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3

The First Days of Class

The first day of class sets the tone for the rest of the term. It is natural for both students and instructors to feel anticipation, excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty. To pique students' interest, convey your enthusiasm for the topics that will be covered during the term. To put students at ease, try to create a relaxed, open classroom environment conducive to inquiry and participation, and let students know what you will expect from them and what they can expect from you and the course. The following suggestions, intended to help you get your class off to a good start, address three important tasks of the first day: handling administrative matters including course policies and procedures, creating a positive classroom environment, and setting course expectations and standards.

General Strategies

Visit the classroom before the first meeting. Test the room's lights, blinds, electrical outlets, thermostat, and ventilation. Check any equipment (microphone, projector screen, laptop, chalkboard) that you will be using, and find out how to obtain help if the equipment malfunctions. If the classroom is large, practice speaking to the far corners of the room and make sure your board work will be legible from the back row.

Build a sense of community in the classroom. Students learn more and work harder in classes that spark their intellectual curiosity and allow for active involvement and participation. For the first day, plan an activity that provides opportunities for students to speak to one another or to solve problems. Students also tend to work harder when they feel that their instructor views them as individuals rather than as anonymous faces in the crowd. From the start, make an effort to get to know your students and express your interest in working with them during the term. (Source: Astin, 1993)

Address students' concerns. Students enter a new class with several questions: Is this the right course for me? Does the teacher seem competent and fair? How much work will be required? How will I be evaluated? Use the first days to answer

these questions and demonstrate your commitment to helping your students learn. (Source: Forsyth, 2003)

Set the tone for the rest of the term. Greet students when they enter the classroom. Start and finish class on time. Encourage questions, and give students the opportunity to talk. Stay after class to answer questions, or invite students to walk with you back to your office. Students with positive first-day experiences report higher levels of motivation and achieve higher grades than students with negative first-day experiences. (Source: Wilson and Wilson, 2007)

Make the time worthwhile. As time permits, plunge into substantive material. Choose a topic or an activity that will engage students: stage a provocative demonstration, pose a controversial issue, make a counterintuitive argument, or work through a compelling case study.

Expect some awkwardness. All teachers, especially beginning instructors, feel a twinge of apprehension before the first class. Do your best to assume a confident attitude. Keep in mind that your students are likely to perceive your nervousness as energy and enthusiasm. Arriving early on the first day of class and talking informally to students may help you relax.

Taking Care of Administrative Tasks

Identify the course name and number and your name on the screen or chalkboard. This message will alert any students who are in the wrong classroom to leave before you begin. If your name is difficult to pronounce, include the phonetic spelling.

Take attendance, if class size permits. Call the roll or ask students to sign in. Make allowances for students who arrive late and have a contingency plan if more students arrive than you can accommodate. If your department does not have a policy for handling excess enrollment demand, you may want to give preference to graduating seniors or to majors, or you may prefer to hold a lottery. If your course is an elective, consider admitting a few extra students to compensate for those who are likely to drop the course.

Mention campus enrollment policies. Explain procedures for wait lists, deadlines for adding and dropping courses, and so on. Know where to refer students who have problems in these areas.

Clarify your policies on attendance. Researchers have examined the effects of classroom attendance. Students who regularly attend class tend to earn higher grades than students who attend sporadically. More significantly, classroom attendance has a more positive effect on overall student performance than time spent studying outside of class. Absenteeism—which in large universities may approach 40 percent on a typical day according to Romer (1993)—declines when students perceive the course content to be relevant to their interests or needs, when the quality of teaching is high, and when expectations for attendance are explicit. (Sources: Gump, 2005; Marburger, 2001; Rocca, 2003; Schmidt, 1983; Wyatt, 1992)

Explain the procedures for sections. If your course has sections, make sure that all students know which section they are enrolled in, who their graduate student instructor is, and when and where the section meets. Describe the relationship between the course and the sections and how sections will be run. Have the graduate student instructors introduce themselves.

Review any prerequisites for the course. Let students know what skills or knowledge they are expected to have and whether alternate experience or course work will be accepted. Is help available for those who do not have all the prerequisite skills? Some faculty list tasks that students should be able to perform if they have the prerequisite skills and knowledge, and they announce that the first graded test will include those tasks. (Source: Brent and Felder, 1999)

Go over course requirements and give estimates of workload. Discuss the written assignments and exams, other requirements (for example, class participation, group activities, field trips), and your estimate of how much time students will need to devote to the course outside of class.

Discuss the course syllabus. See Chapter 2, "The Comprehensive Course Syllabus."

Explain your grading policies. Let students know what they will need to do to succeed in your class. Students who believe that they can excel in a course are more likely to work harder, take an active role in their learning, and learn more. As appropriate, provide grade distributions from prior offerings of the course and let the class know what past students have done to earn As. (Source: Forsyth, 2003)

Tell students about campus policies on academic honesty. State your expectations, and let students know what activities constitute cheating and impermissible collaboration. See Chapter 38, "Promoting Academic Honesty."

Invite students to attend your office hours. Tell students where your office is and encourage them to stop by with questions and course-related problems. Ask students who need academic accommodations for a physical or learning disability to see you during the first or second week of the term. Invite students who may have foreseeable conflicts, such as student athletes or students with medical school interviews, to meet with you to arrange for makeup exams or assignments.

Review safety precautions and emergency procedures. If your course requires lab work or fieldwork, review safe practices for using equipment and supplies and discuss emergency procedures. Show students how to use equipment safely and appropriately. Let students know what to do in case of fire, tornado, hurricane, earthquake, evacuation, or other emergency.

Record the session, if appropriate. For students who miss the first day of class, make available a webcast or podcast that they can review on their own. If recording is impractical, ask latecomers to obtain notes from a classmate.

Give a catch-up assignment to students who want to add the class after the first or second session. To ensure that students catch up on the reading assignments, one faculty member asks students to submit five multiple-choice exam questions for each class session they missed.

Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

Introduce yourself to your class. Let students know how you prefer to be addressed (first name, or last name prefaced by Dr., Professor, Mr., or Ms.). You might also briefly share some information about where you are from, the schools you attended, how you first became interested in the subject, your publications and research, how long you have been at the university, and why you are teaching the course. Convey your enthusiasm for the field and the subject. For many students, the instructor's enthusiasm about the course material is a key motivator for learning. (Source: Wolcowitz, 1984)

Gather information about the students in your class. If class size is appropriate, ask students to complete a questionnaire in class or online: name (and what they like to be called), hometown, campus address, e-mail address, phone numbers and preferred method of contact, year in school, and major field. Some faculty ask students to list related courses or prerequisites they have completed

or other courses they are taking during the current term; reasons for enrolling in the course or what they hope to learn in the course; tentative career plans; outside interests, hobbies, and current employment. Some faculty have asked other questions: What should this class *not* be like? How do you learn the best? What question is uppermost in your mind about this course? How well prepared are you for this course? Approximately how many hours outside of class do you plan on studying for this course?

Ask students to write a letter of introduction. Some faculty ask students to write a paragraph or two about themselves and attach a photo. The letters are not graded or returned. (Source: Armstrong, 2008)

Begin to learn students' names. Learning students' names signals your interest in their performance and encourages student motivation and class participation. If you call roll, ask for the correct pronunciation and how the student prefers to be addressed. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, has developed a pronunciation guide for Cambodian, Cantonese, Filipino, Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese names. If your course enrolls fewer than twenty or thirty students, call the roll for several class meetings to help you learn names. During the term, ask students to give their name when they pose a question in class, call students by name when you return homework or quizzes, and use names frequently in class. Even if you can't learn everyone's name, students appreciate your making the effort. Here are a some other strategies for learning students' names:

- *Photographs.* Ask students to pose in groups of four or five. Post online copies of the photographs with students' names. If your campus supplies faculty with photos of enrolled students, append these photos to your online files. Or, with students' permission, post individual photos on the course Web site.
- *Name cards.* For a seminar class, place name cards in front of each student. In a studio or lab course, post students' names above their workstations.
- *Seating chart.* Ask students to sit in the same seats for the first few weeks, and prepare a seating chart. Try to memorize four or five names at each class session.
- *Alphabetical order.* In a small class, have students arrange themselves along one wall of the classroom in alphabetical order by first name.
- *Introductions.* In a large class, at the beginning of each class period, ask six or eight students to introduce themselves.

(Sources: McGlynn, 2001; Ricci, 2004; Smith and Malec, 1995)

Give students an opportunity to know who is in the class. Ask students to raise their hands if their answer is yes to questions you pose (and if they feel comfortable sharing with information with the entire class). Examples of questions include year in school, major, favorite sports teams, place of birth, languages spoken.

Ask students to interview each other outside of class. If your course is small and has a writing component, assign students to write a brief description of a classmate. The class could agree on the interview questions beforehand, or students can improvise. (Source: Scholl-Buckwald, 1985)

Ask small groups to explore characteristics of effective learning. In the first round, each group generates a list of the three or four best practices of successful students. Groups are then paired to share their lists and agree on a single list of four practices. This sharing of lists can be repeated several times, as needed, and the final lists can be posted for the entire class.

Ask small groups to explore characteristics of effective teaching. In the first round, each group generates a list of the three or four best practices of successful teachers. Groups are then paired to share their lists and agree on a single list of four practices. This sharing of lists can be repeated several times, as needed, and the final lists can be posted for the entire class and for you to comment on.

Consider using an icebreaker. Icebreakers can help people get to know one another and engage students immediately in the class. However, research indicates that students may not like icebreakers (Perlman and McCann, 1999) because they engage in icebreakers in many other parts of their campus lives, and may suffer from icebreaker fatigue (Lang, 2008) . If you decide to use an icebreaker, make sure that it doesn't make students uncomfortable or reveal information they would not rather share. Linking your icebreaker to the content of the course may make it more palatable to students. Here are some examples of icebreakers culled from the Web:

- *Birthday buddies.* Ask students to find someone whose birthday is closest to theirs (day and month only). Ask the pairs to identify two academic or course-related things they have in common.
- *Find someone.* Students write three statements related to the course content on a single index card, such as "Marine biology has been an interest of mine since I visited the Monterey Aquarium when I was 12"; "I am a certified scuba diver;" "In Hawaii, I swam with the dolphins." Cards are distributed so that no one has their own card and students circulate to find and meet the person who has their card.

- *True or false.* Students write three statements about themselves: one is true and two are false. In small groups, students have to identify the true statement.

Distribute rosters. With students' permission, post online the roster and contact information. Encourage students to contact classmates about missed classes, homework assignments, and study groups. Or ask students to exchange contact information with two or three classmates.

Setting Course Expectations and Standards

Discuss the objectives of the course. Tell your students what you plan to accomplish and why, and ask what they want to learn from you. Be sure to carefully acknowledge students' contributions. How you respond to students' ideas on the first day will set the tone for student participation throughout the term. (Source: McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006)

Ask students to list the goals they hope to achieve by taking the course. Have students, in small groups or individually, list two or three goals in the form of statements about knowledge, skills, interests, or attitudes. Students can also rank their goals in terms of how difficult they may be to achieve. Use these lists to identify your class's interests and likely problem areas. (Source: Angelo and Cross, 1993)

Describe how you propose to spend class time. How will sessions be structured? How will discussions be organized? Will a specific time be set aside for questions, or may students ask questions as they arise? Should questions requiring a lengthy response be saved for office hours?

Give your students advice about how to succeed in your class. Discuss strategies for approaching the material and for studying, and give examples of questions students might want to think about. Tell students how much time they will need to devote to studying for the course, and let them know about campus academic support services. Some faculty distribute advice solicited from students in previous offerings of the course. If you teach a large-enrollment course, you may want to mention research findings about seat location and course performance: students who sit near the front of the room are more likely to receive As than students who sit in the back of the room, and students who prefer to sit in the back but nonetheless move forward tend to receive higher grades than those

who remain in the back. (Sources: Benedict and Hoag, 2004; Brent and Felder, 1999; Brinthaupt, 2004; Perkins and Wieman, 2005)

Give a brief diagnostic pretest or survey. Administer a short, scored, but ungraded exercise that will show you and your students what topics or skills they have already mastered. Some science disciplines have widely used diagnostic tests (for example, the Force Concept Inventory in Physics and the California Chemistry Diagnostic Test). The Knowledge Surveys from the Science Education Resource Center (SERC) at Carleton College ask students to rate their level of confidence on various course topics. If your field does not have an established test, you can develop your own. For example, you could create a list of key concepts, facts and figures, or major ideas and ask students to indicate their familiarity with each. Or you could have students solve problems, define terms, and complete short-answer items. In a writing course you might assign a short essay that will allow you to identify students' strengths and weaknesses.

A diagnostic pretest or knowledge survey can be used in a variety of ways. Some faculty administer the same exercise at the end of the term and then return the pretest to students for comparison. Other faculty ask students to take the test anonymously, and some give the answers in the subsequent class so that students can assess their readiness to take the course. Some faculty include questions to assess students' motivation and study habits, since students who do poorly on a diagnostic test might do well in the class with adequate academic support and disciplined study. (Sources: Eckert et al., 1997; Lang, 2008; Nuhfer and Knipp, 2003; Ochs, 1998)

Ask students to work through a problem. Begin to teach students how to participate in your class. Engaging students in coursework during the first session gives them an idea of what your class will be like. Here are some suggestions from faculty in a variety of fields (Brent and Felder, 1999; Erickson et al., 2006; Henderson and Mirafzal, 1999; Higgins, 1999; Keeports, 2000; Scholl-Buckwald, 1985):

- Some professors select keywords from the course title, ask students to propose related ideas, and use those responses to give a thematic overview of the course.
- A sociology professor asks small groups of students to come up with a list of the ten most important events (or people) in history. After ten or fifteen minutes, the groups' responses are placed on the board for discussion and interpretation.
- An English professor divides the class into small groups and gives each member a line from a poem, which the group is asked to reassemble.

- A physics instructor discusses with the class how normal observations lead to false conclusions about gravity, velocity, inertia, and other laws of nature, using everyday examples: swinging a golf club, looking in the mirror, dropping a feather.
- A sociology faculty member uses a demonstration to show how context can define meaning by having a student provide a small amount of saliva in a sterilized spoon. The instructor then asks whether any students want to swallow the saliva on the spoon. When all students decline, the faculty member launches into a discussion of how sharing a soft drink or kissing is an acceptable exchange of saliva but swallowing a spoonful is not.
- A chemistry professor describes a case study about finding white powdery substances near the household cleaning products and an odorless crystalline powder in the pantry. Students are then asked to describe experiments that would help them identify the sample materials.

Give an assignment for the next session. By moving immediately into the first topic, you are indicating to students that the course is well organized and well paced. Avoid giving a graded assignment, however, because students may be adding or dropping your course during the first week or two. (Source: Povlacs, 1986)

Ask students to write their reactions to the first day. Take two minutes at the end of class to have students jot down unsigned comments about what went well and what questions or concerns they have about the course. Review their comments and report back to students at the next session, correcting any misconceptions or inaccuracies. (Source: McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006)

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4

Classroom Conduct and Decorum

Feldmann (2001, p. 137) defines classroom incivility as "any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom." Examples of disruptive student behavior include disturbing others when arriving late or leaving early; packing up books before class is over; dozing in class; reading the newspaper; noisy eating or drinking; checking social networking sites, shopping, or playing games on laptops; text messaging on cell phones; conducting side conversations; and hostile public challenges to course policies and procedures.

The following suggestions are intended to help you maintain a sense of decorum in your classroom. When improprieties occur, you will want to promptly address them: the longer inappropriate behavior persists, the more difficult it is to stop (Sorcinelli, 1994).

General Strategies

Define and distribute policies at the start of the term. Some faculty spend a portion of class time generating guidelines as a class on what is acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior. For example, consider asking students in small groups to give specific behavioral examples of "best effort" and "mutual respect." Research shows that students are more civil when given the opportunity to develop their own rules and sanctions. Other faculty set their own standards and detail them in the syllabus and course Web site. Set only those rules and penalties that you are willing and able to enforce. It is usually better to be firm at the beginning and later relax your policies rather than try to impose a stricter regime as the term progresses. (Sources: Bayer, 2004: DiClementi and Handelsman, 2005)

Emphasize the value of civility. Help students see the effect of their actions on others. Share with students the responsibility for maintaining norms: let students know that they should feel free to tell talkative students to be quiet. (Source: Forsyth, 2003)

Set a good example. Researchers have identified faculty behaviors that set a negative tone for students and affect their academic and intellectual development (Braxton et al., 2004; Buttner, 2004):

- *Inadequate preparation:* failure to order required texts or readers in a timely fashion; inadequate communication about due dates for assignments or about policies on missed or makeup exams; incomplete syllabus.
- *Poor in-class interactions with students:* treating students in a condescending, insensitive, or demeaning manner; putting students down in front of classmates; ignoring students' perspectives; lack of respect for students as individuals.
- *Lack of integrity:* grading students' work on criteria other than merit; treating students unfairly.
- *Failure to provide help:* ignoring students' questions or reacting angrily or defensively when challenged; refusing to provide assistance with assignments.
- *Repeatedly arriving late, running overtime, or ending class early.*

Handling Incivilities

Deal with incivilities promptly and consistently. Responding immediately and consistently to misbehavior will discourage future misconduct. Try to size up the student's frame of mind (for example, disengaged, uninterested, disrespectful, disruptive, defiant, disturbed) and intentions. Address the student politely and calmly, name the behavior that is disrupting the class, and give clear instructions or options about what you want the student to do. If the problem is more complicated, ask the student to see you during office hours. (Sources: Boice, 1996; Feldmann, 2001; González and López, 2001)

Anticipate problems at the back of the room. The back of the classroom is the traditional gathering spot for bored and disruptive students. If your classroom has many unoccupied seats, instruct the class to use only so many rows, starting from the front. Mention that research shows that students who sit in the front of the classroom earn higher grades. Or consider asking students to change their seats periodically, asking those in the back to sit in the front at the next session. (Sources: Benedict and Hoag, 2004; McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006; Perkins and Wieman, 2005)

Make disrupters aware of the problem. Disruptive students may not be aware of the problems they are causing. To interrupt a side conversation, you could move towards the talkers, making eye contact; or ask the students if they would

like to share their ideas with the class; or you could pause until everyone quiets down and say, "When people have side conversations, it's hard for the rest of us to concentrate. Please save it for after class." To keep laptop users from playing online games, perusing Facebook or YouTube, and the like, let students know that it is distracting to those behind and to the sides of them. (For more suggestions on laptop etiquette, see Chapter 33, "Mobile Learning.") Ask students to silence their cell phones.

Monitor comings and goings. Some faculty advise students to sit near the door if they arrive late or need to leave early. One instructor discourages late arrivals by addressing the individual by name before he or she sits down and asking, good-naturedly, a course-relevant question related to that person's own experience, then following up with more questions to the same person. (Source: Carbone, 1999)

Acknowledge negative emotions, but do not explore them in class. When a student's incivility is prompted by negative feelings, show empathy by acknowledging the feeling ("I'm guessing that you're angry because you think this is unfair"), and invite the student to discuss the matter with you after class. Refrain from showing anger, impatience, or hostility. (Source: Meyers, 2003)

Speak with the student in private. In class, enforce your policies. As needed, arrange to speak with a disruptive student outside class, either in a neutral space or in your office. Explain the problem as you see it and ask for the student's perspective. If a student becomes argumentative, agitated, or highly defensive, stop the conversation and arrange for another meeting. Look for common ground in terms of the student's interests and the reasons the student is taking the course. (Source: Downs, 1992)

Deal with grumpy consumers. Some students feel that since they pay tuition, you are a service provider and their preferences take precedence over your classroom rules. Don't extend such arguments in class, but invite the student to meet with you privately. At that time talk about your role and responsibilities to all the students in your class and how you view your role in relation to students (for example, expert and apprentices, not service provider and customers).

Expect some cyber-complaining, but establish limits. Blogs and Web sites such as YouTube and Facebook give students new ways to scrutinize and vent about instructors and courses. Try to take any negative comments with good humor. Let students know if your college or university has policies against filming instructors in class without their permission or if your state makes it illegal to secretly film someone. When complaints cross over into threats, bullying, or misconduct, or when students impersonate and misrepresent you online, take up the matter with your department chair. (Source: Summerville and Fischetti, 2005)

Explain the student grievance process. All campuses should have in place procedures to investigate students' complaints and concerns, if they cannot be resolved adequately by the parties in conflict. Find out about the process on your campus and refer students, as needed, to the appropriate resources. Similarly, find out what recourse your campus has for instructors who face hostile, unruly, or belligerent students.

Teaching in Times of Crisis and Tragedy

Think about how you can help your students cope with tragic events. International crises, shooting rampages on college campuses, natural disasters, the unexpected death of a fellow student or teacher, and other events may make it difficult to conduct class as usual. Studies conducted after September 11, 2001, found that on some American campuses, fewer than two-thirds of instructors mentioned the terrorist attacks in class, and this lack of response surprised, frustrated, and disappointed most students. Students said they were grateful and found it helpful when faculty acknowledged the tragedy and how it affected them. (Source: Huston and DiPietro, 2007)

If warranted, cancel class. If you are unsure about canceling class, check with your department chair. If you cannot notify all your students in advance, show up at the appointed time and explain why you are canceling class—don't just post a note on the door. Let students know what campus resources are available to them, and stay to answer any questions they may have.

When you meet your class, acknowledge the tragedy. Some instructors mention an event but choose not to discuss it in class; others devote a few moments of class time to such discussion. Still other instructors ask students at the start of class whether they want to discuss the event for a portion of the meeting. And some instructors invite concerned students to come to a special office hour.

Here are some other ways that faculty have responded to tragic events:

- Observe a moment of silence to remember the victims.
- Read an inspirational or comforting poem or passage from a book.
- Sign and send a card to students on the affected campus.

- Post contact information for the campus counseling center so students know resources are available.
- Postpone a test; extend the deadlines for assignments and homework.
- Change the syllabus for the following week to accommodate a reduced workload.
- Ask students to write about their feelings and responses.
- Tell students about candlelight vigils on campus and other memorial events.
- Let students know about ways to help (giving blood, collecting donations, volunteering).
- Review with students campus emergency and security procedures.

Recognize that some students may need extra support. Some students may be personally affected by local, national, or international events, and they may need referrals, psychological services, or assignment extensions to accommodate sudden travel plans.

If you discuss the events in class, encourage students to be empathetic listeners. Open the discussion by acknowledging that people have different ways of coping with crises and that all are valid. Some of your students will want to talk and try to understand what has happened, while others will feel that talking and listening will upset them. Some students will share their feelings, but others would be uncomfortable doing so, and some students will welcome the resumption of ordinary routines that convey a sense of security and safety.

Try to introduce and close the session on a supportive note; for example, you might begin by mentioning your reasons for holding the discussion and end by telling students how they can continue the discussion in other venues on campus. Help your class establish ground rules for the discussion: respect one another's points of view, including the preferences of students who wish to remain silent; avoid speculation and rumor; politely remind each other not to monopolize the conversation.

Experts also recommend other guidelines:

- Pose a question or two to get the discussion started: What makes this hard to talk about? In what ways are you affected by these events? How might these events affect your future action and behavior? What questions and fears do you have? How can you become better informed? What positive actions can individuals take in response to this event?
- Balance the emotional and intellectual aspects of the discussion and help students distinguish between the two.

- Invite students who do not wish to participate in the discussion to leave.
- Give students a chance to write before speaking.
- Stop the discussion if it veers off in unproductive directions.

(Sources: Web sites of the University of Michigan, University of Washington, Vanderbilt University, and the University of California, Berkeley)

As appropriate, develop class assignments related to the tragedy. Some professors have asked their students to gather newspapers from around the world and examine the attitudes expressed in the reporting; to follow online coverage in one or two newspapers over the course of several days; to write a "memoir" of their reactions to the events, with the thought that they might reread their account in twenty-five or thirty years.

Strive to restore some sense of normalcy. Try to avoid overreacting to the tragedy. Let students know that the school year will proceed. Reassure them if they are having problems concentrating, and ask them to talk with you about options for completing the semester.

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PART II

Responding to a Changing Student Body