

First Day of Class: What Can/Should We Do?

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What can we do on the first day of class? What should we do?

One common answer is simply to start lecturing: "This is day one, here is lecture one, away we go." Another possibility is: "Here is the syllabus, go buy your books and we will see you at the next scheduled class period." Neither of these two options seems desirable. But what are some other possibilities?

Several years ago a group of professors at the University of Oklahoma visited each other on the first day of class and then discussed what they saw each other doing. But the discussion quickly went from what they observed, to "What might be done?" They eventually identified nine attractive possibilities, as described below. A teacher should not feel obliged to do all of these, but doing even one or several of them on the first day (or during the first week) would seem to accomplish a number of important tasks for getting a class started in the right way.

1) Involve students quickly.

This can be done in a variety of ways:

- * having them introduce themselves
- * allowing them to think and write silently
- * having a whole-class or a small-group discussion, etc.

But letting students know right from the outset that they will be active participants seems like a good approach.

2) Identify the value and importance of the subject.

Not all students come to all classes with a clear idea of why this subject is important. The teacher may need to help them understand the significance of the course. The sooner this is done, the sooner the students will be ready to invest time and energy in the task of learning the subject matter.

3) Set expectations.

This can involve such things as what the teacher considers appropriate amounts of study time and homework for the class, the importance of turning homework in on time, expectations about in-class behavior, how the teacher wants to relate to students, and how much interaction among students is desired. The first day also offers an opportunity to find out what expectations the students have of the teacher and of the class.

4) Establish rapport.

Almost any class will be more enjoyable for both the teacher and the students if they know each other a bit. This exchange can be started with introductions, sharing some background information, etc.

5) Reveal something about yourself.

Sometimes students can relate to the teacher more productively if they can see him or her as a human being, i.e., as something more than just an authority figure or subject matter expert. Sharing personal stories and being able to laugh at yourself can help this process.

6) Establish your own credibility.

Sometimes this happens automatically, but at other times students need to know about the teacher's prior work experience, travel experience, or research and publications in an area. Having this knowledge can help students gain confidence that the "teacher knows what she or he is talking about."

7) Establish the "climate" for the class.

Different teachers prefer different classroom climates: intense, relaxed, formal, personal, humorous, serious, etc. Whatever climate you want, you should try to establish this early and set the tone for the rest of the semester.

8) Provide administrative information.

This often takes the form of going through the syllabus, presuming you have a syllabus with this information in it: what reading material the students will need; what kind of homework will be involved; what your office hours are; where your office is located; how the class grade will be determined; what your policies are regarding attendance, late papers, make-up exams, etc.

9) Introduce the subject matter.

Generally this introduction will be facilitated by starting with some kind of overview of the subject.

- * What is it?
- * What are the parts of the subject?
- * How is it connected to other kinds of knowledge?

Final Note:

Remember that it is imperative that you do on the first day whatever it is you want the class to do the rest of the semester. If you want them to discuss, discuss on the first day. If you want them to work in small groups, find something for them to do in small groups on the first day.

Additional reading from the library of the CTL:

Nilson, L. B. (2003). *Teaching at its best : a research-based resource for college instructors*. Bolton, Mass.: Anker Publ., 48-54.

Heppner, F. H. (2007). *Teaching the large college class : a guidebook for instructors with multitudes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 15-37, Appendix B, Appendix D.