Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #35: Making the most of the first day of class

The first few days of the semester are often characterized by a certain amount of chaos and uncertainty, as students’ (and faculty members’) schedules are still in flux. But the first day of class presents an important opportunity to establish patterns and expectations for the semester, an opportunity not to be squandered if possible. Instructors themselves may well be the best judge of what to do or cover until rosters are settled. Below, we offer a list of activities you might want to consider. The ideas are presented in alphabetical order – *If you have thoughts about suggestions for letter G through Z, please let us know!*

**ADVICE.** Take time to share advice about how to succeed in the class, including about how to study, about what to do if students find themselves struggling, about resources available to them. If you have had students from prior offerings of the course write letters to hypothetical future students, consider drawing from the advice they might have included therein.

**BACKGROUND.** Spend a few minutes on introductions, sharing parts of your own background and giving students the chance to share something about theirs. Use this time to convey your passion about the subject, to provide relevant information about your professional experience and interests. Depending on the size of the class, it may make sense to have students interview each other in pairs or trios. An alternative to allotting class time to this activity, you can ask students to post something about themselves on the Canvas discussion board, and then respond to one or more classmates’ posts. Be sure to comment on information students share the next time the class meets. For example:

1) Please post a photo (of you, of an artifact, of a place, or of an event) that captures something meaningful about you. Explain your selection (in a few sentences). [Do this by XX date.]

2) Peruse the posts of your classmates, and comment on at least one. [Do this by YY date.]

**CALIBRATING.** Students come to our classes with very different levels of academic preparation, and it may be very useful to determine their “starting points.” You might want to administer a calibrating survey, asking them to indicate their level of familiarity with key concepts you plan to introduce or that you’d like to build upon. (Please rate your level of mastery of the following concepts…using options such as a) I’ve never heard of it; b) I recognize the term, but I don’t know what it refers to; c) I knew what this was once, but I don’t recall it any more; d) I understand the concept well.) You might also ask them to share with you one of the more interesting things they learned last semester in a class within their major, and in a class outside of their major.
DECORUM. It is important to establish classroom protocol and norms. Faculty differ significantly in what they expect in the way of decorum. Be sure to state your expectations and policies pertaining to respect, civility, integrity, technology and the like. As appropriate, you may want to invite students to share what they want or need as well. It is always prudent to check with your Chair about policies and practices as well as “local customs” in your department.

ESSENTIALS. Be sure to go over essential elements of the course, including requirements, schedules, policies about grading, late or missing assignments, how class time will be spent, and so on. In particular, faculty differ enormously in how strictly they enforce deadlines, and in the magnitude of the penalties for lateness. Be sure your policies and expectations are communicated to students clearly and in writing (e.g., on the syllabus).

FOLLOW-UP. Consider including some sort of assignment to follow up on material from the first day of class. Questions whose answers you might find useful include:

• What are students most looking forward to? What intrigues them the most about the material you plan to cover?
• What are students’ concerns, if any, about the course?
• What do students want you to know about them, about their circumstances, about how they learn best, etc.?

More food for thought: From Faculty Focus, an online resource about teaching and learning in higher education:

• Five things to do on the first day of class (8/21/13)
• The first days of class: Building authenticity and community (1/11/17)
• First day of class activities that create a climate for learning (7/19/17)
• A memo to my students as the new semester begins (8/23/17)

The sorts of activities suggested above may make it difficult to dive right in on the first day with the content of your course. But you may find the investment well worth it, as you create a more comfortable and effective teaching and learning environment.

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You can read all previous tips on the Faculty Matter Tips page of the CFD website, and share your own thoughts and ideas on the Provost’s Academic Spotlight blog under the category “Faculty Matter”. Please add your own strategies using the comment link on the Provost’s Academic Spotlight blog under the category “Faculty Matter”.
