

Ten Ways to Engage your Students on the First Day of Class

Based on a Magna Online Seminar of the same title
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ABOUT THIS WHITE PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

The first day of class is critical. What happens on the first day, even in the first moments, sets the tone for the entire course. The impression you make will last the entire semester, and today's students are not shy about sharing their opinions. In fact, they are savvy consumers who want classes that meet their needs and that are taught by organized, competent instructors who engage them from the minute they walk into their room. Most students will make up their minds about the course and the instructor in that first class period.

There is a lot at stake that first day. Your first impression helps students determine whether they will stay in your class or whether they will switch to a different section—with a different instructor—or drop it. That is why you must use the first day, the first moments of class, to inspire confidence in your abilities.

Students also want to feel welcome and prepared for success. They do not want to stay in a class where they feel out of place or ill-equipped for the subject matter. The challenge is to create a classroom atmosphere where the rules are clear; expectations are high; and yet students feel welcome, comfortable, and engaged.

This premise might sound daunting, but it is not impossible. Instructors have the power and the tools to make that first day matter and to set the tone for the entire term.

It is important to be deliberate about classroom management. An instructor's job is to teach, and creating an effective learning environment is necessary for students to learn. While it might seem heavy-handed to focus so much energy on procedures and expectations, the first-day strategies in this report will actually lead to less time spent on classroom management throughout the term.

Remember that your classroom will develop its own distinct environment and culture. If you don't make a concerted effort to set the tone, the students will. Most everyone has been in or in front of a class with an adversarial dynamic, yet no one wants to feel at odds with students. A tense, disorganized, or, worse, hostile atmosphere interferes with your pedagogy and impedes student learning. It wastes time and disengages students. It leads to poor evaluations. Moreover, it is unnecessary and easily avoidable.

College professors, instructors, and teaching assistants are subject matter specialists, but many have never had training in classroom instructional management. By learning instructional management strategies for the college classroom, instructors can improve and control classroom climate as well as student participation. The preparation strategies and easy-to-implement procedures contained in this report will enable you to remain in calm command of the class on the very first day and for the duration of the course.

This white paper breaks down those strategies and procedures into 10 simple steps that allow you to engage your students on the first day of class. These tactics will allow you to maximize instructional minutes on the first day and in every subsequent class.

This report will enable instructors to spend more time teaching and less time taking roll, managing behavior, or delivering daily instructions. Students will function more independently and will assume responsibility for their success in the course. Ultimately, these steps will enable you to create and sustain a classroom environment that is conducive to learning no matter what the subject matter.

Many of these steps in this report seem simple, but the order and structure they provide the classroom enable you to maximize instructional efficacy throughout term.

Of course, a successful first day begins before the first day of class. A small amount of advance preparation ensures that the 10 steps work on the first day. For example, instructors should acquire and print final class rosters so that they know who will be there. Some colleges and universities have student directories with photos and information such as declared

majors, class standings, and completed coursework. Simply knowing how many students are registered will help you plan your instructional methods for the course.

Be sure to find the room assigned to your class and make sure that it is appropriate for the kind of course you are teaching. Count the desks, familiarize yourself with any technology, and assess other resources to ensure they are adequate. Decide how you will arrange the room for class, and don't be afraid to move the furniture around. Also, remember to visit the bookstore to verify that the correct book in the correct version is available to students. (For a complete first-day checklist, see Appendix A: Checklist for the First Day of Class.)

Tending to these and other housekeeping matters minimizes the chance of any glitches on the first day. After all, you want that first day to run smoothly so that students focus on the course and not on unforeseen distractions. That way you can tend to the real business at hand: engaging students in the material so that they actually learn it.

Many of these steps in this report seem simple, but the order and structure they provide the classroom enable you to maximize instructional efficacy throughout term.

The following are the 10 things you should do on the first day:

- Create procedures for getting students in the room.
- Learn students' names.
- Use focus activities.
- Display the "Today We Will" list.
- Take time for introductions.
- Review the syllabus, including course expectations and grading policies.
- Conduct an interest inventory.
- Have students make a folder.
- Teach a lesson.
- Utilize the four-step lesson plan.

By starting the very first day of the term with clear routines and expectations, with easy procedures and on-task activities such as the focus questions and "Today We Will" list, students learn that our classes are well organized and that they can achieve success through appropriate class attendance, preparation, and participation. Instructors maximize instructional time and minimize classroom management efforts. All of this creates a classroom atmosphere that allows instructors and students to get down to the real business at hand: learning.

1

CREATE PROCEDURES FOR GETTING STUDENTS INTO THE ROOM

This is college. Students can and should figure out where they need to be and when they need to be there. While instructors are not responsible for getting students to attend class, they can create procedures that move students swiftly into the room and help them focus once they are there. Effective procedures will enable instructors to start class on time and to minimize time and energy spent on classroom management.

While instructors are not responsible for getting students to attend class, they can create procedures that move students swiftly into the room and help them focus once they are there.

Instructors do not want students to trickle into class slowly. Students should not pause, confused, at the door. Clear procedures allow students to quickly ascertain what they need to do and then do it, even on the first day.

In fact, the procedures used on the first day should be the same procedures used every day. That way the procedures become

routine. The routine gets class started promptly and eliminates your need to explain what will happen in class on any particular day. Students know what to do on any given day because it is the same thing they do on each and every day, including the first.

THE ENTRANCE TABLE

Getting students in the door begins with an entrance table at the door. It is a simple approach to help direct students, yet it helps manage student behavior and maximize instructional time on each day of class.

It may seem overly simplistic. Every day students pass by the entrance table on their way into class. As students enter, it should also be obvious that they need to pick up materials on the table. They look here for any materials they will need for all subsequent classes as well. It is also here that they turn in and pick up graded work. You, the instructor, do not have to announce that you are returning materials. You do not have to request that students turn in papers or assignments. Students will be able to determine what they need to do based on what is on the entrance table.

The entrance table, therefore, increases classroom efficiency. It maximizes instructional time because it eliminates the need for instructors to collect or distribute materials during class.

Of course, not every classroom has an entrance table right by the door. Instructors may have to move a table or tables to doorways before class starts. If the room has no tables, two desks pushed together can function as an entrance table. If desks are at a premium, two chairs can serve the purpose as well.

The entrance table works for large and small classes. If a classroom has more than one door, simply create an entrance table at every doorway. If you have teaching assistants, have them help divide materials among doorways. Instruct students which doorway correlates to the first letter of their last names so they know which doorway to use for the rest of the term. If you don't have a teaching assistant, ask some students to assist with setting up the multiple entrance tables at the start of class.

MAKE PROCEDURES VISIBLE

All procedures should be specific and should include directions on what materials students need to find and what they need to do. These expectations should be clear and visible on a screen or board where students are sure to see them. Students who might have missed materials on the entrance table will quickly realize that they need to go back.

An instructor's first-day screen could include the following instructions:

- As you enter, please pick up the syllabus, a card, and a folder from the entrance table.
- Tell me your name.
- Choose a seat and start the activity listed on the screen.

Once students see the screen, the rest of the steps should be clear.

If students don't see the screen or board right away, classroom context clues should help redirect them. They should see and hear other students introducing themselves to the instructor, and they should notice other students already working on the activity. These context clues should reinforce the established procedures so that all students can quickly and easily determine first-day expectations.

Every subsequent day students will repeat the procedure of entering the class, checking for necessary materials on the entrance table, looking to the screen or board for instructions, finding their seats, and beginning their work.

Note: Having students tell instructors their names isn't a procedure per se, but it is a valuable first-day strategy that eliminates the need to call roll because instructors can check off names as students introduce themselves. It also allows the instructor to hear the proper pronunciation of names, which reduces the potential for embarrassment or confusion later.

2

LEARN STUDENTS' NAMES

On the first day, students introduce themselves. This is more than just an exercise. Instructors should make every effort to learn and remember students' names. It shows respect for your students and facilitates classroom management. Knowing students' names will also reflect positively on instructors in student evaluations. Of course, it is unlikely that you can memorize all names on the first day of class, but the effort should begin immediately.

On the second day, the instructions on the screen or board tell students to sign the seating chart. Students will need to sit according to the seating chart throughout the term. This way it becomes a valuable tool for the instructor.

Remembering students' names shows respect for your students and facilitates classroom management.

Like the entrance table, the seating chart minimizes the amount of time spent on classroom management, thereby maximizing the amount of time dedicated to instruction. First, the seating chart allows instructors to take attendance without calling roll. Calling roll wastes time, even with just 25 or 30

students. Also, absences give rise to commentary from other students. Someone might say, "She's not here because she broke up with her boyfriend," or mention that another classmate was out late the night before. Instructors don't want to invite that kind of disclosure.

The seating chart allows instructors to quickly and quietly take attendance while students are working on a focus activity. So within the first three or four minutes of class, students are seated and working, and the instructor has double-checked roll.

Different instructors have different opinions on taking roll and requiring attendance. If you follow these 10 steps, you will see that student success is directly linked to class attendance and participation. Requiring attendance therefore helps improve student performance, and using seating charts to monitor attendance will increase efficiency.

3

FOCUS ACTIVITIES

The daily procedures include a short focus activity that students do at the start of class. On the first day the focus activity might be something simple, such as “Make a name card that will stand on your desk. Write your name in big letters. Then learn the names of those around you.” Essentially, the first-day focus activity is just to get to know a few people in the room.

After the first day, the focus activity serves several purposes. First, it delves into the assigned reading. It enables students to begin working with assigned material as soon as they sit down. The activity can be a question about the reading or a direct quote to which students must react.

Second, focus activities help instructors organize class materials and prepare for exams, because focus questions or quotes that appear on the board or screen should also appear on exams. If the class meets three times a week for 15 weeks, this step would generate more than 45 focus and exam questions. It also self-generates an exam review. Simply tell students that in order to prepare for an exam, they should review and study all of the focus questions.

Finally, focus questions motivate students to get to class on time. Since the focus questions are exam questions, students realize it is important to get to class to see what the questions are and to participate in any discussion relating to them.

Focus questions can work across disciplines. If you teach math, the focus questions are math problems. If you teach chemistry, they are equations that need to be solved or questions about an upcoming lab.

You can have individual or paired focus activities or questions, but generally avoid larger group activities. On the first day, however, the focus activity is usually limited to making name cards, which is an individual task.

4

“TODAY WE WILL” LIST

Of all the steps, the “Today We Will” list is probably the most important. The “Today We Will” list goes up on the whiteboard or screen at the start of class and it stays there the entire time. What’s on the rest of the board or screen will change a lot over the course of the class, but the “Today We Will” list must be there for the whole period.

The “Today We Will” list is a road map. It lets students know what will be covered that day. They can glance at it to check progress or to see if they missed any big concepts. The list also keeps instructors on task. As you move around your class lecturing, the “Today We Will” list is a visual reminder of what you need to accomplish in that period. It ensures that you don’t skip any concepts that you want or need to cover, and it keeps you from veering too far off on tangents.

The list also reminds students that they are accountable for the day’s material whether they are present in class or not. The reality of higher education is that students sometimes arrive late, leave early, or miss class altogether. In blocked night graduate classes, students are often married with families, jobs, and other competing responsibilities that sometimes infringe on classroom time.

You must inform students that—from the very first day—they are responsible for everything on the “Today We Will” list. You do not, however, have to preach it. A clear, straightforward “Today We Will” list will consistently reinforce this expectation and encourage students to assume responsibility for the material presented in each class.

A thoughtfully crafted “Today We Will” list, as a part of classroom procedures, will motivate students to attend class, arrive on time, and compensate for any portion of class that they miss.

For example, if Number 1 on the “Today We Will” list is “Today we will go over three big questions that are on the midterm” and a student missed the first 15 minutes of class, she will want to get that material from you or another student, since the list clearly indicates it will appear on an exam. Thus, a thoughtfully crafted “Today We Will” list, as a part of classroom procedures, will motivate students to attend class, arrive on time, and compensate for any portion of class that they miss. It enables you to

maximize all available instructional minutes. It also keeps the class organized, and it keeps students organized and accountable.

Keep in mind that the “Today We Will” list is not rigid. If you particularly like the discussion students are having, you can take something off the “Today We Will” list. If you feel that

students have really grasped a concept more quickly than you expected, you can add items to the list.

Other times you can leave some blanks in the “Today We Will” list to allow students to direct the discussion. If students read three articles by three different scholars, take a poll to see which article you will discuss first.

However, the list is fairly standard on the first day of class. It contains the following seven things, each of which is addressed in this report:

- Do what’s on the screen.
- Introduce yourself.
- Review syllabus completely.
- Complete interest inventory.
- Make folders.
- Have lesson on _____.
- Conclude with preparation expectations for next class.

5

INTRODUCTIONS

You have already learned your students' names, but it is important that they get to know each other as well. Introductions are a crucial part of creating a community of learners within each classroom, even in large classes. Students who know each other's names are much more respectful to one another in discussions. That helps guard against classroom incivility, which is becoming more problematic on many campuses.

Introductions, therefore, are one component of instructional management useful in community colleges, private colleges, public universities, and even research institutions. They are the first step toward building a civil atmosphere within the class, and they naturally bridge to discussions of all the expectations about classroom behavior, arriving on time, and more.

How you handle introductions varies according to class size. For small classes of up to 25 or 28, students can introduce themselves with the cards they made at the start of class. Larger classes would break into smaller groups of four or five, or they might introduce themselves to just a few of their classmates.

For very large classes, another option is to use "stand-up" questions in place of traditional introductions. Instead of having each student stand and say something, you have students stand up in response to specific questions or statements. Options include the following:

- "Stand up if you are a Spanish major."
- "Stand up if you are from out of state."
- "Stand up if you are a math major."

If you like, you can add some fun options.

- "Stand up if you were born in January."
- "Stand up if you know you were born on a Friday."

You have wide latitude with what you ask, but be careful to not embarrass students with your questions. Students are nervous about the first day of class, and they need a welcoming, warm atmosphere. Therefore, keep your fun questions benign. Avoid anything too personal or delicate.

CONTROL INTRODUCTIONS

Remember that you as the instructor determine how to conduct introductions. If you are doing traditional instructions, be sure to limit the amount of time given to this portion of class. If you allot time per student, keep track of that time and break in if students exceed the limit. Controlling introductions is important to establishing and maintaining the tone you want to set for the course.

Also, keep all students focused during introductions. Some might be tempted to text friends, check email, or otherwise occupy themselves with smartphones or other devices. Be direct on the first day and on every other night and let students know that you expect them to pay attention. Later in class you can incorporate activities that require using each other's names to reinforce both the introductions and your expectations. This will not only help students become acquainted, but adding consequences to the introduction exercise will also underscore your efforts to establish control of class.

6

REVIEW SYLLABUS, COURSE EXPECTATIONS, AND GRADING

The syllabus is the road map for the semester. It details what material students will learn and when they will learn it. Not only does it provide an overview of the scope of the class, it also helps students determine if the course is appropriate for them. For example, transfer students from different colleges may have learned much of the material in a course with a different title. The syllabus review might prompt those students to meet with the instructor after class to determine whether continuing is appropriate. Other students might realize that the course assumes certain prerequisites that they have not completed. Reviewing the syllabus as a class will help ensure that the students who remain enrolled are prepared for and interested in the material you plan to present.

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Establishing course expectations is equally critical. Students need to know what you expect of them in terms of attendance and participation. These expectations are often included in the syllabus. Regardless of whether or not they appear in that document or a different one, reviewing expectations on the first day prevents students from making incorrect assumptions about what they need to do to prepare for class, how absenteeism or tardiness will be handled, and how grades are determined and assigned.

Expectations do not have to involve minutia; it is not necessary to have dozens of specific requirements. A short list of three to five expectations, worded appropriately for the students in your class, is usually sufficient. For example, expectations could include the following:

- Be attentive. Texting, receiving calls, checking email, etc., are never permissible.
- Arrive on time. If you do not, it is your responsibility to gather the information presented prior to your arrival.
- Be respectful of the instructor and other students. There is no talking when others are talking.
- Be participatory. Respectfully participate in discussions without profanity, disrespect, or incivility toward the instructor or other students.

It is also helpful to communicate consequences for failing to meet expectations. Consequences are different from those of high school students. Consequences are used to let students know that they are not meeting their class obligations, to encourage students to meet expectations in the future, and to maintain classroom control. Expectations that are not enforced will undermine an instructor's credibility and will eventually erode the respectful classroom environment that you so carefully establish on the first day of class.

Permissible consequences vary from campus to campus. Before establishing any consequences, particularly those that remove students from class for any length of time, it is essential to consult college or university rules and guidelines to ensure that your classroom consequences do not violate any school provisions.

If allowable, the following are some consequences to consider:

- When expectations are not met, students may be asked to meet individually with the instructor.
- When expectations are not met, students may be asked to leave the room for the rest of the period.
- When expectations are not met, students may be required to meet with the instructor before returning to the next class.

The intent is not to scare students with draconian consequences. Rather, the goal is to inspire appropriate and respectful class participation and behavior.

Keep in mind that it is important to use proximity and privacy when correcting students. Don't embarrass students in front of their peers; chances are they will intentionally embarrass you before the end of class. Also, do not punish the majority who are abiding by the rules. Work privately with any students causing trouble.

REINFORCE EXPECTATIONS

Part of college-level teaching is instilling the skills to be successful students. In essence, along with your subject material, you are teaching students how to be students. You do that by reinforcing your expectations for attendance, class participation, and more on the first day and throughout the term. For example, if you want your students to work from textbooks during class, tell them to bring them to every class. If you want students to keep bringing textbooks to class, then you must use them regularly. Telling students to bring textbooks communicates the expectation. Using the textbooks in class reinforces the expectation.

Immediate and consistent application of consequences is also essential. This begins on the first day. If you overlook small disturbances, they will become large ones. It is easier to ease up on a mature and respectful class than it is to toughen up for a disrespectful or poorly managed group of students.

The classroom procedures established on the first day can also reinforce expectations. Since you expect students to arrive on time, it is helpful to have procedures that get students into seats and straight to work. Also, if you expect students to arrive on time, you must begin class on time. Remember, too, that ending on time is equally important. Students will not respect your time if you do not respect theirs.

How you dress can also reinforce your expectations. If your goal is to have students treat the course professionally and their classmates respectfully, you must model that behavior. That includes your clothing. While instructors must create warm and friendly classrooms, they are not students' friends. They are their instructors, their professors, and their role models. Students expect and deserve professional dress from their instructors. Dressing professionally also communicates that you respect your role and respect the students, which helps engender a similar response from the students.

THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT

There is a lot to cover on the first day. You establish procedures and convey expectations. You review the syllabus and, if you're teaching a lab, safety protocol. You also spend some time teaching some material. While you might not make an assignment on the first day, you still should use some time on the first day to talk about your expectations for students' work and how you assign grades.

Be very clear. Establish criteria for each assignment and put them in writing. That is, you must clearly tell students what you expect them to do and how the assignment should look when they turn it in. Some instructors communicate exactly how long each assignment is supposed to be and even go so far as to indicate what font and spacing students should use.

You must also communicate to students how their work will be graded. One option is to prepare a criteria sheet that lists expectations and points associated with assignments. Another option is to have a rubric with criteria on one side and quality indicators across. It might seem like excessive hand-holding to some instructors, but many students appreciate knowing exactly what they need to do and against which standards their work will be measured. Conveying this information on the first day allows students to plan their time and prioritize their various obligations.

Many students also appreciate a thorough explanation of how final grades will be calculated. A grade-calculation worksheet is a simple tool that allows students to track and monitor their performance over the course of the term. At any given moment, they can know exactly where they stand, what grades are possible, whether they need to spend more time on this course, or whether they can reprioritize to dedicate more effort to another course. In most cases, the math on the worksheet is simple and can vastly minimize stress for students, since it eliminates any uncertainty over how they are performing. (See Appendix D: How Am I Graded in This Course?)

Ultimately, clear expectations and consistent application of consequences will sustain the efficient yet friendly classroom environment that you wish to create. They will also ease stress and should encourage more active student participation.

Note: Although you explain grading on the first day, expect to review it again when you return the first assignments, papers, and exams. Once students have their graded papers in hand, you can walk them through the syllabus and how the material relates to it. You can explain how you applied your grading criteria and made final determinations about the quality of students' work. You can also help them enter their grades on their worksheet to begin to track their performance and progress.

7

THE INTEREST INVENTORY

The interest inventory is another tool that helps you acquaint yourself with your students. Unlike the introductions, the interest inventory is on paper and students do not have to give answers aloud in front of class. The interest inventory, therefore, helps you get to know your students privately and allows you to ask different questions than you would during oral introductions.

When creating your interest inventory, you need to consider what you need to know about your students in order to effectively teach them. The inventory is simply a list of questions about students' interests and backgrounds, but you decide which questions appear.

Your class might be the wrong course or come at the wrong time for some students, and the interest inventory allows you to determine in the first week whether those students would be better off dropping your course.

The questions should always include students' names and majors (or whether or not they have decided on a major). It is helpful to ask students' reasons for taking this course at this point in time. Your class might be the wrong course or come at the wrong time for some students, and the interest inventory allows you to determine in the first week whether those students would be better off dropping your course.

Another valuable question to ask is what students would like to learn or get out of the class. That lets you know what their expectations are. Some fun icebreaker questions are valuable too. "What is the best book you've ever read?" "What kind of music is playing on your iPod?"

While the icebreaker questions might seem frivolous, they are helpful in building the classroom community and in establishing a warm, welcoming environment. Another strategy is to answer some of the icebreaker questions yourself. When you share information with students, it makes them more comfortable sharing information with you.

Keep in mind that although the interest inventory is private, you still want to use discretion with the questions. You don't want to ask anything very personal or anything embarrassing. (See Appendix B: Welcome to Class, for an example of an interest inventory.)

Of course, the interest inventory also needs to include questions that will provide information about students' skills and preparedness. For example, you can have students solve some math problems or write a paragraph about a favorite book. This information will

allow instructors to tailor lectures by addressing any general deficiencies or accelerating material if students are adequately prepared.

IF YOU DARE

Also consider including “if you dare” questions in the interest inventory. These kinds of questions might require follow-up, so they are called “if you dare” questions because you need to be prepared for all kinds of answers and the work they might entail. However, these questions are intended to give you additional information that will help you maximize instructional efficacy.

For example, consider asking, “What did an instructor do last year that helped you learn?” Be prepared for mentions of instructors who provided exam review questions, three-hour review sessions, and pizza. You can also ask students what a teacher did that didn’t help them learn. The answers to these questions will also help you understand your students’ expectations of you.

Another valuable question is “What else do you want me to know about you?” Many times the answers will require that you take some kind of action. Some students might tell you that they have Attention Deficit Disorder or a different learning disability, that they need to see written notes to understand material, or that they need extra time during exams.

You will have to determine how to respond to the answers they provide, but it often is far more useful to have the information at the start of class so that you can work with each student appropriately. Most schools have different rules and procedures to handle special accommodations for learning disabilities, but the questions allow you to have the necessary conversations with students and to direct them to available resources.

Again, be prepared for answers you have not encountered in the past. For example, a student may request unique conditions for taking exams. Knowing the information early affords the necessary time to respond to student requests prior to any exams.

Note: Be sure to bring enough copies of the interest inventory and even pencils for the first day. While the pencils may seem excessive for college-level teaching, it is important to ensure that everyone participates. You can use it as a teaching tool and tell students that you did extra work for them on the first day of class, but that the first day will be the only time you will provide them with basic tools, such as pencils, paper, or books. Let them know that you expect them to bring their materials from that point forward. Remember to state your expectations clearly; don’t assume that your students know them.

8

EVERY STUDENT MAKES A FOLDER

Included in the materials on the entrance table should be manila folders. Students should write their names, last names first, on the folders. You will use these folders throughout the term to organize, distribute, and collect classroom materials.

After labeling their folders on the first day of class, students place the interest inventory inside. Then you have students do something a little unusual. Have them line up in alphabetical order and hand you their folders. As they do, you will say their names back to them to make sure you can pronounce them. Then you'll have all the folders in alphabetical order, and you get a chance to practice their names.

You can introduce the activity by saying, "You're going to do my work for me today," since they have to figure out how to line up alphabetically. If you like you can interrupt the

The exercise is practical (the organized folders) and pedagogical, as it reinforces the introductions from earlier in the class.

activity and challenge the students to finish the task more quickly than a previous class. The exercise is practical (the organized folders) and pedagogical, as it reinforces the introductions from earlier in the class. It reinforces the expectation that students get to know each other. It also affords students an opportunity to move around, which is often necessary in long classes, without squandering instructional time.

THE BOX

When you have all your folders in hand, walk to the entrance table and put them in a big plastic box. Then explain that you will store the students' alphabetized folders in the box. If you keep folders for more than one class in the box, be sure to tell students how the folders are organized or arranged. For larger classes, just utilize more than one box. On the first day, explain to students which letters of the alphabet are at which door.

The box is where students pick up and turn in class work and exams. If the box is out at the start of class, students should know that there is something inside for them. Each student looks in his or her folder and takes his or her exam or paper. Make it clear that they are not to look in anyone else's folder.

When you put out the box depends on when you want students to submit or retrieve materials. Sometimes you don't want them to have their papers back until the end of class. Students learn on the first day that any time the box is out that there is an expectation that they either turn something in or take something out, so don't put the box out at the start of class if you don't want students to use it until the end of class.

Another benefit of the box system is that it, again, allows you to maximize instructional time. You don't have to spend class time returning papers, and students aren't put in the awkward position of returning each other's papers, a practice that can breach student confidentiality. You spend a few minutes preparing folders on the first day of class, but then you save valuable time on every other day when you would need to hand out or collect materials.

Note: The box itself is just a typical plastic storage bin. Find one with handles so that it is easy to carry. Keep your papers in the box and transport the box in its entirety. That way nothing gets lost, nothing gets wet in the rain, and everything stays organized.

MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

While it is possible that students could look into other students' folders, a few strategies will help minimize any exposure of confidential information. When you return tests or papers, place them in the file backward so that grades aren't exposed as students flip through folders. Also, put grades inside on the bottom of the last page of an exam or paper rather than on the first page.

9

TEACH A LESSON

In addition to establishing procedures, it is critical that you teach something on the first day of class. Tuition is expensive and students, like you, have high expectations for the class. They deserve to learn something on every day, and it is your responsibility to find or create the teachable minutes.

Consider a 10- or 12-minute mini-lecture that introduces material. You do not have to accomplish a great deal; the goal is to ensure that students are exposed to the course material on the first day and that they learn something before they leave.

Some instructors give short pretests to assess students' subject matter knowledge. After the pretest, you can use a mini-lecture to provide the answers. There are no hard-and-fast rules about the pretest. You can have students record names or it can be anonymous. You can collect the tests or allow students to keep them. Just remember to inform students that the test will not be graded; you don't want to create anxiety on the first day of class.

There are other options for the first lesson. A science instructor can conduct an experiment or demonstration. A math instructor can model how to solve a problem and then separate students into pairs to solve similar problems. If your classroom is well equipped with technology—and you will know this before the first day of class because you have already visited and assessed your classroom—you can incorporate some of the technology. Short videos and discussions are useful if your students did not have to read any material for the first day of class.

Remember that everything you do on the first day establishes the tone for the entire semester. Take care when crafting any pretest questions or problems. You don't want to scare, embarrass, or humiliate students with material that is too hard. You want students to leave feeling that they successfully learned something and that they are prepared to learn the remainder of the material on the syllabus. You don't want them to leave feeling ill prepared or bored, prompting some to drop your course.

10

THE FOUR-STEP LESSON PLAN AND OTHER CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Even though the lecture component of the first day of class is short, it is still vitally important to plan it just as you would for any other day of class. After all, good teaching is purposeful and requires thought and organization.

You might recall your early days in the classroom when you wondered how you would fill up the hour or even the semester. It probably did not take you long to realize that there is more

The four-step lesson plan helps you organize material so that you can deliver information-rich lectures and cover more material in every class, including the first.

material than class time. Indeed, there is always too much to teach, and instructors have to make decisions about what students will learn. The four-step lesson plan helps you organize material so that you can deliver information-rich lectures and cover more material in every class, including the first.

Note: As you master the four-step plan, you will realize that much of your classroom procedure accomplishes a portion of the daily plan, and that the daily plan will largely mirror your “Today We Will”

list for the class. Thus, creating the plan reinforces the other things you are doing to prepare for class, and vice versa.

THE FOUR-STEP PLAN

• Step One: Focus Students

Most of this report deals with getting students in the door, into their seats, and focused on the class. Students’ minds are elsewhere when they first arrive. They could be thinking about the upcoming weekend. If they have families, they may be thinking about a child at home or at day care. As the instructor, you need to take their minds off those things. The procedures already discussed, specifically steps 1 through 8, are the way to do that. These procedures will occupy most of your first day of class but, if done well, should minimize time spent on classroom management on subsequent days.

• Step Two: Present, Lecture, and Explain New Material

The lecture is the most fundamental tool an instructor has. It is the portion of every class when you explain the reading assignments, present new material, and help students synthesize all of the course information.

While students are capable of reading textbooks or articles, instructors should still make connections between readings and original material during class time. It keeps students engaged and reinforces the importance of completing readings when the subject matter is

featured prominently in class. Students should not have to wonder why you assigned a particular article or chapter; it is your job to tell them or to help them figure it out on their own.

Students also expect and deserve more than simple reviews of reading assignments. They consider instructors experts who can offer insight on information in textbooks and articles. Presenting original material underscores an instructor's credibility and encourages class participation. Students learn that class attendance is critical because new material is available there and nowhere else.

- **Step Three: Apply New Material**

Instructors should not only present but also apply new material in every class. Students look to instructors to bridge theoretical course material and real life. For example, a reading assignment for a graduate education course might present a controversial theory advocating against homework in middle and high school. Have your students consider how this would work in their classrooms and how it would change the way they teach their students.

These kinds of exercises resonate with students and can make abstract concepts more tangible. For instructors, application of course material is a critical way to keep classrooms learner-centered and student-focused.

- **Step Four: Review, Conclude, Assess**

Many instructors have the feeling that there is never enough time and that there is too much to teach, and they keep going until the bell rings. The danger in that practice is that class will end abruptly, with questions hanging unanswered and discussions incomplete. However, briefly reviewing material, concluding the class, and then assessing what students learned helps students retain the information and helps instructors make improvements in lectures, activities, and processes.

You can review in different ways. Sometimes you tell students the importance of the day's lesson and other times you have them explain it to you. Either way, this provides valuable connections for students as they move onto the next portion of reading or as they complete assignments.

Taking a few minutes to wrap up the class also helps you determine whether students learned the material in the lecture, experiment, or presentation. One way to assess that is with a ticket out the door. Instruct students to tear out a sheet of paper. Explain that you will ask two questions and they will get to write for one minute. Then they hand you their paper, or ticket, as they leave. Some professors are incorporating social media into this portion of class by allowing students to respond on cell phones via Twitter. This method forces students to draw some conclusions, and it provides you with feedback on the efficacy of your work in class. It will also help you determine an appropriate starting point for the next time the class meets.

LESSON PLAN MODELS

Just as you have the four-step plan for organizing your class time, you need a plan model for organizing your class material.

There are a variety of useful lesson plan models for the body of the lecture. The most basic is a three-part plan that includes an introduction, body, and conclusion. Other plans are more detailed and include goals and objectives, focus activities, the body of a lesson, a conclusion, an assessment, and a reflection. A detailed plan provides more guidance in breaking down information and successfully teaching it to students. Many instructors therefore find it useful to spell out the details, expectations, goals, and objectives of each lesson.

Goals and objectives represent that we know what we are going to do, what we want to accomplish, and what our students should be able to do by the end of each class. Goals should be specific and clear. For example, the two goals for a graduate-level education class might be to introduce curriculum theorists and then to engage students in a discussion about those theorists and the contributions they have made to primary and secondary education.

Objectives are the things you want students to know and be able to do as a result of the lesson. So, as a result of the lecture for the graduate-level education course, the objective is for students to remember two or three main ideas of each of the two theorists and for students to be able to discuss each theorist's work by naming those two or three main ideas. A second objective is that students will be able to transfer some of the ideas from class into their own classrooms.

Once you establish your goals and objectives for each class, you are ready to prepare and then deliver your lecture.

DELIVERING THE LECTURE

Despite the time they spend planning out every hour of class, many instructors face the reality that not all students come to class prepared. Some do a thorough job of reading the material on a regular basis, but most don't read every word the instructor assigns.

What you do in the classroom has a bearing on how engaged students are in the classroom and out. Simple tactics can reinforce readings, aid in the retention of material, and encourage students to do their assigned readings between classes. More simply, the quality of your lectures can have a profound impact on the preparedness and success of your students.

- **Be Visual**

Breaking up the material with some visuals adds variety and gives students additional tools to aid retention. After all, even the most engaged and attentive students can have trouble concentrating on a lecture for 60 minutes. Blocked evening classes can last three times as long, so variety is essential.

The visuals can be quite simple. For example, you can show a picture of the author on the classroom screen or present a video clip or YouTube segment. When students are exposed to a dozen or more theorists over the course of a semester, an image can help students organize and retain the course material. A student might notice that one theorist was particularly young with dark hair. That bit of identifying information will help that student recall the course material later in the semester when writing a paper or preparing for an exam. All it took was showing a photograph in class.

Your course material might not include authors or theorists, so photographs might not be available. There are other ways to be visual. For example, you could project notes on the screen in 24-point font or larger. Sharing your notes shows students what you are working from, and it helps illustrate the way you broke down the reading material. Students can work from your notes as they read future assignments and begin to break down those readings in a similar way.

- **Be Interactive**

Notes are not necessarily full outlines of articles or book chapters. Notes contain not only key points to make in a lecture but also opportunities to break up the lecture and allow students to participate in the discussion.

Planning student interaction is relatively simple. You can stop and pose questions or problems that students need to answer before the lecture continues. You can also use statements that redirect students back to reading. For example, your notes can include a section of class where you tell students to go back to a certain page, read a segment, and then explain the author's position in their own words. They can do this individually in writing, or they can work in pairs by explaining material to a partner.

11

BEYOND THE FIRST DAY

Some students add classes after the term has begun. Since you have spent the first day of class establishing procedures and expectations along with teaching material, new students will naturally feel a bit lost or behind. When students add a course after the first day, allow them to attend and learn what they can. Then ask them to meet with you before the next class to review the first-day materials and procedures. It is time-consuming for instructors, but it ensures that all students are prepared to succeed in your class. That, after all, is the ultimate goal for instructors and students alike.

Don't abandon your procedures and expectations after the first day or first week. While this report gives you strategies to engage students on the first day, they will also work to keep students engaged throughout the term. This is important to maintain a civil and learning-centered classroom environment. Clear and consistent practices and communication minimize stress for the instructor as well as the students. These strategies

While this report gives you strategies to engage students on the first day, they will also work to keep students engaged throughout the term.

also encourage more active student participation, which increases student success and bolsters course evaluations.

Even if all students were present on the first day, things don't always go according to plan. Even seasoned professors have rocky starts every now and then.

If your first day of class didn't go smoothly despite the 10 steps in this report, reflect on it. Talk to someone else in your department or a mentor. Sometimes a colleague from a different school or program can offer a helpful perspective on what went wrong. Don't change your plan; just tweak it. Eventually things will come together, the class will become a learning community, and students will succeed.

In any case, take some time after the first day of class to determine what worked and what didn't. Evaluate these 10 steps and decide how you might modify them for your next course. (See Appendix E: Modifying the 10 Steps.)

COURSE EVALUATIONS

Many of the strategies to bolster student success also impact course evaluations. While students will not fill out any formal evaluations until the end of the term, their assessments begin on the first day. Keep that in mind as you prepare for class. There are numerous things that influence evaluations, but many of the factors students consider are evident on the first day. For example, students notice whether instructors arrive and begin class on time. They can quickly ascertain how well organized the instructor and course are based on

the syllabus and procedures established on the first day. Your first mini-lecture will tell students how well you know the material and how well you can teach it. Making an effort to learn students' names and insisting on a civil classroom will tell them you respect them.

The point of this report isn't simply to improve course evaluations. However, improved evaluations should be a natural by-product of earnest and consistent efforts and strategies to engage students from the moment they walk into class. (For more on evaluations, see Appendix F: How to Get Better Course Evaluations: 20 Things That Students Expect from Us.)

Even the best instructors are occasionally caught off guard by comments on evaluations. Sometimes you will read something and think, "If only I had known that during the semester, I could have made some changes." Well, you don't have to wait until the end of term to find out if your procedures and strategies are working. Students are usually happy to share their opinions, so consider soliciting feedback from them during the term. What they share can help you refine your tactics and better tailor lectures and assignments. You will know if your students are learning, what they think of you, and what else they need or want. (See Appendix G: Getting Midterm Feedback from Students.)

CONCLUSION

Students want to be successful. They take your class to learn your course material. They enroll in programs to earn degrees. They do that to attain certain career opportunities and rewards.

Instructors are the subject matter experts who impart skills and knowledge. Yet instructors must also teach and reinforce the learning skills necessary to earn the success that students are after. We prepare them to achieve, we share effective student habits, and we model appropriate and effective ways to interact with classmates. In essence, we teach them how to learn and how to succeed.

It all begins on the first day of class. Instructors have the power and authority to establish procedures, communicate expectations, and set the tone for the term. Take advantage of that opportunity to create a warm and welcoming yet businesslike learning environment that maximizes students' investments of time and tuition.

Of course there is only one first day of the term. If things did not go as planned, identify opportunities for improvement. Enlist the help of a mentor or colleague to determine what changes to make to procedures or pedagogy. Otherwise maintain the class components that were effective, and continually tweak your methods throughout the term.

Students are ultimately responsible for their own learning, yet instructors can and should create the structure for learning by creating a well-organized class.

APPENDIX A: GETTING READY FOR THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

Personal preparation

- _____ 1. My family and childcare issues are covered.
- _____ 2. I have practiced the commute to campus at the time I will be commuting.
- _____ 3. I have the required parking pass.
- _____ 4. All paperwork is completed for the college – insurance, payroll, etc.

Campus preparation

- _____ 5. I have found the buildings and classrooms where I will teach.
- _____ 6. I have keys and technology/media passwords for each classroom.
- _____ 7. I have whiteboard markers.

Student preparation

- _____ 8. I have ordered the books and verified that they are available.
- _____ 9. I have the class rosters and have checked the campus online system for student photos, if available.
- _____ 10. I have posted my syllabi and updated the course website information for students.

Class and lesson preparation

- _____ 11. I have a written lesson plan ready that includes time for introductions, and has extra material just in case it is needed.
- _____ 12. An interest inventory is ready for the students.
- _____ 13. The syllabus is ready.
- _____ 14. I have a pre-test or introductory lecture ready.
- _____ 15. I have a bag or pull-cart for taking all materials to class.

Last-minute details

- _____ 16. I have checked my e-mail for last-minute campus or departmental reminders.
- _____ 17. I know where restrooms are located.
- _____ 18. I know the process for having a student change his/her schedule.
- _____ 19. After the class, I will turn in required attendance to my registrar.
- _____ 20. I am ready for a good first day, and my goal is to establish a warm, but business-like environment.

APPENDIX B: A SAMPLE INTEREST INVENTORY

In creating your student interest inventory, ask questions that will not only help you get to know the student, but that also help you understand each student's interest and background in the subject.

Section A. Get student background — name, major, year in school

Sample questions: How does this class fit into your major? What do you plan to do after graduation?

Section B: How do you learn best?

What have teachers and professors done in the past that helped you to learn?

How many hours do you study outside of class? Where and how do you study? (by yourself, in groups, etc.)

Section C: Background in content

In this section, write content specific questions. This includes math problems to solve, or writing a paragraph about the subject matter. For example: In this field, there are many theorists. Name a theorist you have studied and describe why you are influenced by his/her work.

Section D: The fun questions that help us to get acquainted

What is your very favorite meal? Which restaurant is your favorite?

List one hobby. If you have a completely free Saturday afternoon, how would you like to spend it? If I gave you \$5,000 to spend on a trip, where would you go?

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you teach in a lab or high-tech classroom, what procedures will you need to teach on the first day?
2. Describe ideas for getting to know students and for building a sense of community within your class.
3. If your interest inventory or a pretest indicates that a student does not have the background knowledge for your class, what options exist (tutoring, help from the college support center, counseling the student outside of class)?
4. What are some routines or procedures used by a former professor of yours, or by a colleague, that you want to incorporate into your classes?
5. Why is the first day so important? Do clothes matter? How important is the first lesson/lecture?
6. If the first day doesn't go well, how might you plan for the second day?
7. How can you help your students learn to be college students? What other campus offices or organizations can help?
8. What are today's students like? What do we know about them?
9. If you are teaching students who have just entered college, what expectations do you have of their behaviors and of their readiness for your class? What can you do if they don't meet your expectations? How do you teach your expectations?

APPENDIX D: HOW AM I GRADED IN THIS COURSE?

GRADING POLICY

Assignments: There will be homework assignments with values ranging from 10 to 30 points.

Quizzes: There will be quizzes with values ranging from 20 to 40 points.

Midterm and Final: The midterm and final exams will be valued between 100 and 140 points.

The exact number of assignments and quizzes will be based on how the class progresses through the material. Each class is different, so assignments and quizzes vary accordingly.

To determine your grade, you must keep track of all the points you earn on each assignment, quiz, and exam. Add up the points you have earned and divide that number by the total number of points offered. That percentage is then applied to the 90%, 80%, 70%, 60% scale, for the letter grades of A, B, C, and D. A percentage below 60 is an F.

EXAMPLE 1: GRADE CALCULATION

Imagine that these are your grades that you are tracking.

Assignments: 12/12, 14/15, 17/20, 10/12, 22/25, 23/30, 17/20

Quizzes: 10/20, 15/20, 27/30, 35/40

Midterm: 111/130

Final: 110/140

You earned a total of 423 points out of 514 possible points. This is $423/514$, or 82%, which is a B.

EXAMPLE 2: PROGRESS TEMPLATE

In this example, the instructor communicates ahead of time exactly how many points will be available on each assignment and exam. As students look at their first grades along with the template, they should understand more clearly how their term grades are determined and how they can track their grades along the way.

Tracking My Grade in This Course—A Worksheet

This course has four assignments, a midterm, and a final. As each is graded, you can record your points earned and figure your current grade.

Assignment 1: My score _____/30 possible

Assignment 2: My score _____/30 possible

Assignment 3: My score _____/30 possible

Assignment 4: My score _____/30 possible

My midterm grade: _____/140 possible

My final exam grade: _____/140 possible

My points earned _____/400 possible = _____%

Once you have determined the percentage of points earned, apply that percentage to the following scale and you will know your grade:

A = 90–100%

B = 80–89%

C = 70–79%

D = 60–69%

F = 0–59%

Students can use the worksheet to determine how well to prepare for a final exam in order to earn a desired grade. For example, a student can determine the best possible grade he or she can earn, or students can determine how many points they need to earn on a final to maintain their current grades.

To determine the best grade that can be earned, do the following:

Add your points. Then add all the possible points available on the final and refer back to the scale in the syllabus. For example, if you earned 180 points before the final and get a near-perfect exam score, your grade will be 180 plus 140, which equals 80%, a B. In this case it is not possible to earn an A.

APPENDIX E: MODIFYING THE 10 STEPS

For each of the 10 steps, reflect on whether the step will work in your class as it is described. If not, what modification might you make to the step so that it is more useful to you?

1. Create procedures for getting students in the room; use an entrance table.
2. Learn students' names.
3. Use focus activities.
4. Use the "Today We Will" list
5. Remember introductions.
6. Review syllabus and expectations.
7. Take an interest inventory.
8. Have every student make a folder.
9. Teach a lesson.
10. Understand the four-step lesson plan.

APPENDIX F: HOW TO GET BETTER COURSE EVALUATIONS: 20 THINGS THAT STUDENTS EXPECT FROM US

We rarely think about course evaluations on the first day of the new semester, but first impressions do matter and will influence evaluations at the end of the term. Students begin evaluating instructors immediately and continue throughout the semester, trimester, or quarter. What do they want and what can we do to ensure that those evaluations are positive? Actually, the things that will improve evaluations should also increase student performance and success.

Review your school's evaluation process and any specific questions on the evaluation instrument at the beginning of the semester. Consider those factors when you plan your classes and while you teach.

Generally, though, considering the following 20 things should help you focus your efforts and strategies so that students learn more and provide good evaluations:

1. The instructor arrived on time and began class punctually.
2. The instructor was always well organized.
3. The instructor used visuals when needed and they were easy to see.
4. The instructor could be heard and easily understood.
5. When possible with class size, the instructor knew the students' names.
6. The instructor used class time purposefully.
7. The instructor engaged students with the material.
8. The instructor assessed student learning informally before exams.
9. The instructor explained critical information.
10. The instructor used questions to help students learn material.
11. The climate of the classroom was very positive.
12. The instructor understood the background and interests of students.
13. The instructor maintained a lively pace.
14. The instructor had clear grading criteria for each assignment.
15. The instructor had clear grading criteria for the final semester grade.
16. The textbook for this course was a valuable resource that we used.
17. Papers and exams were returned in a timely manner.
18. The instructor was available for help outside of class.
19. The instructor answered messages and emails in a timely manner.
20. The instructor encouraged us.

APPENDIX G: GETTING MIDTERM FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS

Students are not shy about telling instructors what they think about course content, how professors teach, how hard the class is, or anything else on their minds. However, when only a few outspoken students provide feedback, their comments may not represent the feelings of the majority of students.

Course evaluations often provide useful information for adjusting certain classes the next time around, but they are not helpful in identifying challenges to current classes. Often instructors read end-of-semester course evaluations and think, “If I had just known that, I could have easily made a change.”

That is why getting feedback during the semester can be very valuable in helping us to meet students’ needs. This feedback can also help us to understand our students and what they are—and aren’t—learning.

You are the expert, so you don’t want to solicit feedback at every turn lest you appear to be seeking approval. However, a good time to gauge how class is going is after the first big paper, project, or exam is returned to the students. One strategy to collect information is having students complete a short inventory or survey about their preparation and work for the paper or exam. These can be anonymous so that you get more genuine and honest responses. Questions you might ask include the following:

1. Were you pleased with your grade on this paper/project/exam? Why or why not?
2. How long did you study for this exam outside of class?
3. How long did you spend preparing the paper?
4. Now that we are in the third week of the semester, about how many hours a week do you spend reading the assignments and studying for this class?
5. Where and how do you study? By yourself or with others?
6. What could be done in class sessions to help you better learn/understand the material?
7. Which class activities help you the most to learn the material (lecture, discussion, brainstorming sessions, guided questions about the reading)?
8. Complete this sentence: It would help me a lot if the instructor _____.

Another idea to try is to give the college’s course evaluation at midterm time as an informal, formative assessment of how the course is going. This way you see what students are thinking while there is still time to make improvements before your department chair and dean read the final evaluations.

Also, short, formative assessments can be done at the end of some classes. When completing a unit with multiple topics, allow two minutes at the end of class for students to write the following:

1. Which topic do you understand the best from the last two weeks? Why?
2. Which topic remains the most difficult or unclear?
3. What could be done in class to help you learn and master this material?

Again, anonymous is best for the most accurate, candid responses.

WE VALUE YOUR FEEDBACK

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