

The First Day of Class: A Once-a-Semester Opportunity

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There's only one first day of class. Here are some ideas for taking advantage of opportunities that are not available in the same way on any other day of the course.

- It's students' first introduction to the course content. Catalog descriptions of courses may be accurate, but they aren't all that good at conveying why the content is important, relevant, and useful; why students just may find it interesting; and why a few in the past have actually fallen in love with it. A good introduction provides a bit of background; it builds connections by identifying shared experiences and common interests. The details offered in a good introduction motivate continued conversation.
- The first day gives you the chance to explain why this course and the content of this field matter to you. Of all the potential majors, you chose one in this field—how did that happen? Did you choose well? Why?
- Most courses develop important skills—concrete ones like how to calculate the Doppler shift and less specific ones like how to evaluate evidence or construct a persuasive argument. The first day is a good time to let students know what they will be able to do—or do better—as a consequence of this course. Too often we focus the conversation on what the course covers and what students will know by the end of the term. That's important, but we shouldn't leave out how the course develops skills—some of which students will use for the rest of their lives.
- Courses have been known to change lives. Most don't, but why not introduce the possibility on the first day? Adult educators call it transformative learning. It happens when we learn something that not only changes how we think, but also changes what we do; indeed, who we are. Sometimes these big changes occur incrementally; other times they hit like lightning—with a burst of light and a thunderous revelation. It's been known to happen in all types of courses and with all types of students.
- You can talk about your commitment to teaching. What are your favorite things about teaching? What do you need from students in order to do your very best teaching?
- You can talk about your commitment to student learning. How will you support their efforts to master the material? What can you do to go beyond "I'm happy to answer questions" and "I have regularly scheduled office hours"?
- You can explore students' commitments to learning. Yes, most often their first commitment is to grades and getting good ones, but there's an opportunity missed if you talk only about grades and don't mention learning. Could you compose a potential course theme song? "Grades matter, but learning matters more." You'll be singing it solo, but if students hear it often enough, you may get some accompaniment by the end of the course.
- It's the first chance to find out about your students in the course: year in school, major, prior course



work, current jobs, career objectives, characteristics of courses in which they've learned a lot, teacher feedback that is and isn't helpful, peer contributions that support learning—whatever information you might need to connect with them as learners. Collecting this information is the first step in building constructive relationships with students and discovering concrete ways you can link course content to student realities.

- It's a new course and, for most, the beginning of a new academic year. Optimism prevails. Teachers and students want the same things on the first day—a good course, a positive constructive learning environment, the chance to succeed—and at this point everyone still believes these things are possible.
- Students may look passive and not especially interested, but don't be fooled. In most cases, it's a facade. Who among us hasn't tried to look calm, cool, and collected when we're feeling scared, uncomfortable, and afraid of looking stupid? On that very first day, get students connected with each other and the course content. Let students wade around in some intriguing content details, collectively discovering that the water's warm and feels good. Maybe they'll be motivated to dive in and swim out toward deeper water.
- It's the day in the course when it's easiest for the teacher to genuinely smile. You have only good news to share, so let them hear it.

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