Best Practices

The First Day of Class
Never underestimate the importance of the first class! The “way you engage students on the first day sends powerful messages about the level of involvement and interaction you expect from students... it is a great chance to stimulate interest about the course and to activate relevant prior knowledge students may have about the material” (CMU).

In his advice guide, “How to teach a good first day of class,” James M. Lang defines four core principles that you can use to plan the start of semester:

- **Curiosity:** “Consider the first day as your best opportunity to spark students’ curiosity and invite them into a fascinating intellectual journey.” Instead of just reviewing the upcoming semester’s content and assignments, think about ways that you can “build and present learning experiences around deep questions and problems.” What first inspired you to pursue your discipline? What interests and values do your students bring to the classroom and can you find a connection to the subject matter?

- **Community:** The students that enter your classroom are “driven toward community, beset by fears and anxieties, and influenced in countless other ways by aspects of their lives beyond the purely cognitive.” How can you build a community that allows them all to contribute meaningfully to the learning that takes place in your classroom? How can you help them get to know you and each other?

- **Learning:** Many students think the first day of class will be limited to administrative tasks. Instead, think of ways to get them learning. You can get students excited and inspired by asking them to “try a cognitive task before they are ready.” For example, have students attempt to “solve a problem before they have the skills they need to be successful,” or work to “complete a challenging task that they will face again at the end of the semester.” You can also ask students to reflect on their own learning strategies and what has been effective or ineffective in the past, or to reflect upon past learning experiences they’ve had and what made them successful. Have students share these reflections with each other and with you.

- **Expectations:** Students come into your class expecting to find out certain things right away - “What shape will the course take? What materials will they have to buy? What tests, projects, and other assignments will they be required to complete? Are there any special obligations (such as field trips or community service) that might differentiate your course from a typical one?” Lay out your expectations for students, but also demonstrate to students what they should expect from you—using the first class as a model for the way the course will be run will help motivate students, clarify how they should best spend their time, and let them make an informed decision as to whether they should stay enrolled. A certain number of students will always drop your course because of conflicts or preferences - try not to take it personally.

The following tips will help you create an engaging and effective first class that address the four core principles.

**Set the stage**

- **Determine the ideal physical environment** – Students will make judgments about the course based on the arrangement of the room, with formal rows indicating a lecture format and circles or u-shapes indicating that student participation will be expected (CMU). You can choose to set up the room ahead of time, or do it as part of an activity during the first class. As students do introductions, “ask your students to comment on the acoustics and remain conscious of how well you can hear and see each of them.” Talk to
them about the format of the class and the way they’ll be expected to participate. After introductions are complete, have them work together to rearrange the room (CFT).

- **Make an entrance** – To establish an informal style, arrive early and chat with students. To establish a formal style, arrive exactly on time and enter the classroom (IUB). The same goes for clothing – “More formal attire communicates expertise and confidence, less formal attire communicates approachability. Usually, it is easier to shift a more formal impression into a more relaxed one than the other way around. These considerations are particularly relevant for young instructors who are concerned about establishing themselves as authoritative” (CMU).

- **Whatever you plan to do during the semester, do it on the first day.** “Model all aspects of your course (group work, activities, participation, technology, etc.) in that first class, especially if what is coming is different from the norm” (Ryerson).

- **Be enthusiastic** – “Enthusiasm comes from confidence, excitement about the subject, and pleasure in teaching. Your facial expressions and smiles, attentiveness to students, movement away from the podium or chalkboard, and eye contact is long enough to observe students’ expressions will all demonstrate your enthusiasm” (IUB).

**Introduce yourself**

Students will be trying to figure you out on the first day—are you approachable and helpful? Are you likely to be a harsh grader or strict about deadlines? Are you experienced with the subject matter and confident as a teacher?

- **Establish your own credibility** – Give students a sense of your qualifications for teaching the course – discuss your prior work experience, fieldwork, travel, research or publications (Fink). “Taking time to share your professional journey to becoming an expert in your discipline places a human face on the subject matter for students. It can also foster excitement in your subject matter. The sense of wonder and curiosity that you can convey may be just the catalyst that students need to reframe a required course to one that is exciting and engaging” (UNC).

- **Reveal something about yourself** – “Sometimes students can relate to the teacher more productively if they can see him or her as a human being... Sharing personal stories and being able to laugh at yourself can help this process” (Fink). Tell the class what you enjoy most about teaching, or what you’ve learned from your students (CFT). Just be careful not to “disclose any personal information that could undermine your authority—“it is not helpful to say that you’ve never taught the course before, or that it is your least favorite course to teach” (CMU).

**Identify the value of the course**

- **Introduce the subject matter** – Many times, students will be enrolled in the course without having a clear idea of what they will be learning and why it’s important. It’s good to clarify things with an overview of the subject that answer the questions “What is the subject and how is it connected to other kinds of knowledge?” (Fink)

- **Make it relevant** – Help students understand the significance of the course. Open the class with a “provocative question or anecdote and relate it to the content” (Berkeley). “Bring in a newspaper or magazine clipping that relates to your course. Whenever you can connect your field to current events, or pop culture, or student interests, you demonstrate relevance, which increases student motivation” (CMU).
Get to know your students

- **Help students get to know each other** - Create a positive, social classroom environment by giving students a chance to interact with each other. Depending on the size of the class, you could invite students to introduce themselves and share some of their background, or lead them in an informal group discussion (Fink). “Ice breakers raise the energy levels and get students comfortable... especially if you want to foster a collaborative environment... Icebreakers work even better when they allow students to get to know each other in the context of the course material” (CMU). Possible icebreakers include:
  - In pairs have students interview and then introduce each other
  - In small groups have students find one thing they all have in common and one thing that none of them have in common
  - Go around the room have students tell the origin/meaning/story behind their name
  - Have students fill out a Google Form before class and display the results (either summarized or anonymously) in class
  - Ask students to post the GIF that most represents them and the reason why in a discussion board in D2L (CRLT)

- **Assess student knowledge and motivation**
  - Give students an ungraded pretest that assesses knowledge and skills necessary for the course. “The questions might cover the major themes you will address during the semester.” These questions can also be used on the mid-term and final “enabling you and the students to compare their knowledge at the beginning and end of the course... In addition, it provides students with examples of the types of questions you will ask on graded quizzes and exams” (CFE).
  - Have students write a few sentences about why they are taking the course, what they expect to get out of it, and what challenges they anticipate (CMU). Have students compose an “ungraded short essay on the first day of class. Short essays can reveal several important student characteristics, including perception, knowledge, and attitudes about the subject, analytical and conceptual skills, as well as general writing ability” (UNC). To save time, conduct surveys or questionnaires ahead of time using Google Forms.
  - Ask students to submit questions about the course “in class, via email, or in an online discussion board, such as on D2L. Plan to answer these questions during the next class session” (Washington University).

- **Learn student names** – remembering student names can be difficult even in small classes, but there are a few strategies that can help make the process easier:
  - Ask students to sit in the same seats for the first few weeks of class.
  - Ask students to say their name before each time they speak.
  - Repeat student names as much as possible, for instance when restating a student’s question or comment for the class.
  - Have students make name tags or tent cards on the first day of class - students can include the name they would like you to use (often different from the official roster) as well as their chosen pronoun. Collect the name tags at the end of class and redistribute them at the beginning of the next class - this prevents students from losing or forgetting the name tags at home and will also give you practice distributing them by name (UNL).
  - Assign a short written assignment in the first week and then practice student names by calling up students one by one to return their papers
• Try to talk to a different group of five students each class, for instance when supporting them as they work in groups, and make an effort to use their names frequently as part of the conversation (Finley, 2014).

• **Consider a mandatory office hour** - require students to “make an appointment with you, find your office and visit you there before the next class or two. This gets students to your office, breaks the ice with a short one-on-one interaction, and makes it much more likely that the students will come back for help when they need it” (CMU).

### Establish ground rules and expectations

• **Get student buy-in** - “involve them in creating the class contract around norms, behaviors, etc. Make sure to cover lateness, disruptive behavior, and distractions such as laptops and cell phones” (Ryerson).

• **Review the syllabus** - Distributing “a comprehensive, learning-centered syllabus during the first class promotes a positive attitude in students, as it shows you care about the course and have made an effort to plan it carefully” (CFE). Your syllabus should “provide an easy to access guide to navigating the course throughout the semester” (UNC). Spend time on the first day going through the syllabus with students. To avoid sending “the message that students can ask you rather than look up course information,” plan an activity in which students must actively engage with the syllabus themselves (Weimer, 2013)

• **Clarify instructor responsibilities** - “Share some advice for success in your course (e.g. attendance, participation, keeping up with the readings) and let them know you are confident in their success as long as they put in the required effort” (CMU). Let students know what you will provide them so that they can be successful in your course. Will you provide them with specific types of feedback, study guides, slides, notes, or review sessions? (CFT)

• **Elaborate on any preferences** - Write your contact information and office hours on the board, explain which method of communication you prefer (phone, email) or how students should approach office hours (drop by, make an appointment) (CMU). Set boundaries for communication with students – let students know if you won’t be able to answer emails on the weekends or the evenings, or if you will be away for a certain period of time during the course (CFT). You can tell students that you have a specific time span during which you will respond to e-mails, regardless of when they send them, or that you will get back to them within a defined time-frame.
Work Cited


Center for Teaching. First Day of Class. Vanderbilt University. https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/first-day-of-class/


Please contact michelle.schwartz@ryerson.ca, with questions or suggestions for future topics http://www.ryerson.ca/lt

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