think of one or more constructive suggestions for improving the precept.

Suggestions for course heads:

- In your opening lectures, articulate your pedagogical goals for the precepts. Explain how the precepts, and any additional assigned reading for the precepts, will complement the lectures.
- Provide similar information about the precepts on your course syllabus and on the course Web site.
- Before the first day of class, hold an orientation meeting for your preceptors to discuss the major themes and goals of the course. Explain your objectives for the readings, the written assignments, and the precept discussions.

In the first precept, I ask students to write down their expectations for this class, and we discuss them. During the course, we revisit these goals informally or formally—with mid-term and end-of-term evaluations. We discuss whether expectations are being met (or exceeded) and whether they are changing as we go along. -- Preceptor

PREPARING FOR PRECEPT

I'm never quite sure why a particular precept seems to be smashing while another falls flat. My best precept ever was one which I opened by asking, "Was Machiavelli right?" and then sat back and listened for 50 minutes as the class conducted a superb discussion. I've asked the question again, but the magic has never returned. -- Preceptor

It's not enough to think of a great opening question. You have to ask yourself: "And then what will happen next?" -- Preceptor

I send out an e-mail each week to help students prepare. The message identifies the readings and provides a little context so they understand why they are looking at the particular texts for that week. More importantly, I provide them with a few questions to consider while reading the texts that bring out the key themes and issues that will be discussed in class. -- Preceptor

It is also important for the preceptor to have a good balance of preparedness and spontaneity; a preceptor should have some material prepared to cover in precept, but should also leave plenty of room for deviation from his or her agenda. -- Student

No formula exists for preparing for a successful precept. What works spectacularly one day with one group of students may flop the next.

Clearly, however, preparation means more than simply reading the material in advance and walking into the classroom. For preceptors, knowing the material well is only a first step. You should actively plan, as much as possible, the process of discussion. Think through the learning goals for the precept session and the ways in which you might help lead discussion toward those goals.

Prepare alternative opening questions and follow-up questions; imagine the alternative routes that the conversation may take; be ready to both follow and guide as the conversation takes off.

Enlist your students as collaborators by asking them to think of key questions or issues to discuss in advance of the pre-

cept. Using e-mail or Blackboard, have students share their ideas with each other and with you.

For students, effective preparation means much more than just doing the reading, closing the book, and forgetting about the material until time for precept.

Suggestions for preceptors:

- Send out an e-mail several days before precept providing students with questions to consider while reading the week's texts.
- If assigning additional reading for the precept discussion, select texts of manageable length and ones that are likely to provoke lively debate.
- Ask students to compose a brief written response to the assigned reading.
- Make use of the online discussion board available on Blackboard. Ask students to post responses to reading or questions a day or two prior to class.

- Use the course lectures as a springboard for discussion. Ask students to identify points in the lectures that puzzled them or with which they took issue; ask them to think of key ideas they would have included or emphasized.

Suggestions for students:

- Identify key themes or ideas in the reading.
- Think through your position, and how to defend it, on the contested or provocative issues in the reading or lectures.
- Be ready to pose questions about things in the reading or lectures that were unclear or undeveloped.
- Consider how a current week's readings relate to readings from the preceding weeks. Write down your reasoning and prepare to present your observations about the relationship.
- As part of your course notes for the term, keep a journal of interesting ideas of your own and your fellow students that emerge from precept discussion. Often, such a journal, in conjunc-

tion with your lecture notes, can lead you to interesting paper topics.

Suggestions for course heads:

- Take advantage of the McGraw Center's preceptor mentoring program to hold weekly meetings with your preceptors over lunch. Those meetings should focus on the upcoming week's readings and precept discussion, but can also deal with larger pedagogical issues such as techniques for leading discussion, conducting conferences, and grading. Invite the more experienced preceptors to share successful ideas and tips and encourage everyone to discuss teaching challenges and to seek advice from each other.
- Invite a staff member of the McGraw Center to attend one of your weekly meetings. The McGraw staff are happy to facilitate discussion or make a brief presentation on topics you would find helpful.

The preceptor should have a set of questions for the class discussion, but also be willing to stray from that path if the class has some other relevant topic they would like to discuss. The preceptor should be knowledgeable enough so that he or she can guide that discussion. -- Student

Sometimes I have students prepare discussion questions or mark a passage they'd particularly like to analyze (one that's problematic, interesting, particularly important, etc.). -- Preceptor

Students must have made some attempt to process the material before coming to class; they cannot simply read it and stick their books in their backpacks. -- Student

Prepare! Do the reading and be ready to actually think. The more active students are prepared to be, the better precept will be. -- Preceptor

Viviana Zelizer, The Lloyd Cotsen '50 Professor of Sociology -- Precepts help students learn what and why they are learning, but also help teachers learn what they are actually teaching.

Amy Gutmann, Provost and Laurance S. Rockefeller University Professor of Politics and the University Center for Human Values -- Forewarn your students that everyone in this course—yes, everyone—is expected to be prepared (by doing the reading ahead of time) and to participate in the discussion. Begin with a thought-provoking question, and stay on your toes by refereeing the responses and engaging every student. Never (no, not even hardly ever) lecture. Stimulate students to think out loud and therefore also to become more intelligently articulate by asking leading questions: What makes you think this? Who has a different argument? How would you adjudicate this disagreement? The hour flies by, and everyone is motivated by the lively engagement to think even harder than before.

Joshua Katz, Assistant Professor of Classics -- Precepts are above all a time for students to take the material that is presented to them and “play” with it. I love sitting back and listening to undergraduates turn my and others’ words inside out and upside down as they try to figure out what is really going on. In the ideal precept, the hour passes in a playful and productive flash of collective energy, and I often find myself opening the next lecture by calling the attention of the whole class to something that my students in their exhilaration have led me to understand more clearly.

John Fleming, Louis W. Fairchild '24 Professor of English and Comparative Literature -- Princeton undergraduates are very good, yet they naturally do their best work in response to circumstances and structures that invite and foster both discipline and creative initiative. A Princeton preceptorial of carefully prepared students led by a knowledgeable and flexibly minded preceptor not infrequently achieves something quite precious and rich.

Miguel Centeno, Professor of Sociology -- The best precepts are those where

I have to say progressively less over the hour, where I stop calling on people since the conversation just flows, and where the reading provokes an argument on interpretation, validity, and relevance. In short, the best precepts are when I become pretty much superfluous. I have learned so much from listening in on these conversations and can no longer imagine how I would ever teach even the largest lecture course without my weekly contact with a small group of students.

The best one I can remember was the 50-minute debate on whether Achilles would make a good soldier. Students brought in issues of gender, personality, discipline, organization, and motivation in a complex web. The best part was that by the end, no one cared about the answer; we were having too much fun with the questions!

Caryl Emerson, A. Watson Armour, III, University Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures --

Four rules for good precepting in the “literary humanities”:

1. It’s too late to lecture. You must work with what students now understand and care about.
 2. Never let your voice be the first one to drone on at the beginning of the class. Rather, pre-arrange each week for one of them to open the precept with a question or a series of observations (five minutes max).
 3. LISTEN. Most literature isn’t written for “professionals” who know the works by heart, but for people who read it once. That’s your students. In certain ways their responses will be the freshest and best.
 4. Don’t let a small number of people take over. Interrupt and open up the discussion if it looks like more than half the class is dozing off or not participating. But let your interruption be as brief and “interrogative” as possible; don’t drone on.
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*Most fundamentally...the
preceptor is a catalyst.
-- Preceptor*

*The preceptor's job...is
to lead a group of
students on to a
personal appropriation
of knowledge. This
takes place in those
rare moments of group
discussion when the
personal or social
relevance of the subject
'comes alive.'
-- Preceptor*

ENGAGING PARTICIPANTS

Many see the ideal precept as an energetic discussion in which all or most students participate and are encouraged to formulate and critique arguments in a rigorous way. There are innumerable ways to structure a dynamic discussion, to draw in well-prepared students, and to ignite exciting and productive conversation.

The preceptor must be prepared to set the stage by assigning provocative readings and posing hard questions, and then step back. Perhaps the key to good precept participation, for both the preceptor and students, is attentive listening. Rather than just making sure to inject a pre-prepared observation, no matter how astute, at some point in the discussion, really listen to each other, follow the flow of argument, and contribute to it. Nothing is more rewarding than when the conversation builds toward new and exciting ideas through the collective contributions of the participants.

The best precept discussions often arrive at unpredictable destinations by circuitous routes. In fact, the outcome of good precept conversation should be, by nature, unpredictable. Unlike lectures that typically strive for neat summations and conclusions, the best precepts instead stake out positions, clarify ideas, sharpen points of view, introduce important evidence—but don't necessarily arrive at the "answer." Good precepts are often structured around well-chosen readings that can provoke debates among several defensible and intelligent positions. A good precept seeks deepened mutual understanding and an appreciation for the complexity of the material, not necessarily consensus or closure.

Students need to prepare for precept with the same flexibility—not so much with a scripted smart remark to earn a participation check-mark, but rather with a thoughtful set of ideas and questions that can contribute to the evolving discussion.

Critical to good precept participation is the art of attentive listening. Make sure you understand the points made by your fellow students before you respond, and ask for clarification or examples if appropriate. Engage your classmates directly; don't funnel all communication through the preceptor. Don't be reluctant to disagree, but be respectful. Challenge ideas, not people.

It is important to have a discussion early in the term about the expectations and standards for valuable class participation. For example, a preceptor might encourage students to participate in certain ways: to introduce textual or factual evidence, to respond thoughtfully to the argument of a peer, to introduce relevant additional information, or to move from concrete evidence to more abstract conclusions.

Suggestions for preceptors:

- Ask students to write extemporaneously on a topic or question for a few minutes at the beginning of precept, and allow students to read from their responses during precept.
- Choose an example—such as a legal case or a life experience—to enhance understanding and provoke different opinions.
- Split students into small groups and allow them to discuss various aspects of the precept material. The groups might reconvene as a whole class to share ideas and realizations.
- Ask, or require, students to participate in e-mail discussions during the week between precept meetings. You can assign one student each week both to launch the e-mail exchange with a few questions and to moderate and encourage the discussion. You, or the weekly moderator, can then select the most interesting themes, ideas, or questions for further consideration during the next precept meeting.

*It is a cardinal
principle of a
good preceptorial
that the expression
of opinion, and
of difference
of opinions is
invaluable;
expressing your
own ideas, and
defending them
against conflicting
ideas are the best
ways to be sure
that you have any
idea at all. --
Donald Stauffer,
Professor of
English, 1939*

My own ideal picture of a preceptor is of one who takes an active guiding part, but who refuses to steer all the way. -- Robert F. Goheen, Assistant Professor of Classics, 1955

There should be more emphasis on thinking and not on regurgitation of what we read. In general, I prefer a push toward debate and argument, and away from didacticism and summary. -- Student

Precepts have been the most valuable element of my Princeton experience. Although lectures are interesting, I learn most from open discussion when ideas are bounced among students and the preceptor. The open forum is more conducive to critical thought. -- Student

The main points in a discussion may be summarized for clarity without achieving any predetermined 'solution.' -- Preceptor

- Structure discussion as a debate on an issue; require every student to take a stand.
- Ask each student to choose and share one vignette, example, or concept from the reading that most struck him or her.
- Resist the temptation to interject your ideas or reactions. A good rule of thumb is that the preceptor should not speak more than the most active student in the class.
- Don't be hesitant to leave discussion only partly resolved.
- Encourage one-on-one or smaller group conferences with students periodically throughout the semester during office hours. This will allow you to hear insights from quieter voices.

Suggestions for students:

- Follow the discussion carefully and make contributions that will help develop, clarify, or redirect the collective work of the group. Seek connections with observa-

tions or questions you may have prepared in advance; resist making a comment that digresses or halts the conversation.

- Ask "why" a classmate said something if the remark doesn't appear to advance the discussion, but be prepared to answer the same question when you make a contribution.
- State your ideas and opinions boldly but always respectfully.

Suggestions for course heads:

- Design your course Web site in Blackboard to facilitate communication between you, the preceptors, and their students and among students themselves between class meetings.

The most successful preceptorial conference is one in which both students and preceptor have the attitude that a serious discussion may lead to a modification of their views.

-- Preceptor

The precept is particularly vulnerable to failures in listening.

-- Preceptor

BROADENING AND DEEPENING THE DISCUSSION

While I want students to have read the materials, I want even more for them to be motivated to want to support their own arguments and to be more convincing by having their hands on information that will be of use for them to come to grips with the material and the issues.

-- Preceptor

Over the term, one key to a successful precept is that discussion both grows to encompass more material and makes connections with other disciplines, as well as focuses more profoundly on understanding the key ideas. Precepts should not become static, repetitive, or complacent, but must continue both to broaden and deepen the collective intellectual work of the class. Material from earlier precepts can serve as the foundation for extended discussion of more recent material; conclusions can be re-evaluated in light of new information. Alternatively, students can be asked to make new linkages with other fields of knowledge, to examine material with different disciplinary biases, to connect course material to events or controversies of the day. Just as an individual precept session should have some learning goals, so should the extended precept discussion over the full term—in conjunction with the lectures and readings of the course.

Over the term, precepts should nurture the higher-order intellectual skills that make for sophisticated critical thinking: the skills of summary, analysis, application, synthesis, and judgment. Simply put, the precept is where students really learn to think, as Robert F. Goheen, Assistant Professor of Classics and later President of the University, articulated in 1955: “The objective of the preceptorial process...is to make men [and women] who will be intelligently responsible for their knowledge and responsibly intelligent in their lives.”

Suggestions for preceptors:

- Learn to what department students belong, and turn to them as “authorities-in-the-making” from those disciplines to add a new point of view or method of analysis to the discussion.

- Assign a range of readings that requires students to make connections between seemingly disparate ideas, facts, and approaches. Pose questions in advance that ask students to synthesize new material.
- Help students to move beyond basic comprehension and summary by pressing them to defend and clarify their remarks.
- Articulate your larger learning objectives for the precept, and explain how the precept will both integrate with and complement the goals of the course lectures.

Suggestions for students:

- When preparing for class, push yourself beyond basic comprehension to ask questions such as “Why is this important?” or “Are these conclusions justified?”
- Try to find both continuities and ruptures with concepts and material you learned

earlier in the course or in other courses you’ve taken.

- Try thinking of the material from the standpoint of another discipline, for example: “How would a sociologist make sense of this historical material?”
- Don’t be hesitant to raise fundamental questions about the value or relevance of the material during precept.

Suggestions for course heads:

- As the term progresses, take time during lecture to discuss ways in which you hope that students’ command of the material is developing through the readings and precept discussion.
- Select reading assignments that will stretch your students’ sense of the scope, significance, and complexity of the course material.

Never excuse students for poor preparation. If they are not prepared, they should not come to precept. Precepts depend upon and therefore demand student preparation; make sure your students understand that.

-- Preceptor

Discrimination between “bull” and serious mindwork is certainly an essential task for the preceptor.

-- Robert F. Goheen, Assistant Professor of Classics, 1955

EVALUATION

Although the goal of the preceptorial system may be the noble one of stimulating productive intellectual conversation and discovery, inevitably the more practical question of evaluation and grading must be addressed. Just as the class discussed expectations for positive participation, the preceptor and students should clearly understand the criteria for grading the quality of student contribution to the precept.

Some preceptors announce from the start that they will feel free to call on students during the course of the discussion. Other preceptors encourage, but don't compel, participation.

However, most preceptors, to promote active engagement and emphasize the importance of precept discussion, include a “participation” component in the final grade. Some faculty, however, are concerned that if “participation” is measured simply by the number of times a student speaks, the quality of contribution may be sacrificed to quantity.

Some students are less comfortable speaking in class, and most preceptors are sensitive to that fact while still trying to provide a non-threatening and supportive class environment. Whatever the pedagogical philosophy or policy, course heads and individual preceptors must make clear what is expected of their students and how they will be evaluated.

Suggestions for preceptors:

- Keep notes after each precept so that you don't have to rely on memory.
- Make clear whether student precept participation will receive a letter grade that will be computed into a final average or whether the participation grade will be used instead as a “plus” or “minus” when the course grade is determined.
- Provide students with some mid-term feedback on their participation.
- Offer students who are reluctant to speak in class alternative ways of contributing, such as written responses to the reading or to precept

After each precept, I make a note about each student's participation... (I might give a ++ if someone was exceptional). I find that keeping a running record during the semester is much more accurate than relying on memory to assign a participation grade at the end of the course. -- Preceptor

A preceptor should take advantage of any plausible opportunity to comment positively on the performance of individuals or the group as a whole. -- Preceptor

I'm not comfortable speaking around people I don't know really well, in any situation, and I feel like precept will make my grade worse because I'd rather listen than speak. It would be easier if it were more natural and friendly. -- Student

I try to give encouragement to untalkative students when they first venture a comment, but some students simply would, like Bartleby, prefer not, and there's not much you can do about it. The important thing is that everyone feel comfortable and not in danger of embarrassment, and that everyone understand what is going on. -- Preceptor

discussion. Occasionally, ask all students to write something in class that they can then read so that students who are uncomfortable speaking extemporaneously can participate.

- Speak to individual students about their participation outside of class rather than during the precept.
- Call on students who are reluctant to participate for more factual information as a way of easing them into the conversation.
- Most important, work to create a stimulating but always supportive classroom atmosphere so that students feel comfortable to take intellectual chances and safe from embarrassment.

Suggestions for students:

- Make sure your comments are genuine contributions to the collective conversation by following the discussion closely, responding to others' remarks, and making clear the connections between your ideas and the general flow of discussion.
- Remember that preceptors are looking for the quality rather than the quantity of your

participation, and for intellectual substance rather than rhetorical eloquence or wittiness.

- Be willing to take chances and try out ideas in precept, and be supportive of your fellow students when they do the same.
- Speak to your preceptor privately if you are unwilling or unable to participate in precept discussion.
- Ask your preceptor to make clear his or her expectations for participation and for some feedback on your precept performance during the term.

Suggestions for course heads:

- At a precept meeting early in the term, have a thorough discussion with preceptors about your grading philosophy, the appropriate standards for evaluation of written work, your expectations for written commentary and feedback on graded papers, and your thoughts on how to assess precept participation.
- Articulate those grading expectations and standards to all students in an early meeting of the course.

- Devote an occasional timely weekly preceptor meeting to specific grading issues. For example, distribute a small set of sample essays for all preceptors to evaluate before a meeting, and then compare results in order to arrive at agreed upon and equitable standards for grading.
- Meet with individual preceptors to discuss how their precepts are going. Sit in on a precept with the permission of the preceptor. Review one or two graded papers from each preceptor.
- Provide an answer key to exams to all preceptors to facilitate fair and uniform grading.
- Grade examinations as a group rather than individually—perhaps by circulating the exams and having each preceptor grade the same answer on all exams—in order to maximize course-wide equity in grading standards and to minimize any inevitable personal biases toward individual students.

Should a student remain silent or too talkative, a quiet personal word after a precept early in the term may help. -- Preceptor

TWO CAVEATS ABOUT THE UNPREDICTABLE ART OF PRECEPTING

The preceptor learns his business by the old process of trial and error, but they must be his trials and his errors. A set of general principles and a collection of helpful hints, such as are offered in this pamphlet, provide a useful background, but only a background. Each individual preceptorial requires its own laws, each is a unique experience, bringing together a particular preceptor, a particular group of students, and a particular work. -- Preceptor

If, after everything has been tried, the precept still does not go well, do not conclude that you are a failure. Chance can throw together a group of students whose ignorance is so universal and whose indifference is so profound that Socrates himself would be stumped! -- Preceptor

AND TWO INSPIRING FINAL THOUGHTS

*Students should be made to feel that it is up to them to derive full value from the precept experience; your job is to offer something they want.
-- Preceptor*

We should take classes because we are excited, interested, and dedicated, and professors should teach them for the same reason. With this sense of shared purpose, we can embark on a common educational journey in precepts. -- Student

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