

The First Day of Class

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How Adults Learn

In order to prepare and to teach adult students, a teacher should first reflect on how adults generally learn. Initially, this is important because that first day of class “sets the stage” for the rest of the semester. It demonstrates your feelings about your discipline, about teaching in general, about how you will conduct class, and about your expectations of the students. See Chapter 11, [Characteristics of Effective Teaching](#), for more information.

There are several assumptions about how adults learn that new teachers preparing to teach should consider. These assumptions follow:

- Adults are reflective problem solvers in nature. They can and need to direct their own learning.
- Adults’ life experiences also can and should be used as a source of learning.
- Adults are generally motivated by internal forces, such as a drive to finish a degree. In a college classroom, students have genuine purposes for being in your class (Knowles, 1980).

Suggestions:

- If possible, allow some choices of assignments in your syllabus. For example, you could allow students a choice of how to develop a final unit of study that synthesizes their learning.
- Student discussions that focus on important course topics help students to synthesize what has been learned. It also allows them time to work out any concerns they may have about what they are learning. For example, the students may be given a case study about a specific time in history. They are to read and reflect on how the historical events of that time may impact current issues in society.
- Allow for group work so students have a chance to share their learning. Students may not understand the same way. Sharing helps to clarify important issues they may have about concepts. Besides, teachers spend too much time talking. Students learn best when they are actively engaged, working with materials and interacting (Weimer & Neff, 1990).

Before the First Class Meeting

First impressions are important. So, the teacher should be well prepared before entering the class for the first time. Part of that preparation is to think about the little things that need done to make sure that the first class meeting goes smoothly. In addition, your planning shows the students that you care about the coursework and their learning. Several suggestions are made below that may help.

Visit the classroom

- Know the classroom setting and how it is arranged. Being familiar with the classroom setting will help you determine how to present the content and to interact with the students during class time.
- Know how many students there will be and what you will need for them to participate during class. For example, are there enough seats/desks for all of your students? Taking time to try to find extra desks takes away from the content of your class.
- Some classrooms are locked if they contain expensive equipment. So, you may have to make arrangements to have a key to the classroom for this specific semester.
- Think about the types of equipment (technology) that you will need and what is available in the classroom setting. You may have to arrange for specific equipment to be added to the classroom for instruction, or you may have to make adaptations in your instructional plan.
- Think about how you want your students to participate in class. In some classrooms, you can think about rearranging the room for group work. In larger lecture type classrooms, you may have to find other ways to encourage collaboration, such as group work assignments.

Syllabus preparation

Your syllabus is your contract with the students, and it needs to be prepared before your first class period. The following need to be considered when creating your syllabus. See Chapter 4, [Preparing and Designing a Course](#), for more on syllabus development.

- You need to read the text to determine how the text is outlined and know the author(s) stance on the content. This is necessary in case there are discrepancies between what you believe and what the authors believe. These can be addressed in class as the situation arises.
- As the text is read, determine your calendar for discussing the topics you plan to cover. This shows the students you have thought through the specifics of the course and are prepared. It also helps you keep track of the objectives that need to be taught.
- Plan your assignments and test schedule. Make the assignments authentic and applicable to the course. Along with the assignments, determine your grading system. Your assignments and tests are influenced by the type of course you teach. Large lecture classes could need different assignments and tests than the smaller classes. For example, many students in large classes have tests in INQUISIT.
- Also, include on your syllabus your contact information the students will need for the semester. Giving the students your office phone number and email address are two options of maintaining contacts with the students. Having more than one way for students to contact you lets them know that you care about their success and are willing to extend yourself so they learn.
- Finally, your syllabus has to include a statement concerning how adaptations and accommodations will be made for disabled students (Davis, 1993). If need be, contact the Office of Disabled Student Development at 285-5293 for further information.

General preparation

- Think about how you will introduce the topic of the course and your syllabus to the students. You are trying to catch their interest in the course. Some professors may want to stick to general discussions about the course requirements. On the other hand, you may tailor-make your first day presentation. For example, one could read a poem or short text that will make the students start to think about the course content.
- You must prepare to introduce yourself and have the students introduce themselves. What information do you feel is the most important for the student to know about you and for you to know about them? If you plan an activity that first

day, use the activity as an informal way for students to get to know each other or to become acquainted with the course topic. Do not plan on taking up a lot of class time with this activity. But it does signify to the students that they are important. For example, you may want to share your educational background and related professional experiences with your students. Furthermore, make sure the students know how to address you (Ms., Mrs., Mr., Dr.). Showing respect for you is important.

- Allow the students to introduce themselves. They can share their program of study and what they plan to do when they graduate. It is best not to ask students to share personal information that may jeopardize their privacy. Make sure that you specify what you want them to share. Consider the total number of students you have and how long you can allow for this activity. By students sharing briefly about themselves, it becomes easier for them to form relationships and work together for the semester.
- Over prepare that first day. It is best to have too much than too little.
- Many of the activities that have been described demonstrate the importance of making the first day interactive. Engagement through activities helps students relax and enjoy the class. Learning does not have to be painful.

The First Day

Generally, this is a time of anxiety for both the student and the teacher. It is typical for a new professor to be quite anxious as he/she begins a new class. In fact, seasoned teachers are sometimes anxious when meeting new students for the first time. As a college teacher, you want the students to feel that the learning environment you create will be inviting and engaging. You want your students to also understand that you value the contents of this class and the time that will be spent in class. This gives them a genuine purpose for attending. As for the students, you need to remember that your class is not the only one they may attend that day. In each class, they are given a sampling of the upcoming activities to learn the coursework throughout a semester. So that first day or week of classes can sometimes be overwhelming as the students begin to sort through all of the courses and their requirements (McKeachie, 1999).

In order to set the stage for a successful experience for you and the students, consider the following suggestions before entering class for the first time.

- Be on time for not only this class, but all of the class days that follow. That gives you time to organize your materials the way you want to present them to the students. It also allows you time to informally chat with individual students before class begins.
- Dress in a suitable manner. Your dress should indicate that you are the teacher.
- Plan to take attendance the first few class periods. If the class is small, this gives you a chance to become familiar with their faces and names (Johnson, 1995). If the class is large, you can still become familiar with the names and can begin to recognize faces with names as the course continues.

To Begin Class

Introductions

Once the introductions (teacher and students) are finished, you may want the students to complete an information sheet or a 3X5 card that includes other courses they have taken that pertain to this class. In addition, the students can list their expectations and goals for the course (McKeachie, 1999). This type of information can help you determine how the students perceive the course and it can guide how you interact with them. For example, a student may not understand how the course topic will contribute to his/her degree. You can address this in your lessons. Making time to focus on students' concerns will help you establish an atmosphere in which the students' voices are heard and respected.

After introductions

- To begin the course, give a brief presentation of the course topics to be covered during the semester.
- As a part of your presentation, you may want to briefly assess the students' prior knowledge of the course topic. This can be done in many ways. Students can write what they know about the course topic on the information sheet; you can have them do a Quick Write (a short summary) of what is known; or you could have them share in class. This initial assessment can guide you in developing your lesson plans and can help you to

become acquainted with individual students who may struggle.

Introduce the syllabus

Your syllabus should provide information for the students that may eliminate some of their concerns if they have any.

- Students need to have time to discuss and ask questions to clarify topics and statements in the syllabus. Give them time to reflect and think about the requirements so they understand your expectations. As McKeachie (1999) points out, even if the students are not that interested in the course, they are at least interested in what type of teacher you will be. So, it is important to demonstrate that you are objective and fair.
- Make sure the students understand that you are willing to set appointments for those who cannot meet during regularly scheduled office hours.
- Do not apologize because you are new and may lack information that other professors may have. All teachers are confronted with similar feelings when beginning to teach at the college level. Remember, teaching is a continual learning process. Teachers learn every time they instruct a different group of students or teach a different course.

Introduce the text

If your students have the required text on the first day, you can review the contents of the text. Describe how students can learn from the text and how much of it will be used.

Key points to remember

- Have a way of presenting your course topic so that it is well organized and the content flows so students can make connections. Give them a genuine purpose for studying the topic. Make it interesting.
- You are setting the stage for the course. So, be as prepared as possible.
- Consider developing an activity to guide the students' thinking about the content of the course. Some examples include:
 - Small groups of students have five minutes to agree on one question they would like the instructor to answer. These are written on cards for the instructor to

- answer. The instructor reads and responds to some of the questions.
- Use an activity such as the Quick Write. The students write their reaction to the first day of the class and their introduction to the course and syllabus (McKeachie, 1999).
- In closing, just remember, you have worked hard for the opportunity to teach and learn at the university level. Relax and enjoy teaching.

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