First Day: Instructional Strategies

THE FIRST DAY & WEEK OF CLASS: INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

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The beginning stage of a course includes the all-important first day and first week of class. During this formative period, it may be useful to view the process of building class community as the first "topic" that needs to be addressed in class. Allowing students early opportunity to interact with each other and with the instructor, is a fundamental or foundational experience that should be "covered" before any other topic is introduced. Not only does such early interpersonal bonding enhance student retention by promoting social integration, it may also address a primary need of new students at the very beginning of their first semester—a time at which research indicates that freshmen are most concerned about “fitting in” and establishing social ties (Simpson, Baker & Mellinger, 1980; Brower, 1997). Thus, it may be helpful to view the needs of first semester freshmen in terms of Abraham Maslow’s classic “need hierarchy” model, in which human needs for social acceptance and self-esteem are more basic and must be met before higher needs for personal growth and self-actualization can be realized (Maslow, 1954).

The first week of class may also be the time to provide students with a preview of some of the more exciting and interesting issues to be covered in the course. In particular, use the first day of class to create a “positive first impression” of the course, which can establish motivational momentum and a foundation of enthusiasm upon which the course can build or “take off.” This practice should differentiate the inauguration of the course from many other college courses in which professors often use the first day of class to deliver a drab review of the syllabus that often includes a “laundry list” of course requirements and policies—which is enough to induce “syllabus anxiety” in some students. Adding insult to injury, this cursory review is sometimes followed by early class dismissal, which sends students the tacit message that the first day of class is not important (or, worse yet, that class time is not important and can be readily sacrificed).

Instructors who conduct the first day of class in the foregoing fashion may underestimate the important influence of the first class in shaping students’ initial impression of the course. The first impression can be an influential force that has long-lasting impact, and if it is not a positive one, as the old saying goes, “you never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This suggests that the first class should be one that is deliberately designed to generate student interest and student involvement. As Friday (1989) illustrates, “Opening the first session with a lecture on course goals delivered to students seated in rows is likely to establish the expectation that the teacher is in charge of doing the work and that the students are responsible for observing” (p. 59). Similarly, Erickson and Strommer argue that students come to the first class with a “hidden agenda” which includes determining “what the professor is like, who the other students are, how instructors and students will behave, and what climate will prevail. In addition to
distributing the syllabus, then, our agenda for the first class would include . . . getting students to talk [and] to be actively involved. If they sit passively during the first day, they will do the same in the next” (1991, 87).

Another timely practice that could be introduced during the first week of class is to provide students with an overview of the overarching topics and a preview of key strategies for succeeding in the course. An effective overview has the cognitive advantage of giving students a sense of the “big picture” (total context), as well as providing them with an “advance organizer” that can enhance the later learning of specific information related to it (Ausubel, 1978). Also, taking some time during the first week of class to provide a preview of course-success strategies can have affective advantages for students, serving to increase their awareness of adjustments they may need to make during the course, so that they are better anticipated and implemented more proactively (Whitman, Spendlove, & Clark, 1984). Such anticipatory discussion of potential stressors has been found to function like a “stress inoculation,” serving to strengthen an individual’s coping response to the stressor when it is subsequently experienced (Meichenbaum, 1985).

Lastly, use the first week of class to make an intentional effort to learn your students’ names. No one more poignantly captures the significance of remembering an individual’s name than does Dale Carnegie in, How to Win Friends and Influence People: “We should be aware of the magic contained in a name and realize that this single item is wholly and completely owned by the person with whom we are dealing and nobody else. Remember that a person’s name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language” (1936, p. 83). College research indicates that “addressing students by name” is a classroom teaching behavior that correlates positively and significantly with students’ overall evaluation of the instructor (Murray, 1985). In contrast, research on “uncomfortable courses” (i.e., courses most likely to cause “classroom communication apprehension” among students) reveals that such courses are more likely to be taught by instructors who are perceived by their students as being unfriendly and who did not address students by their first name (Bowers, 1986).

It is my personal experience that learning the names of students as quickly as possible is the most effective way to create a positive first impression among students and establish early rapport with your class, thereby laying the foundation for a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable interacting with the instructor and becoming actively involved in the course.

Listed below is my “top ten” list of strategies for the effective and expeditious learning of student names.

1. Ask the office of Students Services or Student Affairs if you could review identification photos of students in your class. This could be done before the course begins, or whenever class rosters are first available from the registrar. Learning to associate or pair faces and names is expedited if the names are learned prior to making associations with their respective faces. Also, you can use student-identification photos to selectively review the names and faces of particular students who you are having difficulty remembering.
2. Make short-hand comments next to student names when calling roll on the first day of class (e.g., record memory-triggering comments referring to the student’s distinctive physical characteristics or seating location). Remaining after class for a few minutes to review these comments made by each student’s name is an effective memory-enhancement practice because it capitalizes on the fact that you may still have visual memory for students’ facial features and for the spatial (seating) position they occupied in class. Your visual-spatial memory can be improved further if you request some information from students on the first day (e.g., personal information cards) and collect their responses in the same order in which they are seating in class. Moreover, this quick post class review tends to combat the “forgetting curve” at a time when most memory loss tends to occur—during the first 20-30 minutes after new information has been learned.

3. On the first or second day of class, consider using short ice-breaker activities designed to help students and the instructor to get to know each other. For example, “paired interviews” may be used in which two students interview each other and then report the other’s autobiographical information to the whole class. Another effective icebreaker is the “name game” strategy whereby students sit in a circle or horseshoe arrangement and say their name preceded by an adjective that begins with the first letter of their name and describes something about their personality (e.g., “jittery Joe” or “gregarious Gertrude”); or, students may say their names accompanied by some nonverbal behavior that reflects their personality. After each student introduces himself, ask the next student to recall the name of the previous student before introducing herself.

4. On the first day of class, take a photograph of the class and have individual students sign their names by (or on) their respective faces. Use this as a record to review or rehearse student names until you have mastered them.

5. On the first day of class, have individual students introduce themselves, and have this class session videotaped so you may review or rehearse students’ names and faces outside of class time.

6. During the first week of class, have students submit to you a photocopy of the picture on their student identification card or driver’s license and use these pictures to help you associate names with faces.

7. Rehearse student names during periods of “dead time” (e.g., as students enter class and take their seats, or as you circulate among students during small-group discussions and exams). Early in the term, make an attempt to come to class early and to remain after class while students file out. This will provide you with opportunities to rehearse names, one by one, as students enter and leave the classroom.

8. Consider assigning some short reaction papers or minute papers at the end of class during the first weeks of the term. This practice will enable you to learn the names of students as they come up (one by one) to turn in their papers at the end of class, as well as at the beginning of the following class session when students come up individually to the front of class to pick up their papers.
9. Schedule brief, out-of-class conferences with individual students during the first few weeks of class so you can meet them one at a time.

This should enhance your ability to learn and remember their names because it allows for “distributed” practice, i.e., learning small amounts of information in a series of short separate sessions. For instance, it is easier to associate 21 faces with 21 names if they are learned three per day on seven different days, rather than learning all 21 of them on one day.

10. Continually refer to students by name after initially learning their names (e.g., always address them by name when you respond to them in class or when you see them on campus). This practice serves not only to reinforce your memory of the student’s name, it also repeatedly signals to the student that you know him as a person and are responding to him as a unique individual.

References


