Tips for the first day and links to resources

Version 11

Published 9/1/2020 by Petra Misaljevic   Last updated 1/31/2024 10:52 PM by Ashley Ribbel

Tips for the first day of class

Getting ready for the first day of class can generate a mixture of excitement and nervousness, whether you are new to teaching or have been teaching for years. It helps to have a mental checklist of objectives to accomplish so that you and your students come away with the impression that the course is off to a good start.

The first class should serve at least two basic purposes:

1. To clarify all reasonable questions students might have relative to the course objectives, as well as your expectations for their performance in class. As students leave the first class meeting, they should believe in your competence to teach the course, be able to predict the nature of your instruction, and know what you will require of them.

2. To give you an understanding of who is taking your course and what their expectations are.

These two basic purposes expand into a set of eight concrete objectives:

1. Orchestrate positive first impressions

First impressions can be long-lasting, and they are usually based on a thin slice of behavior. Before you even start teaching, your students will have already made some decisions about you, so it is important to understand what those impressions are based on and how to manage.

2. Introduce yourself effectively

Your introduction should be succinct, but make sure to cover certain key areas. These questions should help you decide what to say:

- What characteristics do you want to convey about yourself?

- What will you need to say to convey those characteristics?

- What do you think students are trying to figure out about you?

- What should you be careful not to say?

3. Clarify learning objectives and your expectations

This is probably the most important objective. Clearly laying out expectations starts to orient students toward the kind of effort, learning, performance and classroom behaviors you expect from them, and it helps them use their time productively. It will also help those students who are shopping around in deciding whether to take your course or not. Be sure to:

- Describe the prerequisites

- Highlight main aspects of the syllabus.

- Consider a quiz on the syllabus.

- Explain your expectations for student behavior

- Communicate your commitment to the students' learning experience.

4. Help students learn about each other

The classroom is a social environment, so it is helpful to start the social dynamics in a productive way. Icebreakers raise the energy levels and get students comfortable. Here are some ideas for icebreakers:

- Icebreakers, Energizers, Warm-Ups, and Closers

- Ice breakers for the college classroom

- Ice breakers for college

- Ice breakers and activities

5. Set the tone for the course

The way you engage students on the first day sends powerful messages about the level of involvement and interaction you expect from them. Inexperienced instructors sometimes make the mistake of lecturing at the students for a few weeks, then try to have a discussion when the first big unit of the course is finished, only to be surprised at the lack of student participation. This is because students have already been socialized to just listen in the course. The following strategies will help you set a productive tone:

- Whatever you plan to do during the semester, do it on the first day.

- Consider a "Homework 0" voluntary-mandatory office hour.

- Establish a culture of feedback.

You may also want to establish some rules or norms about cell phone use or class discussions. Follow this link to view a good video on establishing rules or norms (3:14).

6. Collect baseline data on students' knowledge and motivation

This objective stems directly from the second overarching goal for the first day of class.

- Collect data about baseline knowledge.

- Get a sense of students' motivation in the course.

- Decide what to do about different/inadequate prior knowledge.

7. Whet students' appetites for course content

Some instructors simply hand out the syllabus and dismiss class figuring that the enrollment has not yet stabilized and it does not make sense to cover material. While there is truth to that argument, the first day of class is a great chance to stimulate interest about the course and to activate relevant prior knowledge students have about the material. Here are some suggestions for activities that orient students to the content:

- Directed reading-thinking activity. Collect data from the students about issues related to course content.

- Have students generate a hypothesis about a typical problem in your course.

- Connect course content to current events.

- Common sense inventory.

8. Inform students of important course details

You might want to provide information about the following categories:

- Drop-add dates – here's a link to Seneca's important academic dates

- Rules about course sections

- Safety procedures – here's a link to Security and Emergency Management Services

- Other relevant administrative or logistic procedures – here's a link to Seneca's information about paying for courses, awards and OSAP.

While this may seem like a lot of information to consider for one class, remember that the

first day of class sets the tone for the entire course. Time upfront will pay off in the long run.

Adapted from: Make the Most of the First Day of Class from Carnegie Mellon's Eberly Center, Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation.

Links to resources

To see more great resources, visit the The Teaching & Learning Centre to explore all the many amazing workshops, online programs and faculty supports that the Teaching & Learning Centre has available.

For other great ideas, take a look at these excellent resources from Iowa State University and Stanford University. They're also shared by the The Teaching & Learning Centre.

- What to Do on the First Day of Class from the Centre Teaching & Learning at the University of California Berkeley
- 10 Ideas for a Great First Day of Class from Iowa State University
- 10 Teaching Tips for the First Day of Class (PDF)
- 10 Teaching Tips to Launch Your Online Course (PDF)
- Ideas to Create a Welcoming, Engaging, and Inclusive Classroom from the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at Iowa State University

tags : classroom-essentials, teaching-and-learning-centre, tips-for-the-first-day