

Ten Tips from a Senior Scholar on Teaching in Indonesia

I did not teach a formal course but gave multiple lectures on a variety of subjects to freshman through graduate students. Sometimes I was given a topic or an outline, other times I suggested a topic relevant to the course. I also gave lectures at universities and civic groups within a three hour drive of the city, and these ranged from extremely specific technical topics to those of interest to an educated audience (such as global climate change, Indonesia's energy reserves, sustainability, etc.) Below is what I learned:

1. Never assume all of your students understand everything you have said. At the end of every lecture I asked the students to write down one thing they understood and one thing they didn't. It was not unusual to have them say their English is not very good but they really liked having an American professor. I would correct misunderstandings via email or follow-up lectures.
2. There is a huge variation in student skills, which reflects the varying quality of their high schools. The top 5-10% can compete anywhere in the world, but among the students I encountered the overall quality was somewhat low, making it difficult to find the right level to teach.
3. Students were not used to essay questions, though very familiar with multiple choice. When asked to compare and describe the meaning of graphs or data, students were often silent. Some seniors never had to write until their senior project.
4. I covered 20-25% of the material I would in a US classroom. It was unclear if my students understood the concepts I was teaching – when asked if they understood, most students would nod yes. The teacher is rarely interrupted, questioned, or challenged.
5. Spending time on critical thinking skills and internet exercises (differentiating good sites from bad) would be helpful to many students. Students appreciate help with writing a personal statement or cover letter, as well as how to conduct a job interview.
6. I made lavish use of small gifts from the US to encourage questions. Students are risk adverse, so even a wrong answer got a bravery award. After about 6 gifts, interest grows and questions flow. I found it useful to shorten the lecture so I could get to the questions. These told me how much learning had actually occurred.
7. Students are given much more responsibility in Indonesia than in the States. My wife and I have been asked to give talks to over 200 people and never met faculty until after the lecture. Students contacted us, arranged transport, introduced us, etc. At ITS they organized science fairs for high school students, weekend camping and community help trips involving over 100 students, etc., all with no faculty help. At student request, the department allowed me to teach two English classes.
8. Indonesian students are used to working in groups and sharing. Plagiarism is an intellectual concept, but cheating on tests is not allowed.
9. Students routinely come late to class, sometimes 30 minutes late. Faculty complain, but don't use rewards or punishment to change behavior.
10. Indonesian students are kind, considerate, helpful and very enjoyable. Their praise, warmth and genuine happiness has been very humbling.