



Constructing a Syllabus

A HANDBOOK FOR FACULTY, TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND TEACHING FELLOWS

B R O W N U N I V E R S I T Y

THE MISSION OF THE HARRIET W. SHERIDAN CENTER for Teaching and Learning is to improve the quality of teaching at Brown University. The Center builds upon the unique and historic commitment of the University to excellence in teaching by recognizing the diversity of learning styles and exploring the richness of teaching approaches. In order to encourage the exchange of ideas about teaching and learning, both within and across disciplines, it consults and collaborates with the faculty, administration, and graduate and undergraduate students. The Center offers a broad range of programs, services and activities which address interdisciplinary pedagogical issues; in addition, it assists departments and programs to realize the specific needs and potential of their disciplines. Thus the Center supports the ongoing improvement of teaching for the benefit of the University and the community-at-large.

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Michael J. V. Woolcock

A web-based workshop based on this handbook is available at the center's website: www.brown.edu/sheridan_center

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Acknowledgments

THE IDEA FOR THIS GENERAL PROJECT was conceived five years ago when I experienced first-hand the trials and tribulations of being a Teaching Assistant. Having vacated a faculty position in Australia prior to coming to the United States for graduate study, I realized anew that there were profound differences between servicing a course for a Professor and producing one's own course. Fearful that the joys of the latter would be lost to my fellow teaching assistants battling the vagaries of implementing courses that had often been hastily assembled, I resolved to offer some practical suggestions on course preparation to try and reassure them that the profession of teaching was more rewarding than the visissitudes of being a T.A. might lead them to believe.

Since that time, graduate students and junior faculty have responded favorably to the ideas on course preparation that I have presented in various seminars and in an earlier edition of this Handbook. It has been very encouraging to receive their constructive feedback and learn of their commitment to teaching in an age that seems to be increasingly devaluing it. The conspicuous absence of professional pedagogical instruction given to prospective college teachers is one of many factors that is "killing the spirit" (Smith, 1990) of higher education in America and elsewhere. I hope this Syllabus Handbook is one modest step in the direction of reviving that spirit while getting beyond puerile teaching-versus-research debates.

These initiatives, however, would not have gone very far without the suggestions, invitations, and encouragement of Rebecca More, Associate Director of Brown University's Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, who along with the Graduate Fellows of the Sheridan Center has worked so hard to raise the profile and standards of teaching at Brown. I am grateful for the opportunity the Sheridan Center has given me to share and shape my ideas, and for the stimulation of being in the company of kindred spirits.

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Preface

I believe that teaching is one of the most delightful and exciting of all human activities when it is done well and that it is one of the most humiliating and tedious when it is done poorly.

– Paul Ramsden

I am sure that one secret of a successful teacher is that he has formulated quite clearly in his mind what the pupil has got to know in precise fashion. He will then cease from half-hearted attempts to worry his pupils with memorizing a lot of irrelevant stuff of inferior importance.

– A. N. Whitehead

ONE OF THE CENTRAL THEMES of a liberal arts education is that our lives are shaped not only by individual efforts and choices but, less obviously, broader historical and structural forces such as gender and race over which we have relatively little control. Similar forces are at work shaping the educational outcomes in the classroom; what students accomplish (or fail to accomplish) over the course of the semester, no matter what the subject matter, is a product not only of individual efforts and abilities on the part of students and instructor, but of the very structure of the course itself. In this instance, however, faculty do have control over this particular ‘structural force,’ and can use it to enhance their teaching effectiveness. This Syllabus Handbook has been written with the somewhat ambitious goal that all instructors – from astronomers to zoologists, from senior faculty to graduate students preparing a course for the first time – gain an appreciation of how important a course structure is in shaping educational outcomes, and begin to take concrete steps towards maximizing student learning by designing an effective syllabus. If this process in turn serves to reaffirm a simple lesson from the liberal arts, so much the better!

The handbook is divided into four parts. Part I establishes the rationale for reflective thinking about the course outline and its place in facil-

itating student learning. Part II addresses the key practical steps in building an effective syllabus. These are followed in Part III by sample course outlines from the four disciplinary areas – social sciences, life sciences, physical sciences, and the humanities – and information on Brown University’s requirements for submitting new course proposals. Finally, Part IV provides a list of bibliographic sources and suggestions for further reading.

The Fundamentals of Course Construction

Linking Effective Teaching to the Course Outline

THE AIMS OF THIS HANDBOOK are to help instructors express clearly to the student what he or she will be expected to learn in the course. Specifically, instructors will endeavor to

- prepare an effective, pedagogically sound course outline;
- make explicit connections between course objectives, departmental aims, and the university mission statement; and
- establish clear relationships between course objectives, student assessment, and evaluations of teaching effectiveness.

OBJECTIVES

On completion of this handbook, instructors should be able to produce a syllabus which:

- Articulates specific aims and objectives for a course in their field
- Identifies the relationship between course objectives, course content, and sequencing of material
- Demonstrates how teaching effectiveness is related to student assessment and course objectives
- States clearly defined mutual expectations
- Is clear, coherent, and comprehensive.

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE COURSE OUTLINE

“How can I get students to discuss more in class?” “Why aren’t they completing required readings?” “Why did my students do so poorly on the mid-term?” “I’m teaching a class for the first time. What books am I going to use?” “How am I going to assess my students?” Sound familiar?

Although these common questions may appear to be isolated issues, they are, in fact, closely related.

The source of the problems giving rise to these types of questions can usually be traced to the manner in which the course has been set up, or, more specifically, to the course outline, that apparently benign document instructors assemble and distribute to students at the start of semester. Whether it is intended or not, the quality of the course outline is a fairly reliable indicator of the quality of teaching and learning that will take place over the course of a semester. An additional benefit of a well-designed course outline is that it makes the always-difficult task of faculty assessment more rigorous. The familiar complaint of relying on student evaluations alone as the measure of effective teaching can be at least partially obviated by including course outlines as a major component of one's overall teaching portfolio.¹ Similarly, measuring departmental teaching effectiveness is also enhanced when new faculty and administrators can see that there is unity and coherence between departmental teaching aims and objectives and the courses that serve as the means to those ends.

The importance of preparing effective course outlines is overlooked by many instructors for four reasons. First, students, instructors and administrators alike tend to associate good teaching with that mythical quality known as 'dynamism.' If you can 'wow' an audience, if you have that elusive charismatic quality of being 'dynamic,' then you can expect to be hailed as a good teacher. Even if you aren't 'dynamic' you will probably believe that this is the model you should be trying to emulate. To be sure, enthusiasm is vital, but lots of well-meaning, diligent, and successful teachers simply are not and never will be dynamic in the popular sense. Even the dullest lecturer can be an effective teacher when they give extended and thoughtful consideration to how and why their courses are set up.²

Second, most instructors attribute both the success and failure of their teaching to individual behaviors alone: if work is handed in late, if students do poorly on assignments, if students turn up late for class, then

1. For specific guidelines on constructing a teaching portfolio, see Hannalore Rodriquez-Farrar's *The Teaching Portfolio* (1997), available from the Sheridan Center.

2. For useful suggestions on improving communication skills, see Patricia Hamm's *Teaching and Persuasive Communication: Class Presentation Skills* (1996), available from the Sheridan Center.

it is because we assume they are lazy or stupid (or both). Conversely – especially at elite colleges – if students happen to do very well, then we attribute this to the fact that Ivy League students are bright people, presuming that they would have done well no matter who was teaching them. There are elements of truth to such conclusions, but such reasoning deflects attention from understanding the important role that planning (or lack thereof) plays in shaping educational outcomes. When either favorable or negative outcomes are experienced in the classroom, we should first seek explanations in the structure of the course itself.

Third, few instructors conceive of their course as the medium which links student learning to the attainment of the department’s and the university’s mission statements. The course outline is in fact part of a four-way agreement between instructor, students, the department, and the university.³ An important aspect of thinking pedagogically entails making clear and explicit connections between course and departmental objectives, between departments and the university mission statement, and most importantly and immediately, between the instructor’s goals and students’ expectations. If those connections are made successfully then mutual expectations are established right from the start, and both teaching and learning become more effective. As professionals, instructors should expect to be fully accountable for what and how they teach, and this should be reflected in the quality of the course outline.

Finally, course outlines are often overlooked because their role in facilitating student learning is vastly underappreciated. Being part of the process by which the ideas and skills of one’s discipline are passed on to the next generation is both a great privilege and responsibility, and when it is done well it is, as Ramsden’s opening quote reminds us, “one of the most delightful and exciting of all human activities.” Designing effective course syllabi is one of the keys to bringing this about. There is a lot of deep satisfaction to be gained from knowing that the way you have designed your course structure has helped students to achieve outcomes that they might not otherwise have attained. Learning to think pedagogically is a sadly neglected aspect of our professional preparation as university teachers, but it is an invaluable resource for even the most retiring, yet committed, teacher.

3. See *Report on Instructional Assessment in the University* (1995), available from the Sheridan Center.

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook builds on the premise that the form and content of course outlines matters in the teaching of all disciplines. In the four sessions that follow, I present some specific guidelines for developing effective course outlines, concluding that effective teaching and learning should be defined in terms of the extent to which instructors have facilitated students' attainment of course objectives, and that evaluating effective teaching is necessarily linked to course assessment. Ideally, one should begin to prepare a course in the context of departmental aims and the university's mission statement, but since these are either non-existent or vary across universities, we begin with the more common problem of simply trying to design a college course in one's field of expertise.

The Handbook has been designed to take readers through the pedagogical processes of constructing an effective course outline. To this end I have sought to provide general principles rather than "rules". Sections 2 through 5 in Part I take us through each of the four major areas of effective syllabus construction:

- aims and objectives;
- content and sequencing;
- assessment and evaluation; and
- administration and presentation.

Part II provides a series of practical exercises corresponding to each of these areas. Having completed them, it would be a good idea to discuss your progress with colleagues, since, as with all written work, it takes time and feedback to produce a quality final document. Learning to think pedagogically about the process of syllabus construction is more important than striving for a definitive final product.

Since this is a 'practical guide' I have kept formal references to a minimum. A list of recommended reading material is contained in the Bibliography, but harried readers would do well to consult Paul Ramsden's (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, which provides an excellent single-volume overview of the various theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning, as well as the empirical research on what makes for effective student learning. Ramsden stresses, as do I, the centrality of understanding that teaching "techniques" are means, not ends,

and that “good teaching [is] learning about where students are in relation to where we want them to go” (p. 137). But where do we want our students to go? What do we want them to learn as a result of taking our course? This is the first and most important question any instructor should ask themselves.

Course Aims and Objectives

OBJECTIVES

On completion of this section, readers should be able to:

- Identify the importance of beginning any course preparation by formulating aims and objectives
- Distinguish between aims and objectives
- Appreciate the range of aptitudes, attitudes and behaviors that a course should strive for
- Articulate specific aims and objectives for a course within a specific discipline.

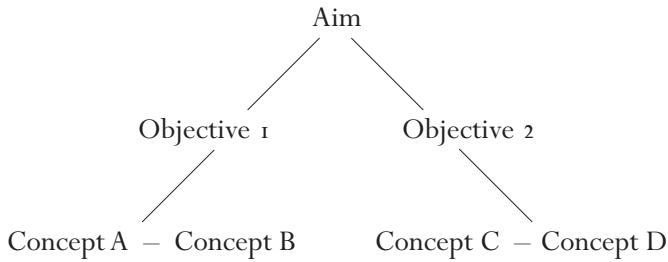
AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

THE FOUNDATION OF AN EFFECTIVE COURSE OUTLINE

Clearly stated aims and objectives are the foundation stone on which the edifice of your course outline is then constructed. Aims are broad statements identifying the general educational outcomes you want a graduate of your course to be able to display, while Objectives are the concrete measures by which these will be realized, and are usually expressed as relationships between specific concepts (see Figure 1). One of the aims of a course in Development Studies, for example, might be to examine the role of the state in different developing countries. A corresponding objective might be to explore the conditions under which industrial policies help or hinder economic growth.

Figure 1: The Relationship Between Aims, Objectives, and Concepts

The extent to which students achieve the course objectives is the extent to which they realize the aims of the course, and is the measure of your teaching effectiveness. Clearly articulating your aims and objectives is a deceptively simple task, but should take several hours, since everything else in your course is determined by it. Content, method of instruction,



reading material, lab exercises, and forms of assessment are all derived from working out what end result you desire for those who complete your course. This does not mean that you are necessarily “imposing” your agenda on students or stultifying their creative powers; it does mean that even the most open-ended approach to teaching – where students themselves decide upon the curriculum and forms of assessment – contains at least two implicit course objectives, and that students and faculty alike are all better off when these are stated clearly and explicitly.

Some instructors are reluctant to set aims and objectives because they fear that doing so will give their course an overly behaviorist or positivist stance; they fear that all objectives have to be measurable in some quantifiable amount, or that students will focus exclusively on “jumping through the hoops” at the expense of developing a love for the material itself and wrestling with its complexities. These are reasonable fears only if one has a very narrow view of what constitutes a legitimate course objective. If you think it is important for students to develop a love of poetry, an appreciation of the complexity of the universe, or the wonders of the human body then say so! There may not be any statistical test that can demonstrate whether a “significant difference” has been attained over the semester in these matters, but that’s what your professional judgement is for. The best strategy, of course, is to incorporate a range of quantitative and qualitative objectives so that together you have a holistic set of expectations.

As part of the process of formally expressing your aims and objectives, it is helpful to begin by asking yourself a simple question: What educational outcomes do I want a graduate of this course to display? By beginning at the end, you start the process of trying to work out what you want students to learn, which in turn enables you to decide upon the most effective means of helping students attain it.

COUSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING STYLES

It is important to bear in mind that all of us learn things through at least three of our five senses, one of which is usually dominant. We learn by hearing (Audio), as in lectures, seminars and discussion sections; we learn by seeing (Visual), as in reading and observing; and we learn by doing (Kinesthetic), as in performance, practical, and laboratory work (which may involve taste and smell as well). This so-called AVK model of learning is useful because it helps us appreciate that not everyone learns in the same way. Many students, in fact, learn in highly individual and complex combinations of AVK. As academics, for example, we are primarily Audio and Visual learners, and so we have been successful in an educational environment built around lectures and libraries. Similarly, different disciplines have different learning requirements: theater and engineering majors tend to be Kinesthetic learners, while art history majors are primarily Visual learners. In introductory classes especially, where a broad range of interests, abilities, and learning styles are present, it is very important to try and cater to each of these learning styles. You do not have to strive for equal measures of each, since each discipline and subject has its own requirements, but incorporating some A, V, and K learning into your course syllabus not only makes for a more interesting class but, pedagogically speaking, also helps to maximize the learning potential of each student.⁴

The AVK learning model is very helpful in the preparation of course aims and objectives. Just as you should ideally strive for a mix of qualitative and quantitative objectives, so should you also try to incorporate objectives that tap into a variety of learning styles.⁵ Chemistry and biology courses generally do this very well through lectures and laboratory reports, but courses in the humanities and social sciences will also be more effective if they require students to achieve in a range of different learning environments. One possible problem with this is that catering to different learning styles will tend to depress the range of final scores,

4. For a fuller account of the relationship between cognitive processes and learning, see Professor Brian Hayden's handbook, *Teaching to Variation in Learning* (1997), available from the Sheridan Center.

5. If this is not possible or desirable within a given course then it should at least be reflected in the range of introductory courses offered within a department or concentration. This point underscores the importance of having clearly defined departmental aims and objectives (see footnote 3).

since you are playing to each student's strengths and weaknesses. This may make it more difficult to distinguish between students who are borderline cases between each grade, so be prepared to make some tough decisions, but it is a small price to pay for maximizing learning.

The list below contains some of the verbs that can be used to help construct concrete objectives for your class. Note that they represent each of the AVK learning styles outlined above, and cover the full spectrum of quantitative and qualitative measures. Five or six sentences beginning with these verbs provides a reasonable range within which you can work; this number forces you to be precise but comprehensive about the range of objectives. Again, though it may only take a paragraph in your final document it will – and should – be by far the most time-consuming element to actually articulate.

analyze	appreciate	classify	collaborate
compare	compute	contrast	define
demonstrate	direct	derive	designate
discuss	display	evaluate	explain
identify	infer	integrate	interpret
justify	list	name	organize
outline	report	respond	solicit
state	synthesize		

(nb. not an exhaustive list)

Course Content and Sequencing

OBJECTIVES

On completion of this section, readers should be able to:

- State the relationship between course objectives and course content
- Appreciate the relationship between sequencing of material and attainment of course objectives
- Prepare a preliminary list of topics to be covered in each week of their course.

PREPARING THE TEXT OF THE COURSE

Having done the hard work of articulating course aims and objectives, we are now in a position to decide which material, in what order, and in what mode of instruction, will help expedite the manner in which students endeavor to achieve these objectives. Every decision you make about your syllabus from this point should be made in the context of how it helps students attain the course objectives. In the process of making these decisions you may well decide that some of your original course objectives are inappropriate or poorly specified, in which case you should of course make the necessary adjustments, but the general principle remains that your decision-making regarding content and sequencing should be grounded in the course objectives.

After establishing what educational outcomes you hope students will achieve, the next task is to decide what specific content will best facilitate this process. A helpful strategy is to begin by envisioning your course as a book, with (say) thirteen “chapters” if it is a survey class and seven if it is an upper division or graduate class.⁶ The number of “chapters” corresponds to the number of weeks in the semester. A good book, as we all know, has an introduction, body and conclusion: a good course outline does likewise, with the ‘body’, the largest part, typically subdivided into three or four substantive parts. Start by giving names to each of

6. Standard introductory textbooks are designed this way, and provide a useful model even if you don’t assign such textbooks for your courses. Such textbooks, however, typically cover far more than be addressed adequately in a single semester, which means the instructor is once again faced with the strategic decision-making task of selecting which material will be covered, and which will not. Such decisions are made on the basis of the course objectives.

these major parts, and then do the same for each pair of lectures/seminars you will hold each week of the semester. In a more detailed course outline – or for your own clarification – you might want to include a three-line summary of what issues or questions the lecture will address. Doing this well before the semester helps to order your sense of what particular material will be included, and where, and also enables students to have some clear expectations about each class as they prepare for it. Giving thoughtful titles to each lecture is also a good idea: as we know from our own experience, we attend lectures with interesting titles and promising substantive content, so why should students in our classes act differently?

Having decided upon the course content the next step is to work out what order it is to be presented. The obvious goal in upper division courses is to progressively increase the degree of difficulty, and to ensure that different subject areas have a natural affinity and articulation with one another. For introductory or survey classes, however, this task is at once more necessary and more difficult, since a broad range of material of roughly equal difficulty has to be covered. A helpful strategy for developing both quality content and sequencing is to lay out your lecture topics into a ‘conceptual map,’ or flow chart. This helps to clarify in your own mind whether there is a clear logic and sequence to each component of your course. Distributing such a chart early in the semester is also good for students, who may not otherwise make the necessary connections between different components of the course until later in the semester. Ensuring that “everyone’s on the same page” is vital for effective teaching and learning.

Only at this point does one then consider which texts to use. I suspect most people, when preparing a class, consider this item first: which books do I want to use? Note that here the selection of reading material and textbooks is subservient to course objectives; it comes after you have decided what you want students to have acquired from your class. (See Part VIII for suggestions on deciding upon how much reading material to assign students in humanities and social science courses.)

Either way, careful attention to the content, sequence and presentation of lectures will go a long way towards facilitating the clarity of the material in your own mind and the progression of students towards the attainment of course objectives.

Student Assessment and Course Evaluation

OBJECTIVES

On completion of this section, readers should be able to:

- State the relationship between course objectives and assessment
- Prepare a reliable and valid assessment schedule
- Appreciate the relationship between course assessment and evaluations of teaching effectiveness.

FOUNDATIONS OF ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Perhaps the most important reason for establishing course objectives is that they directly shape student assessment procedures. The sole purpose of assessment is to establish the extent to which students have achieved course objectives, and so the timing, content, and procedural aspects of assessment should be shaped accordingly. A combination of qualitatively different types of assessment procedures is needed to assess course objectives effectively. It is also important to regard these different assessment procedures as complementary, and themselves capable of serving as teaching instruments.

Assessment itself can be used to help students attain course objectives by giving attention to:

Written Assignments

Require students to complete at least two short papers (or quizzes) before any large research paper (or exam) is due. This gives both students and instructor a sense of how well students are mastering material as the semester unfolds, and provides a confident base from which students can then tackle the more difficult material. In freshman survey classes this is especially important, since these research papers enable students to pursue in more detail subjects that were necessarily given brief attention in class.

Assessing Early and Often

Having the first piece of assessment early in the semester is also helpful. Students taking four classes in a semester soon establish an implicit

priority list, and one of my goals as an instructor is get my class to be one of their priority courses. If there is nothing due in your class until week 8 of semester, for example, there's a good chance that students won't begin any serious study until week 7, by which time routines and study habits for all four courses will have been established. By week 8 students will be so stressed out trying to cram perhaps 20 hours of lecture material and five hundred pages of reading into a busy week that you can safely bet they won't touch it again until they have to. I suspect one of the reasons language and theater classes consistently score well in student reviews is that regular assessment and feedback is required by necessity.

Weighting

Another point to bear in mind is that the weighting you allocate to each item of assessment should reflect its importance as stated in your course objectives: if discussion in section is important in your class, for example, then allocate assessment space accordingly. The items that comprise the 100 percentage points you have to allocate to each student should be distributed in accordance with your course objectives, and hence should reflect the time and effort you expect students to give over to it. Against this criteria it is hard to justify, for example, a 50 percent weighting to both a mid-term and a final exam: does the amount and type of knowledge you can assess under these conditions accurately reflect what you want students to learn in your course?

Range of Assessment Items

Recall the AVK model of learning: each of us has a preferred mode of learning, and ideally a variety of student assessment items should be included to capture this. In science courses this is reflected in exams and lab reports, in theater classes in discussion papers and performances, but, no matter what your discipline, try to tap into as many different avenues of student learning as possible. Some students speak well in section, for example, but don't perform well on exams; others do very well on multiple-choice exams without doing a lot of serious work. Devising an appropriate range of assessment items helps to alleviate these problems.⁷

7. Hayden, 1997.

Firm Deadlines

Setting out due dates for each item of assessment at the start of semester is very important, especially for students with learning difficulties, others such as student-athletes and musicians who will be periodically absent from class, and students who have paid employment commitments. Nothing is more frustrating to students (and busy T.A.s) than to have “floating” due dates; as the size of the class and complexity of its material increases, so too does the instructor’s mandate to keep it on schedule. Be explicit about when assessment is due, where it is to be submitted, what form it will take, who will be grading it, and grievance procedure policies.

Clear Submission Procedures

It is helpful to prepare a separate document outlining in detail the course’s assessment and submission procedures, complete with a detachable semester calendar that clearly lists all due dates for assessment items. Again, students with learning disabilities will greatly appreciate this. The second document should also contain a detailed list of which readings or exercises are required for each week, along with discussion questions that will be used to guide section meetings. These questions help students to know what to look for before they tackle reading assignments, and helps them actively prepare for section rather than wasting twenty valuable minutes at the start of each meeting waiting for the discussion to “warm up”. Finally, this second document keeps the Course Outline itself to a neat and manageable four pages, and doesn’t overburden “shoppers” attending the first few classes.

Administration and Syllabus Presentation

OBJECTIVES

On completion of this section, readers should be able to:

- Identify the importance of including basic administrative material in the course syllabus
- Arrange the different components of a course outline into a coherent document
- Appreciate the importance of preparing a thorough and professionally presented course outline

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Having made all the hard decisions, all that remains is providing key administrative information and combining all the component elements into a clear and coherent document. Such information minimizes unnecessary questions and confusion; it is also in the nature of a “contract” to ensure that all items are clearly spelled out.

The following administrative components should be addressed in your course outline. The first three items are important for students seeking transfer credit, faculty who may have to make such decisions. Over the course of a career it also provides a clear record of what was taught when, and why.⁸

- University and Department
- Name and Address
- Semester and Year of Instruction
- Handout #1 (Numbering all handouts is also good idea.)
- Title of Course
- Instructor’s Name ▪ Teaching Assistant’s Name
- Office ▪ Office
- Office Hours ▪ Office Hours
- Phone ▪ Phone
- E-Mail ▪ E-Mail

Course description

As per the course announcement bulletin. This is an important first statement about what the course will cover, and is often all that stands between whether a student decides to take the class or not. Ensuring that the wording is accurate and precise helps to attract students who are genuinely interested in your class (and, conversely, dissuade those who are not). This statement should be about 8 – 10 lines in length.

8. This material is also available to members of the Brown teaching community electronically from the Sheridan Center. It may be requested as an email attachment file or accessed at the Center’s web site (from November 1997).

Preamble

Rationale; where the course “fits” in the department curriculum and/or disciplinary context. Mutual expectations. Contains a brief statement of your philosophy of teaching and learning; course idiosyncrasies; prerequisites; etc.

Aims

See page 5.

Objectives

See page 5.

Course Content Overview

See page 9.

Assessment

See page 11. List various items and their respective weightings. Remember that you should be assessing the extent to which students have achieved course objectives.

A second document (Handout #2) should be produced outlining

- what readings are to be done by when, along with leading discussion questions;
- what form assessment will take;
- how assessment will be graded and by whom,
- where and when it is to be submitted (I have found producing a detachable course calendar a useful strategy in this regard);
- your late policy;
- grievance procedures;
- arrangements for those with learning disabilities;
- other.

Reading and Audio-Visual Material (and other items to be purchased)

Include only required texts in course outline (detailed reading list goes in Handout #2). State where these texts can be purchased, and list

approximate costs. Identify those texts that are on reserve at the library. If additional outlays are required – e.g. labcoats, costs to cover experiments, etc. – these should be clearly itemized.

Additional Information: Class size constraints; accessing the writing fellows programs; etc.

Try to finish on a lighter and enthusiastic note, e.g. “I’m looking forward to an interesting and mutually rewarding semester!” Lay a firm foundation of mutual respect and commitment, and students will respond accordingly.

Teaching Strategies and the Syllabus

The following are some additional teaching strategies that faculty and teaching assistants at Brown have found helpful to incorporate into the preparation of their courses and syllabii.

An important instructional goal, particularly in discussion sections, is to maximize the amount of “time on task” of each student, or less formally, to ensure that the time that instructors and students have together is as productive as possible. A simple strategy to this end, especially at the start of semester when everyone is a stranger, is to break class discussion up into small groups: it uses peer pressure to ensure that students actually do the readings (thereby lowering the familiar “free-rider” problem) while simultaneously helping students get to know each other. In a large discussion group each student may get to say one or two things in a fifty minute section; in a small group discussion lasting thirty minutes, the same student gets to discuss perhaps five or six issues, leaving fifteen minutes for a more lively general feedback session. Notice here that the role of instructor also changes profoundly, from being leader to facilitator. During discussions, move from group to group answering questions where necessary, while gauging the quality of analysis within each. When it is time for feedback from each group, get the groups to repond in ascending order of strength so that the stronger groups have to go beyond the more mundane remarks made by the earlier groups.

Finding the balance between ‘not enough’ and ‘too much’ reading material is a common dilemma. There are no easy rules to follow, and what is considered reasonable varies for each discipline, but a general

rule of thumb says assign as required reading only what you yourself are also willing and able to read during the semester. One common strategy is to distinguish between ‘required’ and ‘supplementary’ reading so that the interested student knows where to turn for additional material if they are so inclined. If there is a clear link between each of the readings and the lecture material, and if explicit discussion questions are provided before they actually trackle the readings, students are more likely to read the material and read it discerningly. Preparing discussion questions in advance also helps to ensure parity in large classes with different T.A.s.

Organizationally, it is helpful to number each handout presented to students, complete with an Index at the end of semester. This helps when students miss a class and request copies, and ensures that the instructor has an accurate record of what material has been distributed, and when. Also, ensure that the sources of all the figures, tables, and graphs distributed as handouts are clearly indicated. If instructors expect students to document all the sources they employ in their written work, then they should model this behavior in their own handouts.

For the benefit of instructors and students, particularly in large survey classes, it is useful to prepare a bibliographic essay at the end of semester documenting and briefly summarizing the sources used in lecture preparations. This is particularly valuable for students seeking more detailed follow-up material, and in the long run it also serves as a useful record of how the instructor’s interests and sources have changed (or not, as the case may be).

Know your audience! Taking the time to find out your students’ expectations, educational backgrounds, reasons for taking the course, and basic biographical information (e.g. where they come from, year in school, extra-curricular interests) makes a big difference in terms of finding the right “fit” between the instructor’s and the students’ goals, and the associated teaching strategies. Asking students to complete a short written survey after the third or fourth class (i.e. when numbers have stabilized) is an appropriate time to collect this data. Students appreciate it when they know their instructor has an interest in them as a real person, not merely as a number waiting to be assigned a letter grade at the end of the semester.

Summary

An effective syllabus thus contains a number of important elements, but the central core is the course objectives, since it is the attainment of these that determines the extent to which students realize the aims of the course. Attaining them is the measure of effective teaching. Understanding that

- frequent classroom assessment of students' progress towards explicitly articulated course objectives and
- measures of a faculty member's overall teaching effectiveness are strategically inter-related processes is central to developing a culture in which good teaching is required, recognized, and rewarded. Elements of a faculty member's teaching portfolio which emerges from this thus should be combined with that of other faculty members as part of an ongoing departmental teaching portfolio which monitors the extent to which explicitly stated departmental aims and objectives are being achieved. Writing good course outlines is not an easy undertaking, but it is central to effective teaching and mutually rewarding learning.

Best wishes for your course preparation! Comments and suggestions for how we can improve teaching generally and this document in particular are welcomed by staff of the Sheridan Center.

Preparing a Syllabus: Practical Exercises

Formulating Aims and Objectives

SELECT A COURSE YOU HOPE TO TEACH or are currently revising. Spend at least thirty minutes trying to identify the most important educational outcomes you would want a graduate of this course to display. Begin by stating these in general terms as Aims, and then prepare a more formal statement of Objectives by which these aims will be realized. At the end of this time you should have a statement that reads:

Aims The aims of this course are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Objectives On completion of this course, students should be able to:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

If possible, share your answers with a colleague. Ask for feedback on the clarity and suitability of your statements, given the degree of difficulty of the course and its placement in the department's program.

These statements represent a "first draft," and like all first drafts will no doubt be revised several times before we get to the end. Nevertheless, these aims and objectives are the building blocks on which we will construct the more substantive elements of the syllabus in the next sessions. It is also helpful to compare and contrast the extent to which the

aims and objectives of this course are similar to and/or different from those in other courses you teach.

Preparing the Text

Write out the titles of the (say) five major parts, or ‘chapters,’ of your course.

- Part 1: Introduction
- Part 2:
- Part 3:
- Part 4:
- Part 5: Conclusion

In a typical semester, you can expect to give around 25 or 35 class meetings, depending on whether two or three formal sessions are scheduled each week. Within the framework you have outlined above, prepare preliminary titles or topics for each session of the semester. (The exact wording can wait until the final draft.) Note that you don’t have to have a different title for each session, since one topic may take several classes to unpack – recall the “book chapters” analogy cited above – but you do need to cover all 25 or 35 sessions. This may seem difficult now, but remember that at some point you may be required to present a 50-minute lecture to three hundred students for each of these sessions, so get off to a solid start now! On completion, look at the relative amounts of time you have allocated to each topic: does this reflect accurately what you have stated in your course objectives?

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

PART 2

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

PART 3

- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.

PART 4

- 18.
- 19.
- 20.
- 21.
- 22.
- 23.

PART 5: CONCLUSION

- 24.
- 25.

In the light of your answers to the above, prepare a 'flow chart' that shows how each of the topics to be covered during the semester are related to one another. Be prepared to make on-going adjustments to what you've written in Exercise A and B as this chart unfolds!

Assessment and Evaluation of Course Objectives

Assume for the moment that you have an adequate number of T.A.s to service your course (i.e. you are not reduced to multiple choice mid-terms and finals because you are on your own with 150 students!). Look closely over your course objectives, and decide upon the most valid and reliable means of assessing the extent to which students have attained them. Bear in mind that you should have a range of qualitative and quantitative objectives, so you should have some mechanism for evaluating each type. List each assessment item, and identify which course objec-

tive it is associated with. (I suggest six different assessment items as a manageable workload for both students and instructors.)

- e.g. Short Essays/Book Reports
- Research Papers
- Oral Presentations
- Class Participation
- Problem Sets
- Mid-Term/Final Exams (in class versus take home)
- other

Allocate 100 percentage points among each of your assessment items listed above. Ensure that the relative weighting you assign accurately reflects your course objectives. (The same applies within a given assessment item: for example, if you are going to assign 50 percent to a mid-term exam, make sure that the components of this exam also reflect what it is you wish students to learn.)

Review, once again, your course objectives. Satisfy yourself that each assessment item not only relates to each of your course objectives but accurately reflects its overall importance.

Administration and Presentation

- Complete each of the administrative items not already covered in earlier sessions (e.g. office hours, etc). Pay particular attention to the wording of the short Course Description, and the Preamble.⁹
- The components of your course outline are now in place! Prepare a final draft that brings all these elements together, and present it in an attractive and distinctive manner. Being creative with quotes, cartoons, graphics, and diagrams may also be helpful.
- Share your work with other faculty colleagues. What have been the most helpful aspects of this process? How do you think it will improve your teaching?

9. Readers are reminded that this material is available electronically. See footnote 8.

Preparing a Syllabus for the College Curriculum Council (CCC)

At Brown, significant changes to existing courses, all new course proposals, and all classes to be taught by graduate students (including the Summer School), must be approved by the College Curriculum Council (CCC). The CCC has its own specific guidelines for you to follow, and interested instructors should contact the Office of Faculty Governance (Box 1830 or telephone x9441) to request the necessary forms and documentation.

Naturally instructors are required to prepare a syllabus as part of approval process. It should be stressed that the guidelines for preparing a syllabus outlined in this handbook have not been officially endorsed by the CCC, though proposals using this format have been accepted and commended for their thoroughness. The CCC requires proposals to include a statement of course objectives, a statement for inclusion in the Course Announcement Bulletin (CAB), and a detailed outline of subject matter to be covered. These are all issues considered in this handbook, and the more clearly and coherently you can articulate these different elements the stronger your final proposal will be.

Sample Course Outline

THE FOLLOWING SAMPLE COURSE OUTLINE is drawn from one of the four faculty clusters in the university, the Social Sciences.** Each has been selected, not necessarily because it conforms to the model outlined here, but because it has been thoughtfully and thoroughly prepared, and represents an example that others may wish to follow. Needless to say*, Sociology I, a class taught by the author in Spring 1997, is based on the model presented in this handbook. You will see that I have addressed each of the issues covered in Sections 2–5 in the first chapter of this handbook. Of course, this is *not the way* or the *only way* to prepare a course syllabus, but it does attend to the central pedagogical issues underlying the construction of an effective course outline.

**Sample outlines from the Life Science, the Physical Science, and the Humanities are available at the Sheridan Center website in the ‘Syllabus Workshop.’

*The sample selected for inclusion, Sociology I – Perspectives on Society.

Social Sciences

Brown University
Department of Sociology
Providence, RI 02912-1916

Spring 1997
Handout #1
Course Outline

SOCIOLOGY I – PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIETY

	Instructor	Teaching Assistant	Teaching Assistant
Name	Michael Woolcock	Rima DasGupta	Kathleen Reilly
Telephone	x2176	x7599	x7599
E-Mail			
@brown.edu	michael_woolcock	modhurima_dasgupta	kathleen_reilly
Office Hours	M: 3–4; W: 4–5	M: 1–2; Tu: 3–4	M,F: 12–1
Office	Maxcy Hall 403	Maxcy Hall 409	Maxcy Hall 404

Course Description

Sociology I provides a broad introduction to the discipline of sociology from a macro perspective. The emphasis in the course is on developing a general understanding of the role of history and social institutions in shaping society generally, and American domestic and international affairs in particular. Consideration is given to five fundamental social problems: order, change, distribution, freedom, and identity. Particular attention is given to the idea of ‘civil society,’ its role in mediating diverse interests and meeting social needs, and an analysis of the various policy responses that have been invoked to help strengthen it. Throughout the course there will be an emphasis on making analytical connections between social theory and policy, along with the importance of providing clear, informed and consistent reasoning in the presentation of arguments.

Introduction, Aims, Objectives

For most of you this will be your first course in sociology, perhaps even one of the first of your college career, so a few words of advice and explanation are in order as we commence. First, sociology can initially appear overly complicated, lost in big words, long sentences, and abstract arguments. There is no excuse for bad writing, but often the rea-

son for the confusion is that the reader isn't (yet) familiar with the vocabulary being used. Sociology, like any discipline, has its own terms and concepts that simply have to be learned before significant progress can be made. This means it is vital that you work hard in the course right from the start of the semester, otherwise you will quickly get behind, begin to lose interest, and fail to get the most out of the course that you can. Second, most of us already have a general or intuitive understanding of many basic sociological issues, but the key to understanding the processes at work is being able to critically evaluate these issues from a number of different perspectives, and these are neither obvious nor easy to apply. A good analogy is to liken us to fish in water; it's only when we're forced to step outside our everyday world that we appreciate how important those things that we take for granted are to us. Traveling to a country with a completely different set of customs, rules, and traditions has a similar effect (commonly referred to as 'culture shock'), but if sociology is taught and learnt well it is possible to experience similar levels of fresh insight and understanding (and sometimes shock!) about one's own society right here in the classroom.

Third, thinking sociologically is an acquired skill, and like any skill it has to be practiced early, often, and well to show signs of improvement. Accordingly, it is important that you make adequate time each week to complete the reading and writing exercises to the best of your ability; in turn, the teaching staff will do their best to provide you with prompt and helpful comments on your work. Fourth, the discipline of sociology covers a vast range of subject areas, ranging from the media, madness, and medicine to development, deviance, and divorce. Any introductory course can only cover a handful of all possible topics, but believing depth to be preferable to breadth in terms of conveying the distinctiveness of a discipline, we have elected to focus on the acquisition of basic theoretical frameworks within which to evaluate and interpret the virtues, vices, and vicissitudes accompanying the twin processes of interdependence and polarization in modern societies. Our particular concern will be the effects of this interdependence and polarization on 'civil society,' namely those key institutions located between the individual and the state. Our preference for depth from a teaching perspective explains our selection of six books for required reading in preference to a larger number of disparate articles or excerpts, and our decision to assess your knowledge through written essays and a research paper rather than in-class exami-

nations. From a learning perspective, you will have ample opportunity to explore particular topics of interest to you, some of which may not have been addressed in class, in your written work and in class discussions.

Finally, we hold the view that the joys of sociology are realized when students are both challenged and encouraged. There is a considerable amount of reading, discussion, and writing to do in this course, but I trust that the end result will be very satisfying for those who make the time and effort. We are here to help facilitate that process, so make use of discussion sections and our office hours to help clarify aspects which are not clear to you. By the same token, learning is very much a two-way street, and we look forward to gaining new insights from you during the semester.

AIMS

This course has three specific aims:

- to introduce you to the discipline of sociology, with an emphasis on the theories, methods and substantive content of its ‘macro’ perspectives;
- to encourage you to think deeply, critically, and coherently about American society and its place in the post Cold War world; and
- to help you establish well-informed links between theory and policy, so that both the problems you identify and the possible solutions you offer for them rest on empirical evidence and consistent argument, rather than anecdote and assertion. These are ambitious aims, the realization of which will require sustained commitment throughout the semester from both students and teaching staff, but such efforts should bear fruit in the form of an interesting, stimulating, and mutually rewarding course.

OBJECTIVES

On completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the central tenets of the ‘sociological imagination’
- Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of sociological theories and arguments

- Explain how and why America's institutions influence domestic affairs and international relations
- Analyze some of the causes, contexts and consequences of social and economic inequality
- Apply sociological reasoning in the formulation of basic public policy issues
- Appreciate the virtues and limitations of a liberal arts education and sociology's contribution to it.

Assessment Overview

See Handout #2 for a complete statement of expectations, requirements and submission procedures.

GRADING

Assignment	% of grade	Due date
4 Short Essays	40	February 3 and 24 March 19, April 28
1 Research Paper	30	April 14
Take-Home Exam	20	Monday May 12
Section Attendance and Participation	10	

Lecture Schedule

Date	Class	Title
<i>Part A: Sociology as Art, Science, Question, Answer</i>		
Jan 22, W	1	Introduction: Overview of Sociology I; Mutual Expectations; Policies
Jan 24, F	2	Seminar: Reading and writing essays and research papers in sociology
Jan 27, M	3	Five Social Problems: The Scope and Limitations of Macrosociology

Part B: Macrosociological Perspectives as Tools for Social Analysis

Jan 29, W	4	The Origins of Social Science and the Emergence of Sociology
Jan 31, F	5	Film: 'The Joy Luck Club'
Feb 3, M	6	Consensus Theory: French and American Influences Essay #1 Due
Feb 5, W	7	Applying and Evaluating Consensus Theory
Feb 7, F	8	Film: 'Lord of the Flies'
Feb 10, M	9	Conflict Theory: German and American Influences
Feb 12, W	10	Applying and Evaluating Conflict Theory
Feb 14, F		No Lecture; Sections still meet
Feb 17, M		No Classes (President's Day)
Feb 19, W	11	Rational Choice Theory: English and American Influences
Feb 21, F	12	Applying and Evaluating Rational Choice Theory

Part C: The Origins and Emergence of Human Societies

Feb 24, M	13	Pre-Modern Societies and the Agrarian Revolution, <1750 Essay #2 Due
Feb 26, W	14	The Industrial Revolution and the First 'Global Economy,' 1750–1900
Feb 28, F	15	The Early Twentieth Century, 1900–1950
Mar 3, M	16	The Information Revolution and the Second Global Economy, 1950–2000

Part D: Contemporary American Society

Mar 5, W	17	Individualism and Community: Two Traditions in American Social History
Mar 7, F	18	The Rise and Decline of the American Dream? Working Longer for Less
Mar 10, M	19	The Social Consequences of Economic Polarization
Mar 12, W	20	Reviving the Dream: Free Markets, Strategic Trade, and 'Family Values'
Mar 14, F	21	Case Study I: Crime as 'Wave,' Pathology, Rebellion, Rational Response
Mar 17, M	22	Democracy and the Withering of Civil Society in America
Mar 19, W	23	Rebuilding Civil Society: Evaluating Liberal and Conservative 'Solutions'
Mar 21, F		No Lecture; Sections still meet
Mar 31, M	24	Identity, Conformity and Freedom in an Age of Integration
Apr 2, W	25	Case Study II: Evaluating Rival Interpretations of the New Urban Poor
Apr 4, F	26	Case Study III: Sports and Entertainment as Metaphors, as Harbingers
Apr 7, M	27	Case Study IV: Education 'Reform' as Problem, as Solution
Apr 9, W	28	Morning in America? Towards a New Dawn for Common Dreams
Apr 11, F	29	Film: 'The War on Poverty'

Part E: Comparative Perspectives on Contemporary Societies

Apr 14, M		No Class Research Paper
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Apr 16, W	30	Comparative Perspectives on State-Society Relations and Development
Apr 18, F	31	'Induced Development' and the Dilemmas of Social Sustainability
Apr 21, M	32	America and Western Europe: Complementary, not Competing, Models
Apr 23, W	33	Towards the Pacific Century? Understanding the East Asian 'Miracle'
Apr 25, F	34	Poverty, Politics, Population and Pollution: Dilemmas of Developing Countries
Apr 28, M	35	'Cultural Explanations' of the Plight Facing New Economies and Democracies

Part F: The Sociological Imagination Revisited

Apr 30, W	36	Conclusion: Sociology into the Twenty-First Century Short Essay #4
May 12, M		Take-Home Final Exam Due

Required Texts and Reading Materials

1. Barber, B. *Jihad vs. McWorld*. New York: Times Books, 1995.
2. Chirot, D. *How Societies Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994.
3. Collins, R. *Four Sociological Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
4. Derber, C. *The Wilding of America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.
5. Gitlin, T. *The Twilight of Common Dreams*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995.
6. Wilson, W.J. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf, 1996.

7. Optional: Appelbaum, R. and Chambliss, W. *Sociology*. Second Edition, 1997. This a standard overview text covering a vast range of subjects in an informative manner. It's good for summary data and general information, but is expensive. If you're the type who collect books and wants to have a nice reference text on sociology for years to come then you might want to invest in this book, but no required readings will be taken from it. Copies of all books will be on reserve in the Rockefeller Library.

The Course Outline (Handout #1) and its companion document – Guide to Assessment and Required Reading (Handout #2) – together comprise the structural framework for each class I teach. The Guide is actually much longer (about 9–10 pages, depending on the course), and as indicated above, contains all that students need to know about assessment procedures and policies, how to reference their work, prepare for discussion sections, etc. Similar documents are common in language and laboratory classes, but it is a good practice for all disciplines to adopt.

Bibliography and Further Reading

THE FOLLOWING IS A NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST of sources used in the preparation of this Handbook, and that the interested reader may wish to consult.

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- Massey, W., Wilger, A. and Colbeck, C. 'Overcoming "hollowed" collegiality: departmental cultures and teaching quality.' *Change* July/August 1994: 11-20.
- Matejka, K. and Kurke, L. 'Designing a great syllabus' *College Teaching*. 42(3): 115-17.
- Morganroth, M., editor. *The Art and Craft of Teaching*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning, 1984.

- Ramsden, P. *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Rodriguez-Farrar, H. *The Teaching Portfolio* (Revised edition). Providence: Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, Brown University, 1997
- Smith, P. *Killing the Spirit*. New York: Penguin, 1990.

The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

THE HARRIET W. SHERIDAN CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING was founded in 1987 to assist faculty and graduate teaching assistants to improve the quality of undergraduate and graduate instruction within the University. Today, the center supports members of the Brown teaching community in building reflective teaching practices which ensure that a diverse student body has the best possible environment for learning. The Brown curriculum promotes the mutually productive relationship between teaching and research among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. The center plays a crucial role in facilitating the ongoing development of that relationship. The Sheridan Center further seeks to help prepare graduate teaching assistants for productive professional teaching careers after they leave Brown.

To those ends, the Sheridan Center offers a variety of programs, services and publications. Programs include broad-scale teaching forums, the Sheridan Teaching Seminar lecture series and three Sheridan Center Teaching Certificate programs (I: Building a Reflective Teaching Practice, II: Classroom Tools and III: Professional Development Seminar). Consulting Services provide faculty and graduate students with individual feedback on classroom performance, course revision, presentation/conference paper skills, and grant requirements. Through the agency of faculty and graduate student liaisons to academic departments, the center assists with the design and implementation of seminars on discipline-specific teaching and learning. The center also maintains a resource library of books, articles, journals and videotapes on teaching and learning issues for members of the University teaching community.

The Sheridan Center publications include *The Teaching Exchange*, Handbooks and a web site. *The Teaching Exchange* is a bi-annual forum for the exchange of ideas about teaching across the Brown community. Handbooks include *Teaching at Brown*, *Constructing A Syllabus*, *The Teaching*

Portfolio, and *Teaching and Persuasive Communication* and *Teaching to Cognitive Diversity*. The videotape *Effective Teaching for Dyslexic/All College Students* is distributed nationally to facilitate understanding of learning diversity in the classroom. The center's web site offers 24/7 access to information about center activities, on-line editions of all publications, and two unique, interactive, pedagogical workshops. The Sheridan Center also facilitates the exchange of ideas on teaching and learning at Brown between faculty and other individuals and agencies on campus through The Brown Teaching Collaborative.

The Sheridan Center is located at 96 Waterman St., near Thayer St. For information about the Center and resources for teaching at Brown, please contact the Center at: Box 1912; (401) 863-1219; Sheridan_Center@Brown.edu; http://www.brown.edu/sheridan_center/

About the Author

After completing a graduate degree in teaching from Queensland University of Technology (Australia), MICHAEL WOOLCOCK was appointed Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Business Studies at the University of Queensland, where he taught for three and half years. In 1991 he began graduate study in the Department of Sociology at Brown University, winning a Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1994 for his contributions to improving teaching among graduate students and junior faculty. From 1997-98 he was a Graduate Fellow of the Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning at Brown University. His research and teaching interests are in economic sociology, comparative development, urban studies, public policy, and poverty alleviation. Since he earned the Ph.D. in 1997, he has been an officer with the World Bank, specializing in South Asia.

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