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Blurb for the Newsletter email

What I learned teaching design students for over 25 years

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Are you searching for quick, actionable teaching methods that can further invigorate and strengthen your teaching? In this article, Associate Professor Steven Faerm reflects on his past 25-plus years of working with design students and shares his key methods for cultivating stronger, more dynamic student-centered learning environments. No matter your level of experience — or your course's subject, delivery format, or academic level — the teaching methods in this article will help further enhance your pedagogy.

Visit this [link](#) to read the full article.

Steven Faerm has received the New School's Distinguished Teaching Award and his School's Faculty Award, along with several international awards for his research on design pedagogy. His third book, [Introduction to Design Education: Theory, Research, and Practical Applications for Educators](#) (2023), is published by Routledge.

The article

What I learned teaching design students for over 25 years

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Over the past twenty-five years, learning how to teach effectively has been a long (and sometimes messy) process of discovery, both inside and outside of my classrooms. Generational values, program structures, curricular emphases, and syllabi content have undergone unprecedented changes over this time period. By being an active part of these changes, I began experimenting with teaching methods in my own courses while simultaneously publishing research about design pedagogy and student development, written utilizing both my primary research about the current generation of students and my own insights based on many years of classroom experience.

As a result of my hands-on exploration of teaching methods, I discovered certain pedagogical approaches and techniques that consistently produce positive results, no matter the course, cohort, or student. Here are a few of them.

1. **Hold mutual expectations.** Just as we hold our students accountable for high-quality performance, we must hold ourselves to the same level of accountability for high-quality teaching. As teachers, we model the behaviors we expect of our students. These include: arriving to the classroom early to set up and start class precisely on time, maintaining a high level of organization and clarity in our communications, and

being receptive — and clearly demonstrating that openness — to new ideas and ways of working from students and colleagues alike.

2. **Teaching is a relationship, not a transaction.** In order to gain the critical insights you need about each student in your class, such as the ways they learn, and what they seek most from your course, you actively have to cultivate relationships with each of them. One way to do this is simply to circulate among students who are in the classroom before class begins and ask questions about them and their lives that demonstrates your interest, such as questions about how their other courses are going, how they enjoyed the weekend, and what recent films, exhibits, or other events are inspiring them. Accordingly, you should also share with your students anything that is inspiring *you* so you present an approachable, thoughtful, and personable image in their minds. This simple act of conversation before every class session helps foster a more positive teacher-student dynamic. It makes your care and concern for them as people — not just pupils — more tangible and real. Cultivating this understanding with students is crucial to making your teaching relationships work with each one.
3. **Body language matters more than you think.** Did you know that nearly 93% of all meaning derived during face-to-face communications comes from non-verbal cues? These cues, including body language and vocal tone, directly impact how students feel about your course, learning material, and you as a teacher. Your facial expressions, body language, hand and arm gestures, how you stand and position your body as well as your vocal inflection, diction, volume, and choice of words all directly influence how students receive your information. To learn and adopt best practices in non-verbal communication, skim articles or book about body language “dos and don’ts.” Learning about body language not only ensures we, as educators, adopt best practices, it also allows us to “read” our students’ non-verbal cues so that we may foster optimal teacher-student relationships.
4. **Enthusiasm is infectious.** Your enthusiasm makes all the difference for the student experience of your class topic. Conveying our enthusiasm to students during class is *everything*. If you’re passionate about the class and the subject matter, they will become so too. As research shows, emotions are powerful motivators and frequently drive students’ actions — including their levels of engagement, learning, and intrinsic motivations. As inferred above, only 7% of meaning from our communications comes from our actual words. It’s imperative that you take these factors into account when considering how to verbally and non-verbally convey your enthusiasm.
5. **“How should we design your (design) education?”** Making sure students have agency in their learning experiences is essential. When we invite students to determine select aspects of course design, they come to understand that they “own” their education (and therefore are responsible for the success of it). This understanding of self-determination bolsters their intrinsic motivation while ensuring the teacher-student relationship is an equal one, not a top-down, hierarchical one. We can engage students by asking their opinions on such things as how a particular class session should be structured, inviting them to propose a final project/assignment deliverable that meets our course’s designated learning outcomes, having them choose from a selection of weekly readings that pertain to the upcoming session’s theme(s) and planned discussions, and asking for their suggestions for guest speakers, off-site learning excursions, and/or critique methods. While there are times we must “stay the course” and follow our outline as planned, there will be other class sessions

and/or project formats that are more flexible in nature and can be more self-directed by the students.

6. **Your first 3 classes set the tone for the rest of the semester.** Every classroom contains its own distinct culture. One professor's teaching style and classroom characteristics will naturally differ from another's. In my decades of teaching, I have found the first three class sessions typically solidify student opinions about the teacher, the course, and the teacher's expectations of them. For this reason, during these initial weeks, make sure you're especially mindful and strategic about both projecting the "right" image and sending the "right" messages so that you establish a strong foundation with students for the rest of the semester. For instance, I always arrive ten minutes early so I can prepare the room and welcome students as they arrive. I begin class *exactly* on time (even if students are still walking into the room late) to model for students the values of punctuality, responsibility, and respect for one another and, perhaps most importantly, for their education. I make sure our 160 minutes together are valuable for the students, purposefully planned, and not wasted. Additionally, during our first class, I collaborate with students to create a community agreement that lists classroom norms that we will abide by every session. I have found that simple — yet highly-effective — classroom management strategies like these help us deliberately create and solidify a collectively chosen classroom culture. Tools like these help classes/semesters run as smoothly as possible. Once your classroom culture is established, understood, and experienced consistently, students will be primed for success.
7. **Build community in every class session.** It's important to facilitate ongoing opportunities for students to talk and work with one another because this ensures each student interacts with each of their peers at least once during the course. The goal of these interactions is to help students to feel more comfortable with one another. That comfort gives rise to a level of trust and respect across the entire group of students. Comfort, trust, and respect are essential to fostering a classroom environment in which students feel safe enough to take risks, experiment, and grow academically and personally in your course. I have also learned these closer peer-to-peer relationships heighten each student's sense of responsibility and accountability to both the group and to themselves.
8. **Create opportunities for students to fail in class.** Many Gen Z students have developed an aversion to risk and failure due to the social influences that affect them 24/7, influences that mislead them into believing that everyone but them leads a perfect life. However, we in the field of design know that failure is almost always a door to new discoveries and a key to greater future success. We know that the ability to fail is a crucial attribute for any student who wants to be a successful designer. As James Joyce noted, "Mistakes are portals of discovery," and these discoveries — along with one's perseverance and resilience — are essential for learning and life itself. In an effort to find a way to facilitate a class environment in which students are not entirely averse to failure, I have found a consistently successful method. Throughout each course, I facilitate low-stakes (non-graded) classroom activities that typically relate to the upcoming homework assignment and/or current project. For example, I might engage students in a "20-minute design challenge" whereby I supply a short brief. Other times, I facilitate "speed sketching exercises" or, as student pairs, have them draw together so they can learn new methods and techniques from one another. These short activities allow students to practice the work — whether it's a technical skill or a theoretical application — before they engage in the higher-stakes (graded) assignments. Other times, the activity is unrelated to the

assignment, yet offers an important learning opportunity that relates to the course content and boosts students' holistic development. Additionally, pairing students during these activities can also heighten their senses of community, support, exploration, trust in each other, and the act of play in the design process.

9. **Different students, different learning styles.** While design students tend to be visual learners, effective teaching styles leverage a variety of pedagogical methods that target other learning styles as well (e.g. auditory, kinesthetic, social, solitary, etc.). To ensure you diversify your pedagogy and target students' different learning styles, I strongly encourage you to structure each class into several discreet experiences that keep the class moving. Design demonstrations, class-wide discussions, team activities, videos, structured critiques, and periods of reflective writing are some ways to target different learning styles so that all students remain engaged and focused.
10. **Observe your students as they leave the room after class.** How did class go? You can tell by taking in the demeanor of your students as they leave after class is over. Do students appear energized? Are they discussing with each other what they just learned or did during class? Are they lingering after class so they can continue speaking with you? What's the overall feeling you get as you reflect on the session and how it concluded? By reflecting on these and other questions, you can identify where your methods are effective and where they are not, which then enables you to hone your methods in an iterative fashion into your own diverse collection of best practices that you can leverage for teaching diverse student populations. Students learn differently, and this fact requires us to remain flexible and adaptable in our teaching, which is critical as some methods that are effective with one cohort may be ineffective with another.
11. **Solicit students' feedback throughout the course.** Students' course evaluations offer valuable insights — but only after all is said and done and the feedback can't be addressed in a timely way to improve the student experience in the class. To gain useful feedback in real time and be more responsive to students as your class progresses, make sure you solicit students' thoughts about the course throughout the duration of the course. For example, once the course has gained traction (perhaps around the fourth or fifth class) start asking students for feedback. You can do this in a variety of ways. With one technique, you can check the classroom "temperature" by handing out index cards and asking students to write an anonymous reflection about the session, the course, or some another topic and return the card back to you. You can then learn from their feedback where students are keeping pace with your teaching and where there are weak spots. I personally do this technique either weekly or biweekly with my classes. While handing out the cards, you can preface this activity by reminding students, "This can be as short or long as you wish. It can be written or drawn — however you choose. You can discuss today's class, write any lingering questions you may have, share how you made a leap forward in your learning, and/or express how the course is going for you." You can adjust your request to suit your needs/the needs of the class, at times being general like above and at other times being more specific and use a guiding prompt that will solicit answers for your specific questions. For instance, I might say, "Please reflect on how this project was paced over the past four weeks. What worked well? What worked less well? Are there any improvements you would make to the future syllabus and/or the course itself?" I collect and review their cards and, via email or at the start of the next class, I relay any themes that emerged from the reflections. If any challenges or concerns were in the students' comments, I explain how they will be addressed by me in the weeks ahead or, when appropriate, invite the entire class to share and discuss possible solutions.