Hand out the course syllabus and leave. Cover the syllabus in painstaking detail, begin day one instruction, and assign homework for the next lesson. Engage in an interactive discussion of the main topics to be covered during the course and dismiss the class early. The first class meeting is arguably one of the most important classes of the semester and much advice has been written. The first class can set the tone for the rest of the course (Davis 1993), provide the terms of a student-teacher contract for the semester (Wolcowitz 1984), and instill a sense of excitement in the students (McKeachie 2002). An attempt is made here to review some of the numerous sources of advice.

Authors generally agree on a number of topics common to all first class meetings despite the varied array of subjects and class types. Conveying enthusiasm about the course, giving students a feel for how classes will be run, introducing the syllabus and course standards, and taking a number of questions from students are common to a number of different works on the subject. Bennett (2004) encourages beginning the class with a personal introduction then immediately discussing exciting research examples that draw on course material. Erickson, Peters, and Strommer (2006) suggest the first class should set the tone for the semester by getting students involved in a type of activity similar to what they will do in a typical class. The authors recommend getting the students actively involved in an activity that avoids giving the students a passive role. Although discussing the syllabus and course standards are common suggestions among many works the amount of time devoted to the topic varies. Bennett (2004) recommends holding off on a quick discussion of the syllabus until the end of class. Clement (2007) recommends going over the syllabus completely while Erickson, Peters, and Strommer (2006) recommend distributing it while not discussing it in class. However, nearly all are in agreement on the importance of the thoroughness and tone of the document regardless of how much time is spent discussing it in class. Providing an opportunity for students to ask questions demonstrates openness and allows students to learn about the instructor. Wright (1989) proposes it is important to show students that their instructor is willing to listen to student concerns. McKeachie (2002) suggests that many student questions on day one are aimed as much at learning something about the instructor as they are aimed at getting information about the course.

Suggestions for breaking the ice in the first class, beginning course content, and assigning homework for the next class varies slightly from author to author. There are numerous recommendations for getting students acquainted with the instructor and each other. A number of authors also include methods for the instructor to learn students' names. McKeachie (2002) suggests one or two students acting as interviewers for the class, having students fill out index cards with pertinent information, and playing some type of name game. Erickson, Peters, and
Strommer (2006) list nine first-day activities that include an introductory survey, student introductions, and a classroom scavenger hunt as ways to break the ice. Povlacs (1986), Davis (1993), and Wright (1989) provide lists of ice breakers and name-learning exercises. Advice for beginning course content on day one is varied. Recommendations range from providing a mini-lecture on some key concepts, sample problems, or questions that students will be able to answer at the end of the course (McKeachie 2002, Clement 2007, and Felder 1995) to covering a prerequisite concept or beginning lesson one material (Wankat and Oreovicz 1993). Regardless of the content the message should be that the instructor takes class time seriously (McKeachie 2002). Fink advises instructors to do on the first day whatever it is they want students to do the rest of the semester whether that is to discuss as a class or work in small groups (1999). Recommendations for a day-one assignment are not universal. Povlacs (1986), Wankat and Oreovicz (1993), and Davis (1993) all recommend some type of assignment on the first day. Davis notes that by assigning homework immediately, an instructor demonstrates to the students that the course is well organized and well paced (1993).

Conflicting views about the first class meeting

Pearlman (1999) provides a student-oriented view towards the first class that contrasts the faculty-oriented suggestions in some areas. Pearlman used an open-ended survey to canvass nearly 600 students in an undergraduate psychology program. Similar to instructor suggestions, students wanted a well-organized first class in which the teacher outlined basic course information and graded requirements, introduced himself to the class, and set a supportive tone. However, more students disliked icebreakers than liked them and many wanted to be dismissed after covering administrative details rather than beginning course content. If starting course content on day one, students preferred receiving an overall view of the course and why it is important. Some felt more motivated to begin the course once they knew why the material was being presented. Pearlman suggested that waiting until the second class day to begin teaching class material is a viable alternative.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for the first class meeting taken from a variety of works written over the last 20 years.

- Set the tone for the rest of the semester. Ensure students know you are open, accessible, and willing to support them through the course.
- Introduce the syllabus. It is a major instructional document but it is not necessary to go over the document in detail in class. Outline in class basic course content, course mechanics, and graded requirements; leave the rest to the paper document. Introduce the textbook as well.
- Introduce yourself. It is not necessary to give your detailed background, but be sure to convey enthusiasm about the material. It may be appropriate to describe how you became interested in the subject or course material.
- Break the ice. Use some method to find out something about the students and help the students meet each other. Although this is a common suggestion among the faculty work, one study of student perspectives downplays this recommendation.
Develop a course outline with student input if possible. Get students involved in deciding which problems they'd like to cover or deciding on goals for the course.

Demonstrate how classes will run. Engage the students in some type of material, discussion, or activity that exemplifies the types of classes that will occur for the rest of the semester. Let students know whether classes will be lecture-based or discussion-based. This shows students what is expected in class and how to prepare for class.

Take questions from students. This demonstrates your openness and gives you an idea of initial student concerns.

Begin course content. Show students that their time in class is worthwhile by delving into meaningful content on the first day. This can be an overview of the entire course, a preview of course pre-requisites, or first-day material. Student perspectives differed from faculty perspectives on this topic. Students preferred skipping course material or covering a course overview if necessary.

Assign homework for the next class. Although this recommendation is not universal among authors, this can show students the class is well-organized and well paced (Davis 1993).

The second class is surprisingly important. Many students view it as the first real class (Wankat and Oreovicz 1993) and it may be good teaching to leave the first lecture until after students have done the first assignment (Pearlman 1999).

References:


**Annotated bibliography:**


A number of the classroom assessment techniques described in this book can be tailored to day one interactions with a new class. Some examples include probing students' background knowledge, checking misconceptions/preconceptions about a topic, determining students' interest/knowledge/skills in a course, or ranking and matching student goals for a course. Extensive descriptions and procedures for each technique ease applying the strategies in class.


This book attempts to answer what makes the best college teachers great through the results of a fifteen-year study of professors in a variety of disciplines. In a chapter on how the best teachers prepare to teach, some examples for the first day included asking students to consider one central question, using inviting language and positive expectations rather than commanding tasks, and trying to get students to understand the heavy time demands and collaborative nature of a particular class. Although the book did not include a section devoted specifically to the first class meeting, Bain included a "bakers' dozen" of specific planning questions shared by many of the best teachers in developing their courses.


In this short discussion of one way to make the first day of class exciting the author suggests using a celebration exercise (in his case, the birthday paradox in a statistics class) to start the class. Rather than building the class around a discussion of the course syllabus, Bennett recommends using the majority of class time to discuss exciting research examples applicable to the course before covering syllabus details at the end of class. Bennett draws on informal survey results from two semesters to show that his approach produced positive results.
Clement, M. C. (2007). Ten things to make the first day (and the rest) of the semester successful. The Teaching Professor, 21(7), 1-3.

In describing ten things to do on the first day, the author emphasizes a few key concepts. Some of these include illustrating a routine if it will be a part of the rest of the semester (i.e., a routine for turning in and picking up papers), covering the syllabus completely, and leaving room for student questions at the end. The author also encourages covering some course content in the form of a mini-lecture.


Davis' chapter on the first day of class provides numerous suggestions in three main areas: administrative tasks, creating an open and friendly classroom climate, and setting course standards. Her suggestions sample many of the works written about the first class meeting and provide an extensive bibliography on the subject.


One chapter deals with preparing a syllabus and meeting the first class. The authors contend that a good syllabus can answer one of the students' main concerns on the first day by giving procedural information (content, requirements, evaluation procedures) about the course. However, the authors recommend avoiding extensive discussion of the syllabus on the first day because it assigns students a rather passive role. Instead, the authors maintain that interactive activities promote participation and give new students a strong impression for the climate of the class (what the instructor is like and how the class is run).


This concise list of recommendations for the first day of class divides recommendations into three categories - opening formalities, activities to learn students' names, and motivating students' interest. Felder recommends keeping the opening formalities such as the course syllabus and objectives to a minimum in class while putting most into a written document. He suggests that quickly learning students' names and motivating interest in the course goes a long way towards a successful semester.


This chapter is devoted specifically to the first day of class and builds upon previous sections detailing the months and weeks before the first class. McKeachie uses concrete examples to describe how to ensure students leave the first class knowing where they are going and how they are going to get there. Additionally, the recommendations for the first day are intended to ensure the students know it is safe to participate, are aware that the instructor cares about their learning, and expect the class will be valuable and enjoyable.

Unlike the rest of the articles cited here, this work takes into account analysis of student response to the first class meeting. Student perspectives on the first day generally supported the recommendations described in the literature except in the areas of icebreakers and beginning course material. The study included nearly 600 students in an undergraduate psychology program led by 11 faculty members in 31 sections.


In a chapter on designing your first class Wankat and Oreovicz focus on engineering courses and begin with broader topics such as developing course objectives or picking a textbook. Regarding the first class meeting, the authors recommend beginning day one with some type of housekeeping chores that may include a grading scheme and a tentative course outline. In contrast to recommendations from other authors, Wankat and Oreovicz suggest the course outline does not need to be complete and may cover only the first month or so of the course. Similar to other works, Wankat and Oreovicz recommend covering some type of course or pre-requisite material and assigning homework for the next class.


This chapter builds on the analogy of a student/instructor contract enacted when a student first enrolls in a course. On the first day of class the student is looking for the terms of the contract. A student likely wants as complete a description of the class as possible to include course requirements, grading policies, and class assignments as well as more intangible aspects such as how class sessions are conducted and the amount of student-teacher interaction. Wolcowitz argues it is the instructors job to provide both the explicit terms (e.g., paper requirements) and the implicit terms (e.g., student-teacher interaction style) of the contract on day one.

Additional resources:


Some useful websites for teaching preparation:
http://teaching.berkeley.edu/teaching.html
http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/