

PROFESSOR: One of the things that's different about a recitation like this is that you're really coaching students as opposed to talking at them. So it takes a little bit of a different mindset. In a normal recitation, you prepare 50 minutes of material. And you would go in, and you'd be prepared to lecture for 50 minutes.

In a recitation like this, you have to be much more flexible. You have to think about, how far do I let the students go? Do I need to go intervene or let them work it out a little bit? Sometimes it's important for students to really struggle a little bit to see what the central issue is, but letting them struggle too long is not productive. So it's very useful, at that point, to step in and try to help.

I like to think of it as coaching rather than telling. If you were teaching students or athletes how to play soccer or baseball, you wouldn't just tell them about it. You would go out and show them. You would watch how they do it. You would correct big mistakes. As that got better, you'd correct small mistakes. And that's really the way to think about a recitation like this, that you're coaching them, you're helping shape the students' understanding so that they can become, hopefully, as expert as you are in the material.

So most of us are used to knowing what's going to happen in the 50 minutes in the classroom. So you prepare a certain amount of material. You expect to go in and present that material. You might run a little short or a little long, but there aren't any big surprises.

When you run an active recitation like this, well, what I typically do is I prepare more problems than I think I'll need, because I don't know how many I will actually use. And sometimes I use three or four, and sometimes we may only use one. And so one of the things you have to be prepared for is to adapt on the fly. You've got to be willing to be flexible and work a little bit without a net, because you're just not quite sure what's going to happen.

And I've seen this in classroom instruction using active techniques as well, where I've asked a concept question and discovered, through this immediate feedback, that students have no idea what I'm talking about. Well, it would just be foolish at that point to plow ahead and keep talking about this thing they don't know about. You really have to adapt and figure out, what have I done wrong? How can I make this concept clearer, because I haven't really done a good job.

This certainly is a lead compensator, but I almost always write it in-- a really good problem in recitation is one that's not tricky but that is likely to expose a misconception that students commonly have. So if you've taught a class for a while, you may discover that students often make the same kind of error when looking at a problem.

And if that's the case, then a very good thing to do is to present a problem where they have the opportunity to make that mistake. You don't want them to make the mistake, but if they do make that mistake, it's then an opportunity for teaching, right? It's a teaching moment where you can explain why that might seem like the right answer, and why it's, in fact, not, and correct that misconception.

One of the things I really like about this approach is that it's just fun. It's much more fun to spend 50 minutes coaching students, talking with them, chatting with them, getting to know them a little bit, understanding what they don't understand than it is to just talk at them for 50 minutes. So all other things being equal, I'd much prefer to do the stand up recitation than a conventional recitation.

Of course, what really matters is the outcome, but I do think the outcomes are better. So in this case, it's a win-win situation. I really enjoy it, and I actually wouldn't do it any other way in the future.