

Friday, August 19, 2005

First Day of Class

The idea that first impressions often leave a lasting impression is something to think about when preparing for the first day of class. While we might have spent endless hours during the summer preparing for our course (s), selecting reading materials, developing activities, preparing a syllabus, etc., we sometimes forget that the first day or two of class is a critical time for setting up the kind of learning environment that will keep your students coming back for more. According to Ken Bain (*What the Best College Teachers Do*), students of the best teachers leave their completed classes with an excitement about the subject and a yearning to learn more. With that in mind, consider your first day of classes as an opportunity to set the stage.

What are your goals for the first day of class? What will the students learn? Going over your syllabus with the students? Great. But maybe you don't want to spend the whole class time doing this and then dismissing the students. Although the discussion of parts of the syllabus might be critical for that first day, keep in mind that the students can read most of the syllabus at a later time either online or from your handout. Most experts believe that an instructor should indeed cover class policy on that first day, especially such issues and ideas that the students may be unfamiliar with like a particular **grading schema** or **unique team-based activities**. But after that, what to do?

Don't take the bait to dismiss class early on that first day after going over the syllabus in detail. Take advantage of the student's enthusiasm that first day to hook them. In a learning community that I was a member of last summer, the participants recently shared their goals for the first day of classes*. And while each faculty member differed in the activities they will do on that first day of class, they all had several things in common. Each of them will

Show passion for the subject they will be teaching. While some will use visuals to set the tone that first day, others will use specific and exciting examples to capture the student's attention.

Make connections to the lives of the student, for example, one faculty member who will be teaching about bacteria will develop several key images that will help new students see the dominant role that bacteria plays in the lives of all of humans...and why bacteria is often good for humans!

Demonstrate excitement in their teaching despite the fact that they may be nervous or shy.

Encourage the students to hunger for more learning.

These common occurrences on the first day of class are consistent with what excellent teachers do--even though the activities for the first day may vary depending on styles of teaching, circumstances, etc. For example, some of you may feel that it is important to lecture for part of the first day or to engage the students in some kind of problem solving activity to set the tone for the semester. Researchers know that the best teachers come with a variety of styles, methods and approaches. The best teachers often don't teach the same way. But they all have in common what I have outlined in this tip. Enjoy your first day of class and don't let the students leave without a curiosity to learn more.

Note: We know that effective teachers also move as quickly as possible within the first couple of weeks to learn the names of the students thus setting the tone in class that students are more than just a number. Teaching large classes presents a problem for learning all the names of students, but there are some methods that work quite well in at least acknowledging the names of your students on a daily basis.

(*Special thanks to the Life Sciences Learning Community with members from both Bowling Green State University and The University of Michigan that have contributed ideas and activities to this teaching tip)

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