

THE FIRST DAY OF CLASSES: GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

1. **Communicate Your Expectations**

It is hard to raise standards and expectations for your students part-way through the term. I find it useful to communicate high expectations to my students. I suggest students should expect the course will be demanding and will require effort. If you know how much effort (time outside of class) you expect, it doesn't hurt to tell them (see also "This is easy why don't they get it?" below). However, I would also tell them I will do what I can to help them succeed in the course.

Variations

One faculty member mentioned they give a quiz on the first day of classes to their second year students in a course on programming. The quiz covered material they addressed the previous year which required mostly rote answers. This quiz asks them to actually "design", that is, write a bit of code. Many of the students don't read the question carefully and don't actually "design". In short, they do poorly. Results of the test are followed by a discussion of the differing expectations of the course. The objective is to communicate to students the shift from first to second year – in second year they are required to read carefully, not provide pat answers, and to actually design.

Take Home Messages

Communicate to students what they should know by the end of the class. Share with them the "take home messages."

- What are the main points they may need to know for the exam?
- Help them focus their attention on the most important information.
- Try to think about the material from the students' point of view.

2. **Preventing a Difficult Situation: The 24-Hour Approach**

On the first day of class, describe your "policy" for dealing with issues that arise. The policy is added to the course syllabus to which you can refer the students. You can explain to the students, My policy is this: I will not address an issue until 24 hours have passed.

If you have a problem:

- Notify me about the issue. (Thank them and ask them to send a note explaining the problem by email).
- Follow up with a note or email. (Explain this will ensure you will remember to address the issue or question).
- After the note is submitted, wait for 24 hours.

I promise, to reply within 24 hours.

Rationale to students:

- This allows me to deal with problems and issues more equitably between students.
- If I am unhappy, it gives me time to cool down.

What it does for you as a faculty member:

- Gives you time to ask an experienced colleague for advice.
- Gives you time to cool down.
- Gives the student time to cool down and discuss the situation with their peers.

After 24 hours our students (and we) are usually more reasonable about issues and have had an opportunity to receive advice from others.

3. **Motivating Students**

How do we motivate students to learn and to want to put forth their best efforts? Some ideas:

- a) Ask them:
 - What motivates them? What will motivate them in this course?
 - What are you here to learn?
 - How do you hope to be different by the end of your course? Knowledge, skills, attitudes?
- b) Relate course material to the student's life, experience, or their potential field of employment. Let them know why they should care about the material you are teaching?
- c) Speak to students about where they are now in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes you are trying to cultivate, and where do you expect they should be by the end of the course? If possible, discuss the phases of development – how do you expect them to progress over the year? How you expect their skills to build?
- d) Briefly mention your own research and relate it to the course content. This helps communicate to students you are helping to **create** the understandings you are communicating and teaching in your class. Be **enthusiastic** about the connection. Do not assume your students know you conduct research. Many believe teaching to be your only responsibility.
- e) Explain why you are a good person to teach this course.

4. **Objectives**

- a) Know where you want the students to be by the end of the year. What, skills, knowledge, and attitudes do you wish to develop?
- b) For each class think to yourself what three things do you want to achieve?

How can/should students contact you? Explain how students should contact you. What is right varies from person to person.

Email. Should they send you email messages? To which address? How quickly will you respond? (Many students expect a rapid response unless you explain you are not available after 5:00, on week-ends or whatever you specify).

Office Hours

5. **How do you expect to be addressed?**

- Dr.? Professor? by first name?
- On the first day, you can introduce yourself in the manner you wish to be addressed, write this form on the board.

6. **This is easy why don't they get it? The Hindsight Effect**

My father says "everything is easy once you know". This captures the essence of the hindsight effect, which suggests it is very easy to underestimate how difficult it is to learn something for the first time. A professor at York University asked students to solve a problem which took them about five minutes or more to solve. When asked how long it should take others to solve the problem, students explained it should take about two minutes since the problem was so easy.

Like those students, it is difficult for us to judge how difficult it is to learn a concept or how long it will take to complete a task which we consider "easy". Basing time estimates on our own experience

can also greatly mislead us, since most faculty member were not “average” students. We did well enough to, not simply pass – but to excel, to be admitted to graduate school, to achieve graduate degrees and to land a faculty position. No small feat – hardly an “average” student. A very small number of our students are like us.

7. **Attendance**

What can we do to encourage students to come to classes regularly? Do we want students to come to class who do not want to be there? As one faculty member put it, “a person can be physically present without being mentally present”. However, some evidence suggests students who attend classes regularly receive higher grades. What can you do to encourage them to come?

- Surprise quizzes that count.
- Don’t provide detailed lecture notes.
- Address material in class which is not included in their text or readings.
- Make the class time valuable, with active learning.

Additional approaches to this question can be found at the University of Pennsylvania:
<http://www.psu.edu/celt/largeclass/faqattend.html>