

# Why is “Introduction to Christianity” so Interesting, Even When the Class is Big and Mandatory?

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## Introduction

Attend all class meetings. Do not be late, because it would bother other students. I do not conduct a class that is unnecessary to attend. Now that you are ICU students, do not act like the students in other universities in Japan. Only Japanese students are spoiled enough to skip classes, for which they (their parents) have paid a large tuition. Well, you are not to compete with such people. During the course, you are going to face challenges from me and fellow students. So be ready for it.

I wrote this on the syllabus for “Introduction to Christianity” last year. It is the only mandatory course at ICU, where approximately 160 students attend each term. There are five or six classes offered each year; one of them is conducted in English. Although rare for a general education course, part-time lecturers from outside of ICU also teach the course. Of course, it is a very difficult task to choose the outside lecturers.

I can never emphasize enough that this is the only mandatory course at ICU. Students are not allowed to graduate without passing this course. And this calls for a great sense of responsibility on part of the lecturers, because this course is a signature of ICU.

For many students, naturally, this course is something they “have to go through”. Every term, however, there are ten or so auditors in my class. They have already earned the credit, but still sit in the class out of their free will. Some attend for the second or third time to see how much they have matured in the last couple of years, by comparing their own reactions towards the course.

There are no chatters in my class. Most students keep their eyes forward and think hard. Any teacher should recognize that earnest look on their face. It is the face that is intently looking for answers, in order to meet the intellectual challenge they are engaged in.

I would like to introduce some tools that help to manage such large course efficiently. These insights

come from 20 years of experience, and I sincerely hope that other instructors would find them useful to improve their teaching styles and mine as well.

## 1. Student Survey

I begin each course by conducting a survey. This helps me to learn about the students, and the students to learn about each other. Since I have done this for more than 10 years, this survey can also be seen as a fixed-point observation of ICU students. I ask them questions such as “Do you have any particular religious beliefs?” “Have you ever received any religious education?” and “What are your impressions on religion as a whole and Christianity in particular?” The answers to these questions are available on my website. I personally find the answers to the last question “Do you have anything else to say?” most interesting. Please take a moment to have a look at: <http://subsite.icu.ac.jp/people/morimoto/syllabi.html>

There are many “hidden Christians” at ICU. In my survey, approximately 10-15% of the students claim that they are Christians. This is more than tenfold of the average in Japanese population. For the 90% of the students who are not Christians, such fact is already stimulating.

I also ask the students to register a nickname in this survey, along with their class year and major. I only disclose their nicknames on my website to protect their privacy. Students often come up with such unique nicknames that I remember them not by their real names but by the nicknames long after their graduation.

## 2. Question Sheet

The students also use their nickname to ask questions during the class. Unlike the ICU’s standard “comment sheet”, I prefer my own “question sheet”. Because there is not enough time to address all the questions from so many students, I ask them to write down their questions. I usually get 30-50 of them after class, to which I write a response one by one and return at the next meeting. On the sheet are three

choices: 1. I am ready to be called with my nickname during the class to discuss further on this question; 2. I feel comfortable with sharing my question(s) in the classroom under my nickname; 3. I prefer my question(s) not to be mentioned during class. I find this method useful for encouraging students to participate actively in the classroom discussion, especially when they hesitate to stand up in class.

I begin each class session by introducing several questions from the students. If possible, I will ask some students to restate or elaborate the questions they have posed. Sometimes this will lead to other comments and questions from the classroom, which will give rise to an ad-hoc discussion on the spot. I find questions with doubts and criticisms particularly valuable for educational purposes, because these often result in rich discussion. If the question anticipates the content of my next lecture, this proves that class is running smooth, and students and I are on the same wavelength. These discussions may last 20 to 30 minutes. Such freedom could be a perquisite to this course that does not stress accumulation and communication of knowledge.

### 3. Attendance Sheet

I am aware of the fact that my class is called “An-Chri” (Anri-Chri) in the ICU jargon, instead of the usual “In-Chri”. Many students and alumni have told me that they never “got through the drawing process”. I myself wish I had a chance to spend the time with more students. However, this does not mean I am an easy grader (average GPA for my class is around 2.7). About 10% of the students will receive an E, which means they fail not by pre-registration drawing but by their own performance in the class.

Some students fail for their attendance. I rely on my “attendance sheet” when teaching a large class. This is a simple list of student names that goes around the classroom. The students are required to sign their name on it. Naturally, they could cheat with help from their friends. But once I explain that “signature” is a sincere act of contract that takes their personal integrity, most students respect it. If not, 10% of the students would not fail the course.

The attendance sheet is used to promote attendance, so I sometimes warn the students that the sheet will circulate during the next class. But again, I sometimes don't. I circulate the attendance sheet six times during the course. If a student fails to sign on it for

three occasions, that student will automatically receive an E (three-strike out). I explain this policy at the beginning of the course, and it is clearly stated on the syllabus. I make no exceptions to this policy, even if the student was ill, or had to attend job interviews or teaching practices. In such cases, the student should try to make full attendance for the rest of the course. Failing both, the student cannot fulfill the essential goal of the course, and he or she must re-register.

The crucial part of the class is to share the questions and answers that are communicated during the class. Therefore, making up for a class missed is virtually impossible. Different fields of study might have different conditions, but in my view, a class is unnecessary if reading books can substitute for it.

The bottom line, as I mentioned earlier, is to make the course intriguing. If the course is interesting enough, students will attend with or without the attendance sheet. And that is exactly why some students would eagerly audit the course for no credit.

### 4. Informed Discussion

ICU Students like to have discussions, but discussions must be more than casual chatting; they must be “informed discussions,” if they are to be part of the curriculum. Here is a way to urge students to do homework and to come to the class prepared. First, you ask students to read the material, and type up a comment on the upper half of an A4 sheet. During the discussion, students will manually add new discoveries on the bottom half of the sheet. Give grades only to the sheets with two sections. Use the last figure of their ID number to make 10 sub-groups of students, and spread them to different corners of the classroom. It would be necessary to reserve an extra classroom.

### 5. Class Content

Although this is not an occasion to share the actual content of my class, I would like to underscore that the course is not designed to teach the Bible or Christian doctrines. Some of the students who come from high schools affiliated with Christianity will quickly realize that this is a class radically different from their high school experience. “Introduction to Christianity” at ICU serves as an opportunity to pose questions to one's own presuppositions and common sense. I never engage in proselytization, for this will have an adverse effect. Students will face the

challenge, both intellectual and essential. Religious beliefs and world-views are deeply connected with their identities, yet they seldom question these matters. I hope the students will become able to acquire versatile view towards them.

Strengthening the skills of critical thinking is crucial in doing so. Critical thinking is about being critical towards one's own thinking rather than that of others. So for Christians, this would mean re-examination of their own religious beliefs, while for the majority of students it would mean re-examining their own assumptions of being non-religious.

Some students are warned by their good-will church pastors back home to be "careful of ICU's Christianity". They think my understanding of Christianity is too liberal and potentially dangerous to the faith they have cultivated for long in their young members. But I sincerely hope that students will nurture a strong faith of their own that will help them survive the treacherous current of this world. They must be ready to encounter the criticisms towards their faith. Faith becomes stronger through grappling with skepticism and criticism.

Understanding other religions like Shinto,

Buddhism and Muslim is also important in knowing Christianity better. "One knows nothing of language if one knows only one language." Likewise, "one knows nothing of religion if one knows only one religion".

### A Closing Remark

I welcome anybody who is interested in my class. You don't even have to make an appointment. Just hop in. Your comments during the class are even more welcome. One new faculty member has attended my course throughout the term.

Although I do not use it in "Introduction to Christianity", I find Moodle efficient in middle-sized classes. I have written a report with practical hints in using the various features of Moodle, such as distributing materials, group discussions, presentations, pop quiz, and evaluation process. You can read the whole paper online, which includes actual screenshots and student evaluations from my course.

森本あんり「ICT活用による自発的学習者の育成」、私立大学情報教育協会『大学教育と情報』Vol.20, No.1 (June, 2011): 19-21.  
[http://www.juce.jp/LINK/journal/1103/03\\_02.html](http://www.juce.jp/LINK/journal/1103/03_02.html)

(English translation provided by the FD office)

## Issues in Teaching Specialized Courses with Students of Various Majors

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### Introduction

This newsletter focuses on "teaching large classes". I will interpret this as "teaching specialized courses with comparatively large number of students who have different majors", and share the ideas from my experience. My interpretation above could be a slight departure from what was intended, but I believe the balance between teaching basic and specialized concepts in courses with comparatively large number of students is important in all kinds of courses, may it be general education, foundation, or specialized course. Also, many of the exchanges made between the instructor and the students during specialized courses are in various ways similar to those made during general education and foundation

courses with large number of students. For this reason, I think my interpretation above is of some value. I would like to discuss how we should explore the teaching of specialized courses in the context of liberal arts education.

Now that the topic has been justified, I would like to move on. Today I would like to share with you the example of "SOC309 Sociology of Science and Technology", which I am currently teaching. This course is offered every year for three units, and is conducted in Japanese. In the recent years 20 to 30 students register for this class, and most of them are juniors and seniors. Students are from various backgrounds. Some of them are sociology majors,