

# for your consideration...

SUGGESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

CFE Number 1

January 2009

## The First Day of Class ... Your Chance to Make a Good First Impression

The way you choose to spend the first day of class will set the tone for the entire semester. In the academy there used to be a relatively common practice of devoting the first class meeting to reading the syllabus to the students and then, after answering questions about the course, either beginning to lecture or dismissing the class early. Alternatively, there are many things you can do on the first day that will help establish rapport with students; set norms and tone for the course, prepare students for the semester's work, correct any misperceptions about the course, and generate excitement about the subject matter.

Students typically want to know two kinds of information on the first day of class. They want to learn as much about the nature and scope of the course as possible, which helps them to decide whether they want to remain in the course and, if so, to better anticipate the work requirements for the semester. Students are also curious about the teacher as a person. They want to know if you will be reasonable and fair with them, if you care about them as individuals, and if you care about the course content itself.

A comprehensive, learning-centered syllabus distributed during the first class promotes a positive attitude in students, as it shows you care about the course and have made an effort to plan it carefully. At minimum, your syllabus should

- describe the course goals and objectives and how these fit in the larger curriculum;
- outline the structure of the course, including topics, grading, examination procedures, reading assignments, attendance policy, faculty office locations, and office hours;

- describe expectations for everyone in the classroom; and
- provide an easy to access guide to navigating the course throughout the semester.

By preparing a well-designed syllabus, you remove the necessity of discussing in detail the various components of the course. Students can read those for themselves. A detailed and clearly organized syllabus frees up time on the first day of class to spend on learning more about students and their interests, sharing information about yourself, and exploring why the topics of the course are important for students to spend time learning. The syllabus will also provide late-joining students with all the vital information they need to succeed in the course. Do consider how much of the syllabus to emphasize during class and leave the remainder for students to read on their own. Emphasize the importance of the syllabus and explain they will be held accountable for all material in the syllabus, much like they are held accountable for all content of the text, not only the material read to them:

### Get to Know Your Students

We have known for many years that respect and other affective factors greatly impact student motivation (Cohen, 1981). Students have strong preferences for being treated as respected individuals and achieve more when instructors have a positive attitude toward both the course content and the students themselves. Thus, there are good reasons to show students from the very beginning that you view them as individuals within a community of learners and care about them as people.

## Learn Your Students' Names

One of the easiest ways to show students you care about them as individuals is to learn their names as early in the semester as possible. Aside from the benefits already mentioned, there are other reasons to learn students' names. Your ability to call upon them by name helps create a relaxed and friendly classroom atmosphere. It enables you to stimulate class discussion by asking individual students to express their points of view. It may also transform a group of isolated and anonymous individuals into a community of people who cooperatively engage in the exploration of ideas and knowledge.

### Methods for small classes

1. In small classes, learning student names may not be difficult. If you teach a class of less than twenty students, you might first ask students to identify themselves one row at a time and then repeat what each student in that row has told you. As you move on to subsequent rows, try to repeat all the names previously mentioned. This exercise can be repeated at the beginning of each class period until you feel confident that you can connect a name with every face.
2. Using the registration list, call the roll at the start of each class. You can also ask students to say their names before they make comments or ask questions.
3. Distribute index cards on the first day and ask students to write down who they are and where they come from. After collecting these cards, spend time on the first day and subsequent days reading the names on the cards, looking at each person and trying to form an association between names and hometowns, facial expressions, hair color, or any other striking characteristics. To reinforce these associations, call the roll every day during the first week of classes to fix the names in your mind.

All these methods are effective in classes with relatively small enrollments, but they are difficult to implement in larger classes. Although it may not be possible to learn every student's name in a large class, it is still important to learn as many names as possible. At the very least, learn the number of names you would in a smaller class.

### Methods for large classes

1. Tell students to select the seats they wish to sit in for the semester. Once course enrollment has stabilized and students have chosen their seats, make a seating chart. If you explain that the reason for the seating chart is to help you learn their names, they will be less likely to object.
2. Review photographs of students as often as you can to learn as many names as possible. Students' One Card photos are included in your

course's Electronic Class Roll. Alternatively, you could have students send you digital photos of themselves. It will not take long before you will be able to identify many of the students in your class.

3. Show up for class early enough to spend five minutes talking to students and learning something about them. Select a different area of the room each class period so that during class you can call on some students by name without always calling on the same section of the room. This method will yield an additional benefit: you will demonstrate to students that you care about them as individuals, even in large enrollment courses.
4. In the first few minutes of a class, record your students on video giving their name and any other information you wish to know about them. Repeated viewings will aid you in learning names.

## Get to Know Your Students' Attitudes and Abilities

Entering a classroom with a new group of students confronts a teacher with a wide array of attitudes, abilities, and capabilities. Acknowledging that these elements can be used effectively to engage and motivate students gives the teacher additional resources for delivering a student-centered learning experience. The more information you have about your students, the more you can direct your teaching to their capabilities, preconceptions, and interests. Here are some ideas for collecting this information.

### Student Biographies

Having students provide information about their background experiences can be very beneficial. First, this gives you some idea of the interests and prior knowledge that students bring to the course. Using this information, you can improve your presentation of material by bringing in topics and examples that match their interests, an approach that will engage them as learners and demonstrate how course material has real-life applications. Second, you can enhance the quality of student-teacher interactions if you review a student's biographical information just prior to a scheduled appointment. Third, contact information can be copied and distributed to all members of the class to help students locate each other if they miss class, need help with the course, or want a study partner. Before you distribute this information, remember to ask students to identify which information they are comfortable having shared.

To gather biographical information, give each student an index card and ask them to write his

or her name, local address, email address, phone number, hometown, and major. Then ask them to write about their interest in your course and in other courses or about life experiences which relate to the course's subject matter. You might also ask them who their heroes are, what hobbies they enjoy, and skills or talents of that they are especially proud. In asking for personal information, you should emphasize that students are not required to reveal anything that they do not feel comfortable sharing.

You might consider collecting biographical information about students before the first class meeting. You could use Electronic Class Rolls or Blackboard to send an e-mail to your students a week before the course begins, asking them to reply with as much of the information noted above as they are comfortable including. If you use Blackboard, you could create a discussion forum and have students post something about themselves for members of the class to read. For smaller classes, you could set the forum to allow students to post anonymously. On the first day of class the group could attempt to match the biographical information with individuals in the class.

## Short Essays

Another method that can be beneficial to you and your students is an ungraded short essay written on the first day of class. Short essays can reveal several important student characteristics, including perception, knowledge, and attitudes about the subject, analytical and conceptual skills, as well as general writing ability. For example, if you are teaching a course in the sciences, ask students to write about the questions and problems that science seeks to answer. If you are teaching a course in art history, show a slide of a lesser-known work and ask students to identify and describe the style, symbolism, and historical period. If you are teaching about a foreign country, ask students to write about their perceptions and beliefs about it. Reading their essays will help you understand what preconceptions, attitudes, and prior knowledge students have about the subject matter and will help you identify themes that you may want to emphasize as you teach.

## Diagnostic Tests

Designing and administering a non-graded diagnostic test is another method you can use to gauge students' knowledge and perceptions of the course's subject matter. The questions might cover the major themes you will address during the semester. You should explain to the students that the purpose of the test is to help you present course materials more effectively and that the more you know about their knowledge or understanding of the subject matter, the easier it will be to focus on what you need to teach them. Many of the questions asked in the diagnostic exam may be used as questions on the mid-term and final

exam: enabling you and the students to compare their knowledge at the beginning and end of the course. You will have a basis for judging how much each student gained by participating in the course (even though you may not wish to use this criterion in assigning grades). In addition, it provides students with examples of the types of questions you will ask on graded quizzes and exams.

## Introduce Yourself

The preceding suggestions are designed to help you learn as much as you can about your students. Just as you have good reason to want to know more about them, students appreciate knowing more about you than merely your contact information on the syllabus. The hierarchy of the classroom can inhibit communication between you and your students. Your willingness to reveal something about yourself helps overcome this behavior.

The first day of class is an opportune time to tell students something about your personal or professional life. Each teacher must decide what self-revelations are acceptable and relevant, but some subjects are relatively safe and easy to talk about—for example, your educational background and research interests. Taking time to share your professional journey to becoming an expert in your discipline places a human face on the subject matter for students. It can also foster excitement in your subject matter. The sense of wonder and curiosity that you can convey may be just the catalyst that students need to reframe a required course to one that is exciting and engaging.

If you don't feel comfortable talking about yourself in class, there are other ways to convey the same information. You might distribute an abbreviated personal resume or curriculum vitae. For those who prefer to be more creative, you could construct a personal profile along the lines of an advertisement.

## Set Classroom Ground Rules

It is important on the very first day of class to discuss with your students expected classroom behaviors. Do not make the students guess what behaviors you desire to observe in class. For example, if you find it rude for individuals to come to class late, tell students that you expect them to be there on time. If you are not troubled by students being a few minutes late, let them know that you appreciate timeliness, but that you would like for them to sit near the door upon arrival. Discussing ground rules for disagreements among students during discussions, policies on cell phones ringing in class, and whether students can use laptops are just a few areas that should be addressed. Essentially, determine what constitutes a civil classroom environment to you and discuss those issues briefly. This discussion is

necessary, as faculty members tend to have differing opinions as to what qualifies as considerate behavior. This is particularly true of individuals from different cultures.

## Discuss the Honor Code

The Honor Code at Carolina plays a critical role in upholding the values of the University. Each instructor is responsible for making sure that students understand what academic integrity means within the context of a specific course. Devoting ample time during the first class period to discuss the Honor Code sends the message to students that academic integrity is important to you, their fellow students, and the University. Do not assume that students have read the Honor Code. Reinforce key points and expectations. Most students focus on those aspects of the Code that address lying, cheating, or stealing. Equally important is how students should conduct themselves each day, both in the classroom and in other academic settings. Initiating a discussion about what it means to be a respectful and responsible learner will help you and your students establish a positive learning environment for the course:

The UNC Honor Code and additional information are available at <http://honor.unc.edu>.

## Introduce the Subject Matter

Introducing the subject matter on the first day of class underscores its importance and relevance to students' learning. Activities that foster engagement with course topics can stimulate students' curiosity about the subject matter and help students begin questioning their current knowledge of the discipline.

A professor in communication studies shows a fifteen-minute video which introduces her subject. The film is colorful, exciting, and motivational, and she reports that students come to the second class eager to begin learning more. An economics

instructor asks students to think about the questions they want the course to answer for them. He writes these items on the blackboard and discusses each of them in turn, pointing out when in the semester the questions will be addressed—but only hinting at possible answers in order to whet students' curiosity. A biology teacher asks students to draw a picture of a cell and has students work in groups to identify commonalities and differences in their perceptions that will become the focus of later lectures. Providing samples of course content can be accomplished in many ways, but the more successful methods are creative approaches that both introduce course concepts and stimulate student interest in course content.

The first day of class affords a variety of opportunities to establish rapport with your students and to provide the kinds of information you and they want in that initial class. By meeting these needs, you can increase students' motivation and achievement and enhance your own effectiveness.

## Bibliography

Cohen, P. A. (1981). Student ratings of instruction and student achievement: A meta-analysis of multisection validity studies. *Review of Educational Research*, 51(3), 281-309.

Davis, B. G. (2001). The first day of class. *Tools for teaching* (pp. 20-27). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Forsyth, D. R. (2003). Prepping: Planning to teach a college class. *The professor's guide to teaching: Psychological principles and practices*. (pp. 9-47). Washington, DC US: American Psychological Association.

McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2006). Meeting class for the first time. In W. J. McKeachie, & M. Svinicki (Eds.), *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (12th ed., pp. 21-29). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.



## University of Oklahoma Program for Instructional Innovation

"Supporting OU Faculty in Developing 21st Century Learners"

PII HOME

Newsletters

Tips on Teaching

Helpful Resources

How To Contact Us

Team-based Learning

Significant Learning

### Ideas on Teaching

#### The First Day of Class: What Can/Should We Do?

What can we do on the first day of class? What should we do?

One common answer is simply to start lecturing: "This is day one, here is lecture one, away we go!" Another possibility is: "Here is the syllabus, go buy your books and we will see you at the next scheduled class period." Neither of these two options seems desirable. But what are some other possibilities?

Several years ago a group of professors at the University of Oklahoma visited each other on the first day of class and then discussed what they saw each other doing. But the discussion quickly went from what they observed, to "What might be done?" They eventually identified nine attractive possibilities, as described below. A teacher should not feel obliged to do all of these, but doing even one or several of them on the first day (or during the first week) would seem to accomplish a number of important tasks for getting a class started in the right way.

##### 1. Involve students quickly.

This can be done in a variety of ways:

- having them introduce themselves
- allowing them to think and write silently
- having a whole-class or a small-group discussion, etc.

But letting students know right from the outset that they will be active participants seems like a good approach.

##### 2. Identify the value and importance of the subject.

Not all students come to all classes with a clear idea of why this subject is important. The teacher may need to help them understand the significance of the course. The sooner this is done, the sooner the students will be ready to invest time and energy in the task of learning the subject matter.

##### 3. Set expectations.

This can involve such things as what the teacher considers appropriate amounts of study time and homework for the class, the importance of turning homework in on time, expectations about in-class behavior, how the teacher wants to relate to students, and how much interaction among students is desired. The first day also offers an opportunity to find out what expectations the students have of the teacher and of the class.

##### 4. Establish rapport.

Almost any class will be more enjoyable for both the teacher and the students if they know each other a bit. This exchange can be started with introductions, sharing some background information, etc.

### 5. Reveal something about yourself.

Sometimes students can relate to the teacher more productively if they can see him or her as a human being, i.e., as something more than just an authority figure or subject matter expert.

Sharing personal stories and being able to laugh at yourself can help this process.

### 6. Establish your own credibility.

Sometimes this happens automatically, but at other times students need to know about the teacher's prior work experience, travel experience, or research and publications in an area.

Having this knowledge can help students gain confidence that the "teacher knows what she or he is talking about."

### 7. Establish the "climate" for the class.

Different teachers prefer different classroom climates: intense, relaxed, formal, personal, humorous, serious, etc. Whatever climate you want, you should try to establish this early and set the tone for the rest of the semester.

### 8. Provide administrative information

This often takes the form of going through the syllabus, presuming you have a syllabus with this information in it: material the students will need

- what kind of homework will be involved
- what your office hours are
- where your office is located
- how the class grade will be determined
- what your policies are regarding attendance, late papers, make-up exams, etc..

### 9. Introduce the subject matter.

Generally this introduction will be facilitated by starting with some kind of overview of the subject.

- What is it?
- What are the parts of the subject?
- How is it connected to other kinds of knowledge?

### Final Note:

Remember that it is imperative that you do on the first day whatever it is you want the class to do the rest of the semester. If you want them to discuss, discuss on the first day. If you want them to work in small groups, find something for them to do in small groups on the first day.

