



Preparing for the first day: what do the data say?

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THE BEGINNING of a new semester is likely a hectic time for faculty as they develop syllabi, create Blackboard pages, and attend to numerous administrative tasks. These conditions are not always conducive to pedagogical reflection. Nonetheless, as faculty members contemplate course plans for the new semester they have to make many decisions including what to do on the very first day of class.

Several authors of resources for effective teaching offer advice about the first day of class such as articulating course requirements and using icebreakers to build rapport (Davis, 1993) as well as using the full class meeting time in order to convey to students the idea that class time is valuable (McKeachie, 2002). While perhaps intuitive, it is important to know if following this advice is supported by empirical evidence and if students are more successful as a result.

To better understand effective first day strategies from a student's perspective, Perlman and McCann (1998; 1999) asked students to describe the most useful things professors do on the first day of class as well as their first day pet peeves. The most frequently mentioned useful behaviors were providing detailed information about the course content, requirements, and expectations. The most frequently mentioned pet peeves were beginning lecture material and using the entire class period. Similarly, Henslee, Burgess, and Buskist (2006) asked students to rate the importance of 18 aspects of professors' behavior on the first day of class. As in the earlier study, Henslee et. al found that students rated getting practical information about the nature and requirements of the course as very important. Students further indicated that they valued receiving study tips on the first day, but did not think that learning about the instructor and other students was an important first day activity. So, it seems from students' perspective, a good first day of class involves a clear explication of what will be required in the

course, tips for how to do well, no lecture, and getting out early.

However, faculty might have different opinions as to what constitutes the best use of the first class meeting. Adams, Truscott, and Hill (2010) conducted a study that directly compared faculty and student ratings of the importance of various dimensions of the first day of class. The data largely replicate earlier findings for student preferences. Faculty and students agreed that information about course requirements and the amount of work expected were very important. The two groups diverged on the importance of study tips and use of icebreakers. Overall, students rated providing study tips as more important than did faculty, and faculty rated learning about other students and the instructor as more important than did students. Several studies on first impressions and relationship development support faculty intuitions about the importance of using icebreakers even if these practices offer benefits that students may not initially appreciate. For example, perceptions of others formed during first encounters lay a critical foundation for how such relationships develop over the course of a semester (Berg & Clark, 1986; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Sunnafrank and Ramirez (2004) did not explicitly investigate whether relationship-building exercises were essential to include on the first day of classes, but their study emphasized the importance of establishing positive interpersonal relations early in the semester. Faculty who wish to foster collaborative learning environments and classroom discussions while being sensitive to student preferences may want to restrict the first day to more practical matters and postpone rapport-building exercises until later in the first week of the semester.

Another important question for faculty to consider is whether instructor practices on the first day of class actually effect student motivation and performance. Wilson and Wilson (2007) reported preliminary experimental evidence that first day

experiences did influence student outcomes. Students were randomly assigned to a good first day experience, in which the professor reviewed the syllabus and dismissed the class early or a bad first day experience, in which the professor reviewed the syllabus, used the full class period, and gave a homework assignment. Over the duration of the course, students in the good first day condition reported higher levels of motivation and made better grades than did students in the bad first day condition. However, several features of the first day of class were manipulated simultaneously making interpretation of the results problematic. For example, in the good first day condition, the teacher was friendly while discussing the syllabus, whereas in the bad first day condition the teacher avoided emotional tone while discussing the syllabus. Consequently, the observed differences may have resulted from initial impressions based on the teacher's affect rather than actual practices.

In sum, faculty might consider focusing their initial class meeting on the syllabus,

See **PREPARING**, page 2

Summer Session 2 Ends: August 5

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Faculty Meeting: August 18

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Getting to Know You: The First Week of Class and Beyond

THE FIRST WEEK of class... Whether on-campus or online, we always plan a few orientation and get-to-know-you activities in an attempt to get our courses off on the right foot. I actually really enjoy these activities, but I always look for new ways to accomplish my objectives. One thing I've learned is that, especially in online courses, orientation and get-to-know-you activities cannot – and should not – just be addressed during the first week of a class. To really support students and help build a productive learning community, these types of activities need to occur throughout the semester. Below are a few activities I have used and am planning to use in my online course this fall.

Orientation –

In an on-campus course, it can be deadly boring to spend the first class meeting reading through the syllabus. However, there is important information in the syllabus that we want students to know and keep track of. In online courses, it can also be boring... and, therefore, students sometimes don't go through all of the course materials as precisely as is need to be successful in the course. Here are a few things I have done, and am doing, in my online course this semester to help students with orientation.

Orientation videos: One of my biggest additions this fall was the inclusion of orientations videos for my online course. I created three 5-minute orientation videos, with each video walking students through a different aspect of the course shell, learning activities, and projects. Using Jing, I was able to create a screencast showing them all around the course shell. I interjected my sense of humor where possible, told a couple of stories, and provided explanations for my design decisions. These three videos not only oriented students to the course, but to me as well.

Course & syllabus scavenger hunt: Using the quiz feature in my learning management system (LMS), I created a course and syllabus scavenger hunt that students had to submit by the end of the first week. To complete the 12-question scavenger hunt, students had to read the syllabus, locate materials in the

course shell, and watch the orientation videos. The results of the scavenger hunt reassured me that students were locating and tracking important course information, and alerted me to any misconceptions or confusions that individual students had about the materials.

Example questions:

- In your own words, what are the learning objectives for this course? What is the reason for listing the ILT competencies with the learning objectives?
- Why is “creative” part of the course title?
- There are four projects for the course: Presentation Makeover Magic, Job Aid Makeover Spectacular, Presentation Prowess, and Design Lessons Learned. Which project are you most looking forward to working on? Why?
- Why are the weekly agendas for each week's learning activities hidden at the start of the semester?

Weekly announcements: At the start of each week (which in my online courses is Monday since I set up the weeks to go from Monday to Sunday in the course shell), I post a new announcement orienting students to the activities of the week. Even though this information exists elsewhere in the course, I like to provide a more personal announcement about the week. I start each announcement with a brief description of my weekend with a photo (usually of me and my family). Then I provide a reminder about how they should focus their time and energy. I end each announcement with a reminder about how to connect with me, and a wish for a great week.

Weekly agendas: For each week in the course, I have a weekly agenda checklist that students can print out to help them track what they should be working on during the week. Again, although this information exists in the course's master calendar, it helps to have the week's activities laid out in checklist format.

Joni Dunlap, Getting to Know You: The First Week of Class and Beyond, September 14, 2009, [<http://thoughtsonateaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/2009/09/getting-to-know-you-first-week-of-class.html>], June 21, 2010.

BOOK

Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty

Elizabeth F. Barkley



PREPARING

continued from page 1

course requirements, and study tips (perhaps presented in a friendly manner), while saving icebreakers and rapport building activities for later class meetings. Such practices should at the minimum increase student satisfaction. Unfortunately, the existing evidence allows for only tentative claims about how these practices would affect student outcomes. For faculty interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning this area represents a potentially fruitful avenue for future research.

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