Maximizing the First Day of Class Webinar
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More resources: https://www.dropbox.com/sh/vp6tb2djb8tmbw2/AACL_D2IFEDjaG2yKFSIOkQJa?dl=0

This webinar is being recorded. To ask questions, click the “raise hand” button in Webex or use the chat function. The recording, which will include your questions, comments, and chat remarks, will be posted on http://ctl.mercer.edu.

This webinar will discuss and/or provide:

1. The Top Ten Ways to Maximize the First Day of Class
2. Your Input based on your prior First Days
3. Link to additional resource material

Introduction

The First Day of Class

The First Day of class has become a legend in the minds of upperclassmen and some graduate students as the “day the professor just hands out the syllabus”. We’ve all likely been there; you show up, answer when roll is called, sit while wait-lists are reviewed, and then are gratefully dismissed once the syllabus, i.e. the course contract, is disseminated.

But what impact does this have on the second day?

What about online classes?

What could that first day of class have to do with cognitive preparation for the rest of the semester?
The Top Ten Things to do on the First Day of Class

1. Conduct a Flight Check (if you can) before class
   a. Go to your classroom (or online course shell) and check to make sure the physical and visual environment is ready, uncluttered, and inviting.
   b. Do this even if someone else will be in the room before you.
   c. Evaluate the seating arrangement, display space (board or screen) and student entry.
   d. Take an inventory of necessary materials to comfortably conduct class in this room (or online). Look at it from a student’s perspective.
   e. Remember it is easier to move from formal>relaxed than relaxed>formal.

   *If the room (or the online interface) isn't right, the class won’t be right either.*

2. Be an Early Bird: Arrive Early
   a. Greet students at the door (or near the door)
   b. Start class on time
   c. Write course information on the board before students arrive. Consider a visual that shows where your office is located.

   *Like a first date, the first day sets a perception of you that is likely to stick. Plan accordingly.*

3. Just Talk: Introduce Yourself
   a. Introduce yourself by telling them your name, your title, any other positions you hold, what work you do for the university, and give them limited but interesting background about both your personal and professional life.
   b. Consider a brief 3-5 slide presentation with a visual history of where you went to school, where you’re from, where you’ve worked, and maybe some photos that humanize you – pictures of kids, pets, you at a younger age, etc.
   c. Introduce the course, but consider easing into it with a story, dilemma, scenario, or example that immediately puts students into your context.

   *Students are very curious about us, and providing limited personal information creates the perception we are like them.*

4. Body Language: Anticipate your Typical Nonverbal Behavior and Adjust Throughout Class
   a. Stand in the front.
   b. Then move to the side.
   c. Then walk around the room. Try to be in close proximity to as many students as possible on the first day.
   d. Hold an open body posture: shoulders back, arms at sides or gesturing out to them, smiling as much as possible. Avoid crossed arms, shaking your head, and sighing.
Students need us to look as though we’re happy and comfortable so they can be happy and comfortable.

5. You Want the Truth: Identify/Extract Student Misconceptions About Your Class and Your Content
   a. Extract prior knowledge and misconceptions from students

   Cognitive science and learning theory tell us that students often come to us with prior knowledge about our subject with multiple misconceptions. For instance, in a biology course, if you asked students how many senses humans have, they might list the 5 common ones. Science tells us there are more. Our job is to identify and correct what they have mentally categorized incorrectly.

   Identifying what students think they understand but don’t is key to efficient instruction.

   So how do you uncover their misconceptions?
   a. Offer 10-15 statements about your subject that are either true or false. Have students decide which are true/false. Use their now-identified misunderstandings to prompt a discussion about how this semester will be a true “course correction”.
   b. Decide what prior information is truly necessary for the course. Turn this into a writing prompt, and ask them to write a One-Minute Paper. Collect these paragraphs and use them for impromptu discussion.
   c. Show pictures or diagrams related to the course. Ask students for observations. Use their comments to build a discussion about what your course will cover.

6. Crack the Silo: Create Interdisciplinary and In-Disciplinary Connections

   Part of creating long-term retention is building connections between our course and the courses students take before and after ours, and to other disciplines and fields. We extend the silo effect when we don’t connect our subject with what other courses students have or will be taking.

   So how can we make these connections?
   a. Venn Diagram: create a visual that shows how your class fits into larger disciplinary areas or fields and where overlap occurs.
   b. Pre and Post-requisites: talk about or visually show where your course falls on the course progression in your major or potential majors they may have chosen.
   c. Relationship to other disciplines and fields: Explain how your course relates to fields that may seem remote to the students. Example: Philosophy relates to almost every course students take because it teaches them sophisticated reasoning methods.
   d. Explain how this course works in the real world: Explain how students could use this content on the job, in graduate school, or in daily life.

   Answer the age-old question on the first day: How will I use this in my life?
7. **Hold that Syllabus: Don’t Give it Out Right Away**  
   a. Consider distributing the syllabus in the last 1/3 or ¼ of the first session and using the first portion of class to introduce the course in other ways.  
   b. Consider explaining the syllabus on the second class session after students have had time to absorb the big picture of the course.  
   c. Build their anticipation for the course policies and logistics and give them a reason to stay. This may be frustrating to some but can be perceived positively if you use the first 2/3 of the session well.

   *Give them the logistics, but tell them the big picture first.*

8. **Clarify Expectations: And Be Prepared to Do This Repeatedly**  
   a. Use the First Day to explain procedures and policy, but also to clearly tell them your expectations for their performance.  
   b. Explain your philosophy for learning in this course and clearly provide them with a path to success – a checklist of what they need to do to succeed.  
   c. Clarify that your policies are also expectations. For example, explain that you are personally vested in the course and that your attendance policy means you expect them to not only be present physically, but mentally as well (thus no devices, distractions, etc). This humanizes and personalizes your course policies.

   *Tell them the rules, but tell them why you have rules: because you want them to succeed.*

9. **Don’t Break the Ice: Tread in Deeper Water Instead**  
   a. Skip ice-breaker events, especially with experienced students.  
   b. Use deeper engagement activities related to the course content to allow them to get to know each other and you.  
   c. Examples: short group activities related to content discovery, such as groups making lists of what the course might cover or what their expectations are for the course. Or have them evaluate the syllabus or other course documents.

   *The very limited research available on the First Day reports that most students dislike ice-breaker activities and prefer to dive right into the subject.*

10. **Use Every Minute: Keep Them Until the Very End**  
    They may (will) complain, but students will respect you for using all of the First Day, especially if you use it well. Alternatively, if you release them early, you’ve set an immediate perception that class time is not crucially important to you. This doesn’t mean you can’t let them go early later, but using all of the First Day creates an important image that you like your course and want to spend your time helping them learn.

    Note: If you use every minute but do so in an onerous way, this strategy will backfire.

   *Keep them engaged and actively involved discovering information about your course until they’re surprised that class is over. They’ll be ready to come back for the next session – guaranteed. (Well, almost guaranteed.)*
Potential First Day Agenda: A 50-minute Class Session

8:50-9:00: Greet students and ensure your materials are complete

9:00-9:05: Take roll, note waitlisted students. Make eye contact with everyone.

9:05-9:15: Introduce yourself and the course (provide a limited view of your life but the big picture of the course)

9:15-9:35: Deploy an engaging activity that (1) identifies misconceptions, (2) involves students immediately into the material, or (3) asks them to evaluate course information. Ideally this does not mean lecture.

9:35-9:45: Review the syllabus and other course documents

9:45-9:50: Force-ask questions (ask 2 people to generate a question about the course or today’s class session); conclude class by thanking the class for choosing your course and telling them you look forward to seeing them next class.

9:50-10:00: Stay afterward to answer individual questions and talk with students

References


Other websites and brief references can be found in the Dropbox folder.