



The Eight-Minute Lecture Keeps Students Engaged

IN THE 1970S, my mother, a fifth-grade teacher, would lament, “The TV remote has ruined my classroom! I can almost feel the kids trying to point a clicker at me to change the channel!” Little did she know that college students today don’t need to wish for a remote control to switch from their professor to entertainment—an endless assortment of distractions are all on their smart phones.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that students retain little of our lectures, and research on determining the “average attention span,” while varying, seems to congregate around eight to ten minutes (“Attention Span Statistics,” 2015), (Richardson, 2010). Research discussed in a 2009 Faculty Focus article by Maryellen Weimer questions the attention span research, while encouraging instructors to facilitate student focus.

When I began teaching in 2006, I assumed that students could read anything I say. Therefore, my classes consisted of debates of, activities building on, and direct application of theories taught in the readings—no lectures.

But I noticed that students had difficulty understanding the content in a way that enabled accurate and deep application without some framing from me. In short, I needed to lecture—at least a little. This is when I began the eight-minute lecture. If you’re worried that eight minutes is too long, I discovered that when students experience many short lectures throughout the semester, they learn to focus in those bursts, in part because they know the lecture will be brief.

How to implement the eight-minute lecture

1. Prepare students – Early in the semester, explain your teaching methodology and your rationale for doing things a certain way. This helps manage students’ expectations. Most of my students study engineering and expect to mostly listen to lectures and take notes. They are less accustomed to an active learning environment that involves lots of debates on the readings, small group discussions and report-backs, short reflection papers, quick multiple choice

clicker quizzes, problem sets, and/or short lectures.

2. Redesign/rewrite lectures – Review your lectures to identify natural breaks. Where can you pause without losing meaning? How can you use students’ knowledge from their homework and previous learning as a scaffold?

Next, look for areas in your lecture where you talk about something that instead can be learned from an image, video, or interactive activity, and substitute accordingly. Cull through the content until you have eliminated two-thirds of your lecture material.

An example from last semester

Toward the end of last semester, I began a module on global business. The learning objectives for the first 50-minute class period on the topic were to be able to discuss the origins and benefits/costs of globalization and to test global business theories against existing corporate outcomes.

In preparation, students read a textbook chapter delineating the history and theories of success in global business, and completed either an interview with a manager working internationally or an analysis of global business news (their choice).

With this preparation, they came to class with a firm grasp of global business terminology and context. Further, as this class period came toward the end of the semester, students had a basic working knowledge of management and leadership theory; Western business history; and the interaction of business, government, and the global economy.

I started out by asking a question related to their preparation. I then began my first eight-minute lecture, introducing them to the concept of balance of payments while displaying current numbers up on the screen. Once I explained trade imbalances, I asked questions that weren’t answered in their reading or my lecture, but were answerable with careful reflection on both.

For example, “How might you incorporate your previous learning on the supply and demand curve to understand how exchange rates influence global business?”

Once this topic was fully explored, I gave another eight-minute lecture, and then engaged them in a new activity that taught the next learning objective. At the end of class, I tested to ensure that the objectives had been met by asking students for a one-to-three-sentence note card summarizing their learning. The success of this method of interspersing mini-lectures with activities, discussions, and time for reflection was validated by the final exam scores achieved by the students in this class, which surpassed those of previous semesters.

References:

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The First Day of Class: A Once-a-Semester Opportunity

THERE'S ONLY ONE FIRST day of class. Here are some ideas for taking advantage of opportunities that are not available in the same way on any other day of the course.

- It's students' first introduction to the course content. Catalog descriptions of courses may be accurate, but they aren't all that good at conveying why the content is important, relevant, and useful; why students just may find it interesting; and why a few in the past have actually fallen in love with it. A good introduction provides a bit of background; it builds connections by identifying shared experiences and common interests. The details offered in a good introduction motivate continued conversation.
- The first day gives you the chance to explain why this course and the content of this field matter to you. Of all the potential majors, you chose one in this field—how did that happen? Did you choose well? Why?
- Most courses develop important skills—concrete ones like how to calculate the Doppler shift and less specific ones like how to evaluate evidence or construct a persuasive argument. The first day is a good time to let students know what they will be able to do—or do better—as a consequence of this course. Too often we focus the conversation on what the course covers and what students will know by the end of the term. That's important, but we shouldn't leave out how the course develops skills—some of which students will use for the rest of their lives.
- Courses have been known to change

lives. Most don't, but why not introduce the possibility on the first day? Adult educators call it transformative learning. It happens when we learn something that not only changes how we think, but also changes what we do; indeed, who we are. Sometimes these big changes occur incrementally; other times they hit like lightning—with a burst of light and a thunderous revelation. It's been known to happen in all types of courses and with all types of students.

- You can talk about your commitment to teaching. What are your favorite things about teaching? What do you need from students in order to do your very best teaching?
- You can talk about your commitment to student learning. How will you support their efforts to master the material? What can you do to go beyond "I'm happy to answer questions" and "I have regularly scheduled office hours"?
- You can explore students' commitments to learning. Yes, most often their first commitment is to grades and getting good ones, but there's an opportunity missed if you talk only about grades and don't mention learning. Could you compose a potential course theme song? "Grades matter, but learning matters more." You'll be singing it solo, but if students hear it often enough, you may get some accompaniment by the end of the course.
- It's the first chance to find out about your students in the course: year in school, major, prior course work, current jobs, career objectives, characteristics of courses in which they've learned a

lot, teacher feedback that is and isn't helpful, peer contributions that support learning—whatever information you might need to connect with them as learners. Collecting this information is the first step in building constructive relationships with students and discovering concrete ways you can link course content to student realities.

- It's a new course and, for most, the beginning of a new academic year. Optimism prevails. Teachers and students want the same things on the first day—a good course, a positive constructive learning environment, the chance to succeed—and at this point everyone still believes these things are possible.
- Students may look passive and not especially interested, but don't be fooled. In most cases, it's a facade. Who among us hasn't tried to look calm, cool, and collected when we're feeling scared, uncomfortable, and afraid of looking stupid? On that very first day, get students connected with each other and the course content. Let students wade around in some intriguing content details, collectively discovering that the water's warm and feels good. Maybe they'll be motivated to dive in and swim out toward deeper water.
- It's the day in the course when it's easiest for the teacher to genuinely smile. You have only good news to share, so let them hear it.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; The First Day of Class: A Once-a-Semester Opportunity; Faculty Focus; August 19, 2015; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/the-first-day-of-class-a-once-a-semester-opportunity/>] September 8, 2015

