

First Day Considerations:

The first day of class is an important time for both you and the students. You will never have a better opportunity to demonstrate that you care about the topic, that you care about what happens in the classroom, that you care about your students, and to set the expectations for the class. In my 16 years of teaching I have, on a number of occasions, read the syllabus to the students (I would pretend it was a discussion, but really I just read it and commented on the importance of certain aspects) and then let them go early. My assumption was that I was doing my students a favor by letting them go early. It was my gift to them (and I got out early).

Then about 8 years ago a colleague convinced me that it is important to treat the first day just as any other instructional day. For a few years I lectured the first day for the whole time and felt I was setting a good tone. I then realized that the first day was not the same as every other class period: it was our first meeting. By jumping right into the material I did not respect the questions and concerns of the students. I knew where class was headed, but they didn't.

About 5 years ago I realized that lecturing on the first day set the tone that I was serious about "teaching," but failed to recognize that they were part of the process of "learning." By letting them go early I was NOT giving them what they wanted or needed. It was not a gift. Sure, most will show pleasure at leaving early, but there are so many other ways to please students, such as answering some of their questions. Students want to know what the course is about, why they should be interested in the topic, what they are going to learn, and why it is important in society. They want to know what kind of teacher you are, and whether you care about them as students or regard them simply as numbers. They want to know what you expect of them and whether you are open to feedback. They want to know if you love what you are teaching and whether they will get to know each other in the class. They want to know many things. Think about what they want and need to know, and use the first day to set the tone you want set in your course. Show them that you care as much about learning as you do about teaching.

The following is how I approach the first day of class. I expect that you will do things differently, but this will give you an idea of the types of things I think about. If you have something that you find works really well on the first day of class please e-mail me. The following is not inclusive, but rather a sampling of items.

I use the first day to set the tone for the class. I first decide exactly what it is that I want to accomplish in the class. I do cover a bit of content, but often I focus on the following: why I love psychology and find Learning and Memory a fascinating area; that I expect everyone (including myself) to put energy into this course; that trying is important in learning, but grades will be based on evidence of mastery, not effort; that I have high expectations regarding student work; that class is a learning community and as a community everyone should know the name of everyone else (my class is about 50 students); that not everything will be perfect in the class all the time; students are ultimately responsible for their own education (have to take tests when scheduled, hand in papers on time, and attend class); and we discuss why the average student in the course should really care about the material that we are about to cover. Finally, I tell the students that all instructors are as different from each other as students are from one another. What happens in this class will be similar to what happens in other classes, and although I am open to adjustments in class, students should NOT expect me to do

something "just because someone else teaches or grades in a give way." We then discuss briefly the assignment for the next class period.

Depending on the course, I will do some form of an icebreaker (several are listed below). I also do some activity that helps me to learn many of the names of students in the course (several methods are listed below). This is often tied to the icebreaker. Then, if we finish all that, we get out early. That is rare these days.

First Day Class Icebreakers:

The following are some icebreakers you might use in your class. Regardless of the icebreaker used, make sure to explain why you are doing the icebreaker, and after it is completed debrief the exercise. For example, beforehand you might mention that you want the class to work as a community and the icebreaker is a chance to get to know each other. After Exercise 2 (below), you might explain we have all done important things and that we consider different things important (honor diversity). After Exercise 5 (below), you might explain the importance of nonverbal communication. Select an icebreaker that relates to your class and at the end explain it to the students.

1. Ask students demographic questions: major vs. non major; geographic area they are from; year at the university; or any number of items that will allow students to connect.
2. Ask each student to state something they have done that they don't think anyone else in the room has done. If someone else has done the activity it is a great connection, and if they are unique it shows that we have all done interesting things.
3. 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, winter break) etc. Include yourself in the introductions.
4. Have students work in groups of two. Find out one thing the other person has done that they consider significant, why that person is taking the course, and what he/she hopes to get out of the course. Then students introduce the person they interviewed.
5. Break students into groups of about 15 - 20 and tell them the task is to arrange themselves in order of the day of the year they were born: January 1 would end up at the front of the line and December 31 would end up at the end of the line. Tough part is that they cannot talk or write anything in completing this task. 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.
6. Ask students to write on an index card what they expect to learn from the course. Then have students, as a class, to arrange the responses into clusters and name each cluster.

Methods to Learn Names of Students:

The following two web sites list MANY ways to learn student's names. I know learning student's names takes a lot of effort, but students report time and again that they

are impressed and feel differently about a course when the faculty learn their names (by the way, students recognize this takes time and energy on your part).

<http://www.indiana.edu/~teaching/names.html>

<http://www.unl.edu/teaching/Names.html>

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