

THE MOST IMPORTANT DAY: STARTING WELL

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Introduction

The first day of class is a very important time for faculty to establish a tone for what will happen the rest of the term. It is appropriate that a teacher reflect on just what climate and first impression she/he would like to establish. This article offers some ideas about that all important day.

Reflecting on the first day of class, McKeachie (1986) suggests that "... meeting a group of strangers who will affect your well being, is at the same time exciting and anxiety producing for both students and teacher." Research on the first day of class by Knefelkamp showed there was a real desire on the part of both students and teachers for connectedness, but neither group realized the other shared that desire. If the participants on both sides don't understand how to develop their relationships, learning will be diminished. If you have experienced some anxiety about this meeting, planning some specific steps can not only reduce that feeling, but can get students to share in the sense of purpose you hold for the class.

Some faculty avoid the "first day anxiety" by handing out a syllabus, giving an assignment, and dismissing the class. This only postpones the inevitable. It also gives students a sense that class time is not too important. Most of all, it loses the opportunity to use the heightened excitement and anticipation that students bring that day; the chance to direct that excitement toward enthusiasm for the class.

What can you do to establish a positive beginning? How can you make sure student's attitudes toward you, the course, and the subject matter will support a constructive learning climate for the semester? The following ideas have been gathered to stimulate your thoughts about these questions. Perhaps you will think of others, but the following are things which could contribute to this goal. They are not in a particular order, but can be sampled to fit your own preferences.

Enthusiasm

Conveying a sense of enthusiasm for the content is important. Scholl-Buchwald suggests that professors "Rarely ... need to impress students with our command of the material. What is not always clear to students is whether we are interested in the subject and whether we will be able to help them become as competent as we are." He suggests that one way to demonstrate enthusiasm is to talk about yourself and your own excitement about what you teach. What intrigues you, and what could interest them?

Another approach is to give a short lecture or lead a discussion to stimulate interest in the

problem-solving that this subject matter could enable students to do. Consider core ideas, typical problems in the field, cutting-edge discoveries, commonly held myths, provocative insights/interpretations or other stimulating insights into the field. Do you have slides or videotapes to enhance these images of inquiry? What interesting, related research is going on here at UNL? How might this have impact on their lives? How can you relate these ideas to their own experiences? Perhaps an interesting experiment or problem to solve can introduce the field.

Ice-Breakers

Opening communications among students as well as between yourself and students will pay dividends throughout the semester. Exercises which do this are called "icebreakers" and can take many forms such as the following:

1. Have students raise hands indicating whether they are freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or seniors; majors, nonmajors, or other interests; those who have had related course and those who haven't; or other categories of student descriptors. This will immediately initiate participation and can give you useful information about the students.
2. Have each person introduce themselves and give some information you and other students can associate with the person. This could be hometown, field, questions they have, why they took the course, what they did this summer, etc. Include yourself in the introductions.
3. Use a "naming cycle" in which students introduce one another with each successive person repeating names of all those already introduced. This can be a device to help you learn names quickly, and this will pay significant dividends in how students feel about you as an interested teacher.
4. Have students interview one another and then have them introduce someone else on the next day. A variation could be to write a short sketch about the interviewed person to be turned in as well as being used for introductions.
5. Have students complete an interest or experience survey from which the teacher would provide summarized feedback for discussion the second day. A variation could be oral student responses to the survey in class or responses with a show of hands.
6. Select a key word from the course title and have students do an "association exercise" by reporting what first comes to mind, record answers on the chalkboard and use these to give an overview of the course.
7. Ask students to suggest what problems or ideas they would like to see included in the course, or have them tell what they have heard about the course. Post these on the chalkboard and refer to the list when the syllabus is reviewed. Students can clarify or correct perceptions they have held.

Your Own Introduction

Who you are and what you are like is of great interest to new students. Learning in the classroom results from an interrelationship of people, and what students perceive about you can help support that interaction. Sometimes students never have the sense that the professor is a "real person," and they may respond in ways that would be unthinkable to someone they felt they knew. Sharing something about yourself can begin a constructive relationship.

You might share your own experiences in the course when you first took it. How did you study it, when did it come together for you? Share what you as a teacher expect from them. What do you believe about teaching and learning? Who is responsible for what in an academic setting? What are your hopes for them when they have completed the course?

Be sure to put your name on the board so they know what it is and how to spell it correctly. It is always surprising to find that many students don't know the names of their teachers. Let them know your attitudes about when and where it is appropriate to contact you outside of class. Are you willing to spend a few moments after each class for those questions which may not warrant an office visit?

McKeachie suggests that the teacher "characteristics" most appreciated by students are:

1. Enthusiasm and willingness to work to make the course worthwhile.
2. Objectivity (the students will call it, "fairness").
3. A sympathetic attitude toward the problems of students

Your attitudes in these areas would be useful topics to convey your values. Caution: Do not focus on your own inadequacies or limitations. This only increases the insecurity on the part of students, and may lead to their blaming their own limitations on the inadequacies you have identified.

Course Expectations

A well designed syllabus can go a long way toward clarifying expectations so students have a sense of knowing what they are to do. The teacher can give them the idea that he/she is prepared to help them learn, while also developing the sense of their own responsibility for achieving course goals.

The syllabus usually includes: information about the course, policies, requirements, tests, assignments, texts, references, prerequisites, schedule, grading policies, etc. For more information on syllabus writing, see Teaching at UNL, Vol. 7, No. 1, August 1985 or the TLC Resource Room for detailed references.

Textbook Introduction

Tell students how you expect them to use the text in their learning, and what is useful about it. Do not criticize it or the author. This is not constructive and can undermine learning. If discrepancies occur between your views and the text, explain that rival interpretations exist, and give reasons for your choice. You can encourage realization that clear "truths" are not always agreed upon. Do clarify for students which ideas are acceptable for examinations purposes.

Student Questions

Provide an opportunity for students to ask questions about the course, you, the text or other aspects of the course. It is important to establish a sense that you are willing to change things they do not understand. Be accepting of all questions. This does not mean you need to change your plans, but you can listen to questions and be responsive to clarification.

Student Feedback

At the end of the first class period, give students two minutes to write their reaction to the first day. These should be anonymous so you get an accurate sense of the students' views. This can provide feedback on doubts, or questions that students were afraid to raise. It can also begin to build a learning climate in which they have responsibility for thinking about learning in this class.

Checklist For The First Day

1. Am I energized to be enthusiastic about this class?
2. Is the classroom arranged properly for the day's activities?
3. Is my name, course title, and number on the chalkboard?
4. Do I have an ice-breaker planned?
5. Do I have a way to start learning names?
6. Do I have a way to gather information on student backgrounds, interests, expectations for the course, questions, concerns?
7. Is the syllabus complete and clear?
8. Have I outlined how students will be evaluated?
9. Do I have announcements of needed information ready?
10. Do I have a way of gathering student feedback?
11. When the class is over; will students want to come back? Will you want to come back?

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