Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #16: The First Five Minutes

In his book *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* and in numerous articles and postings, James Lang, Professor and Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, has summarized a great deal of current research about college student learning. He also provides many excellent easy-to-implement ideas for nurturing student engagement.

One of his key themes is that the first five minutes of class time represent a critical opportunity, often squandered, to engage students, to help focus their attention, and to help them deepen their mastery of the course material at hand. Today’s Faculty Matter Teaching Tip consists of suggestions of things you might do with the first five minutes of your classes.

Open with a “question-of-the-day” or a “warm-up problem” – As students arrive and settle in to their seats, have them spend a few minutes on a question or a problem to solve. This can have many benefits (or “feed many birds with one piece of bread,” as former College of Education dean, Susan Meyers was wont to say):

- It should help them make the transition from whatever they were doing or thinking about prior to your class to what you want them to focus on in your class.
- It will provide a relatively low-stakes opportunity to assess their progress mastering the course material. You may opt to collect their work or not, and grade it or not, but there should be some mechanism by which they receive feedback on their answer, as appropriate to the type of question of problem.
- If you have them collaborate with classmates, it also provides an opportunity for them to practice articulating their reasoning, defending their approaches and listening to and learning from each other.

You can segue into the rest of the day’s activities with a brief full-class discussion, and if appropriate, return to the question and the end of the class period to consider how students might approach it again, in light of the content of the day’s class.

Open with a summary of “where we left off” or “what we covered last time” – Spend the first few minutes of class recapping. But rather than you providing the summary, have students state what they think were the main ideas.

- As ideas are proffered, acknowledge them, expand on them, invite discussion of them as you see fit. Be sure to correct inaccuracies as warranted.
- Consider having them do this without consulting their notes or other materials. Such “retrieval practice”, as it is termed in research in the learning sciences, will give them a chance to “practice remembering,” a strategy which has been shown to promote learning.

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1 See, for example *Small Changes in Teaching*, http://www.chronicle.com/article/Small-Changes-in-Teaching-The/234869/