

Teaching Tips

You don't have to be born a good teacher – you can learn¹.

The tips below are about teaching strategies to use in the classroom itself. Some are strategies to use while others describe things to avoid.

Connecting with students

- It's helpful if students feel that you know them. Using their name signals that you do know them. Provide your students with name tags. Have their first name written in big bold letters so that you can see their name if you are at the front of the classroom. Surnames aren't essential. It's also helpful to get them to leave their name tags after class, otherwise some will forget to bring them to the next lesson.
- If you have a teacher who looks at the back wall when they teach, it's hard to feel connected to that person. Practise looking at your students as you speak. If you have a big class set up as say six tables, you can look towards the back-left hand side of the room and it will seem to every person sitting there, that you are looking at them. Then sweep your gaze to another quarter of the room, repeat. Try not to make the mistake of looking only at two students in the 'front' row.

Social interaction – students interacting with other students in the class helps them to learn from each other and often brings some fun and light heartedness into the class.

- One way to encourage students to interact with each other is to ask them to play a practice hand with all four hands face up on the table. They can help each other to bid and play the hand.
- If you use quizzes during your classes, instead of students completing the quiz by themselves, encourage them to answer the questions in their tables. If you see one person on a table answering all of the questions for the table, you could ask the person to give the others more time to think, or next lesson put that person on a table with others who are picking up the concepts quickly.
- Encourage students to sit with a different person each week. This develops class cohesion and gives students the opportunity to find a bridge partner or two.
- A tea break midway through the class is a great idea. If you are able to run the class when your club has a bridge session, useful to align the beginner's break with the club's break. Then you can introduce your beginners to club members. Even if you don't normally have a tea break during sessions, it might be useful to introduce one when you have a beginner's class. Introducing the beginners to other club members from the start of their course helps them to connect and feel part of your club.

¹ Please note that this document has been developed specifically for face to face teaching.

Structure of your lessons

- The course materials that have been developed for your beginner's course provide a structure for each lesson and each lesson has a similar structure so that students can feel comfortable and familiar with the lesson even though they are learning new concepts. By structure we usually mean headings and elements that are repeated in each lesson. So, you might start each lesson by putting on the board or powerpoint slide the new terms that will be used in the lesson. You don't need to explain them but as you introduce them during the lesson, you could cross them off the list. Then you might have on the board the headings that you will move through – e.g. opening 1NT, responding to 1NT with a weak hand, responding to 1NT with 8/9 HCPs, etc. The headings let your students know from the beginning of the lesson what you plan on teaching and this helps to prepare them for these concepts. If you don't signal to them what you will teach, they will have to put their own structure onto each new idea that you teach in the lesson. And their structure might not be as good as yours.

During the lesson

- When you are first teaching, your focus is often on yourself. You are nervous and you are concentrating on teaching well. Eventually, you'll see that your focus needs to be on your students rather than on your teaching, which really will be more than good enough. For example, while letting students ask questions may interrupt your flow, it's often helpful to the student to ask when they have the issue, and not wait until later. If they don't have their question answered, they may lose concentration on what you are saying next because they are still thinking about their problem. Feel free to ask them to hold the question for a short period of time, but try to get to them as soon as you can.
- Start on time and finish on time. If you wait for people to arrive, you will likely find that they still will arrive late the following week. If you start on time, and then don't repeat the beginning of the lesson for the late comers, they are more likely to arrive on time the next week. Having said that, your students have busy lives and if they are late it needs to not be a big deal i.e. don't make any comment on same. Finishing on time respects your students' time, although you may want to give some the option of replaying a hand or playing one that they didn't get to play, if they want to and if you don't need to leave on time.
- To begin with some people feel comfortable learning the bridge rules by rote until they can come to understand them. While that is fine, it can help students to understand the rationale behind what you are teaching them. Why do you need 12+ points generally to open? And so on.
- Let students know that making mistakes is one of the ways that we learn and that making mistakes is absolutely fine and expected. Reassure students that we all make mistakes in bridge, even the experts. We all learn at our own pace. No question is silly and it's likely that others have the same question.

- Finding softer ways to tell a student that they are wrong when answering a question isn't the easiest. You could try 'not quite' or 'that's part of the answer but not the whole answer' or 'would anyone else like to have a go'. Some students will be fine if you tell them they are wrong and some may not be fine. Use your best judgement and try to be kind rather than harsh.

Things to avoid when teaching

- Talking for too long – keep your explanations brief. Try to keep your first explanation to no more than 20 minutes and then let the students play one or two practice hands. Then you can go back to a further explanation, again for no more than 15 minutes and then let the students play some more hands or answer a quiz. We need to remember that many adults can only concentrate on something for at most 20 minutes before they start to think about other things. Breaking up your lesson helps avoid loss of concentration.
- Jokes that offend – some people are very comfortable telling jokes when they teach and humour really can help to lighten the mood and help people to feel comfortable. However, telling a joke that can offend someone is usually a mistake. You run the risk of losing the person's respect and it may just be enough for them to decide not to return. It's not worth it. The same can be said for sarcasm and patronising comments.
- Students calling out answers – probably not a habit you want to encourage in your students because you want everyone to have the time to think about an answer. Also, if a particular student always comes up with the answer quickly, others may not even bother to think about the answer because they know s/he will answer it for them.
- Putting someone on the spot – Naming a specific student to answer your question can be fraught for some students. They may be very anxious and are worried about appearing foolish in front of the other students if they get the answer wrong. Of course, after you have taught a class for a few weeks, you will pick up who has an abundance of confidence, if you really want to ask questions of a specific student.

Managing students

- The student who is first to answer all of your questions – if you have a student who dominates by calling out the answers to your questions, the class may be large enough to ask for people to raise their hands. If raising hands isn't something you want people to do, you could explain, either to the class, or after class to the specific student, that people have different processing times and you need others to also answer your questions.

- The student who talks a lot of the time, talking over others. A first step to working with a student like this perhaps is to take them aside after class and talk with them about your perceptions. It can be helpful to explain that there is only so much 'air time' for people to speak during the lesson and that time needs to be shared across the class. If that one on one approach doesn't work, then saying calmly to the person during class something like 'it's someone else's turn now x', may make your point.

Tips about beginner courses

Two hours, with an afternoon tea break, is usually long enough for students.

It can help to let students come to the first two or three lessons before they need to pay for the course. That gives a student time to decide whether bridge is for them or not.

As part of the course fee some clubs provide membership of the club until the end of the financial year.

Helpers – if you have more than two tables, it's difficult to help everyone once they start playing the hands. Some teachers ask more experienced players to come along and help such that a person supervises every table or perhaps two tables.

Having finished the course, the beginners are helped to get into the rhythm of playing by being able to attend six or more supervised sessions of play. The supervised session can be the same length as a class.

Some teachers prefer to have someone else do the administration with students – enrolling them, making their name badges, compiling the contact list, taking the money etc.

Rather than provide written notes at the end of the lesson, sending them by email saves work and also allows you to touch base with students during the week. This message can be upbeat and encouraging, letting them know that you are looking forward to seeing them the following week.

NB – if you don't have permission from your students to share their contact details with the other students, please make sure that you send the email to yourself and blind copy emails to the students.

Feedback

It can be useful to check in with students and collect feedback as the course progresses. There are lots of ways to do this but here are two simple suggestions that you can use to collect their anonymous feedback. Give them some paper at the end of the lesson and ask them what would they like you to 'stop doing, start doing, continue doing'. Another strategy for a different class is to ask them for the 'muddiest part of the lesson' i.e. something that they are struggling to understand. You can use these insights to revise a few things at the start of the next lesson.