

Teaching Undergraduate and Graduate Students in the Same Class

Setting Distinct and Authentic Expectations

Purpose: In some courses, it's common to find both undergraduate and graduate students learning side by side. While this format offers opportunities for cross-level peer learning, it also presents challenges: how do you differentiate expectations and assignments to ensure both groups are appropriately challenged and engaged?

Below are strategies for supporting both undergraduate and graduate students and making the experience authentic and meaningful for all.

Strategies and Steps for Implementation

1. Set Distinct Expectations From the Start

- a. Explain early and clearly how requirements differ. List graduate-level expectations and assignments in a separate section of the syllabus or course site.
- b. Communicate rationale: Let students know why the levels differ—graduate students are preparing for advanced research or professional work and need to demonstrate mastery beyond course basics.

2. Differentiate Assignments with Purpose

a. Assignment Augmentation

Graduate students may complete an extended version of key assignments (e.g., greater length or depth, additional sources, advanced analysis), or add components such as critical literature reviews, applied case studies, or leadership roles in group projects.

b. Additional Assignments

Sometimes a supplementary paper, proposal, or creative project is required exclusively for graduate students.

c. Authentic Projects

Whenever possible, graduate-level assignments should mirror real professional or academic tasks, such as conference proposals, policy briefs, or research manuscripts that a student could work toward publication or professional presentation.

3. Ensure Assignments are Authentic and Relevant**a. Undergraduate Assignments**

Focus on fundamental knowledge, foundational skills, or applied learning relevant to future coursework, careers, or civic life. Example: analyzing a case, creating an infographic, or engaging in structured debate.

b. Graduate Assignments

Prioritize tasks aligned with professional or scholarly work in the field. Encourage or require students to pursue topics that might result in a publishable paper, presentation, or portfolio piece. Scaffold these projects over the term, with opportunities for drafting, peer review, and instructor feedback.

4. Foster Collaboration and Community**a. Shared Elements**

Allow opportunities for cross-level discussion and peer learning mixed group work, presentations, or collaborative annotation while marking out separate deliverables.

b. Respect Developmental Differences

Scaffold support for undergraduates and offer optional advanced enrichment for graduates who want to go further.

5. Review and Adjust**a. Periodically Check-In with Both Groups**

Are students clear on their respective paths? Are graduate assignments meaningful, not just “more work”? Use early feedback loops to ensure all students feel challenged and supported.

Instructor Planning Guide

1. Clarity

Have I clearly outlined the different expectations for undergraduate and graduate students in the syllabus and course site?

2. Rationale

Have I explained why graduate students have distinct requirements (e.g., professional preparation, depth of mastery)?

3. Differentiation

Are the assignments for each group appropriate to their level of study, with graduate work focused on advanced research or professional application?

4. Authenticity

Have I designed graduate-level assignments that mirror real-world or scholarly outputs (e.g., policy briefs, proposals, publishable work)?

5. Scaffolding

Have I structured projects in stages with opportunities for drafting, feedback, and peer review to support both levels?

6. Integration

Are there shared activities such as discussions, group work, or presentations that promote community and mutual learning?

7. Feedback & Adjustment

Have I built in opportunities to check in with both groups and adjust assignments to ensure engagement, clarity, and fairness?

Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I listed distinct graduate and undergraduate expectations and deliverables in the syllabus or course site.
- ☐ I explained the rationale for differentiated requirements early in the course.
- ☐ I designed graduate assignments that are not just longer but more complex or authentic to their academic/professional goals.
- ☐ I created undergraduate assignments focused on foundational or applied learning.
- ☐ I included shared learning opportunities (e.g., discussions, group projects) that support cross-level interaction.
- ☐ I provided scaffolding (e.g., milestones, peer feedback, draft reviews) for major assignments.
- ☐ I checked in with both student groups to gather feedback on workload, clarity, and challenge.
- ☐ I ensured that graduate assignments are meaningful not simply “more” and that undergraduates feel supported.

Resource: [Joint Undergraduate and Graduate Program](#) (Harvard DCE)