Start a Portfolio

A teaching portfolio not only will be useful when you discuss your teaching with your department head or superior, it will also be useful in your thinking about teaching and your development.

TIME: ONE WEEK BEFORE THE FIRST CLASS

If you teach first-year students and have a class list and e-mail addresses, send an e-mail welcoming the students to your class. (It's also not a bad idea to do this with more advanced students.)

At this point you're ready to prepare for the first class. For ideas about what to do and how to handle this meeting, read the next chapter.

Supplementary Reading

Robert Diamond's *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula: A Practical Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) has a good chapter, "Developing a Learning-Centered Syllabus."

Barbara Davis's book *Tools for Teaching*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), has a fine chapter on the syllabus (pp. 14–28).

Chapter 6, "The Natural History of the Classroom," in *The College Classroom* by Richard Mann, S. M. Arnold, J. Bender, S. Cytrynbaum, B. M. Newman, B. Ringwald, J. Ringwald, and R. Rosenwein (New York: Wiley, 1970), is still the best material on the changing needs of classes over the course of a semester.

Teaching Within the Rhythms of the Semester by Donna K. Duffy and Janet W. Jones (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995) is also a perceptive and readable guide to thinking about the flow of the course over the term.

An excellent aid for preparing your syllabus is M. A. Lowther, J. S. Stark, and G. G. Martens, *Preparing Course Syllabi for Improved Communication* (Ann Arbor: NCRIPTAL, University of Michigan, 1989).

If you are teaching first-year students, the book *Teaching College Freshmen* by Bette Erickson and D. W. Strommer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991) will be helpful to you.

Chapter 3

Meeting a Class for the First Time

The first class meeting, like any other situation in which you are meeting a group of strangers who will affect your well-being, is at the same time exciting and anxiety-producing for both students and teacher. Some teachers handle their anxiety by postponing it, simply handing out the syllabus and leaving. This does not convey the idea that class time is valuable, nor does it capitalize on the fact that first-day excitement can be constructive. If you have prepared as suggested in the previous chapter, you're in good shape; the students will be pleased that the instruction is under control, and focusing on meeting the students' concerns can not only help you quell your own anxiety but also make the first class interesting and challenging.

Other things being equal, anxiety is less disruptive in situations where stimulus events are clear and unambiguous. When the students know what to expect, they can direct their energy more productively. An important function of the first day's meeting in any class is to provide this structure; that is, to present the classroom situation clearly, so that the students will know from the date of this meeting what you are like and what you expect. They come to the first class wanting to know what the course is

all about and what kind of person the teacher is. You need to know what the students expect. To these ends, the following concrete suggestions are offered.

SETTING THE STAGE

One point to keep in mind on the first day and throughout the term is that yours is not the students' only class. They come to you from classes in chemistry, music, English, or physical education, or rushing from their dormitory beds or from parking lots. The first few minutes need to help this varied group shift their thoughts and feelings to you and your subject.

You can ease them into the course gradually, or you can grab their attention with something dramatically different, but in either case you need to think consciously about how you set the stage to facilitate achieving the course objectives. Even before the class period begins, you can communicate nonverbally with such actions as arranging the seats in a circle, posting an agenda, putting your name on the board, and chatting with early arrivals about what class they have come from or anything else that would indicate your interest in them. While students are coming in, suggest that they spend the time before class starts by getting acquainted with the students sitting near them.

BREAKING THE ICE

You will probably want to use the first period for getting acquainted and establishing goals. You might begin by informally asking first-year students to raise their hands, then sophomores, juniors, seniors, or out-of-staters. This gives you some idea of the composition of the class and gets students started participating. Make it clear that you value diversity. Varied student backgrounds enrich discussions.

In my relatively large lecture classes I have then asked the students to take a minute or two to write down words and phrases that describe their feelings on the first day of class. I then ask them, "What have you written?" and list their responses on the board.

Next I ask them, "How do you think your teacher feels on the first day of class?" This takes them aback, but they begin writing. We now list these responses in a second column, and they see some parallels. I comment briefly on my own feelings. (I remember with special affection the senior who came up to me after class and said, "I've been at this university almost four years, and this is the first time it ever occurred to me that professors have feelings.")

I admit to them that I'm anxious—that I'm concerned about how the students will relate to me and the material, but I'm not sure that everyone should do this. Students need to feel that you're secure enough to admit your own feelings. If they see you as being uncertain about your ability to fill the roles of authority and expert when needed, students may become more anxious.

In a small class you might then ask all class members (including yourself) to introduce themselves, tell where they're from, mention their field of concentration, and answer any questions the group has. Or you can ask each student to get acquainted with the persons sitting on each side and then go around the class with each student introducing the next or each repeating the names of all those who have been introduced—a good device for developing rapport and for helping you learn the names, too. A more demanding but surprisingly effective device is to have each person introduce everyone who was introduced before, ending with the teacher repeating everyone's names. (Try it! You'll be surprised at how well you do.)

Learning names is a start, but students are probably even more interested in you than in their classmates; so give them a chance to ask questions of you. Sometimes I have asked for one or two students to act as interviewers for the class, asking questions they think the other students would like to ask.

Even if you remembered all of the students' names in the "Name Game," you may not recall them later; so it is helpful to supplement the memory in your head with an external memory. I ask a former student who has a camera to take a picture of each student. At the next class meeting I ask students to write their names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and other

information on the photos for me. The "other information" might include previous experience relevant to the course, interests, distinctive characteristics that will help me remember them, possible major field, and so on.

Having established some freedom of communication, you can then go on to assess students' expectations and goals, and let them know what yours are. One technique for doing this is problem posting.

PROBLEM POSTING

Problem posting is a method of getting students involved and active that can be used in classes of all sizes. For this first class meeting you might say, "Let's see what problems you'd like to tackle during the course. What sorts of concerns do you think we might deal with?" or "What are your expectations for this course?" or "What goals do you have for this course?" or "What have you heard about this course?"

You might ask students to write for a minute their response to the question and then ask them what they have written. Your task then becomes that of recorder, listing responses on the board, overhead, or electronic smartboard. To make sure you understand, you may restate the response in your own words. If you feel that some response is ambiguous or too general, you might ask for an example, but you must be ready to accept all contributions, whether or not you feel they are important. It is crucial that the atmosphere be accepting and nonevaluative. Students should feel that you are genuinely interested in what they have to contribute.

By the end of the problem posting the class normally has become better acquainted, has become used to active participation, has taken the first step toward developing an attitude of attempting to understand rather than competing with one another, has reduced the attitude that everything must come from the teacher, has learned that the teacher can listen as well as talk (and is not going to reject ideas different from his or her own), and, I hope, has begun to feel some responsibility for solving its own problems rather than waiting for them to be answered by the instructor.

INTRODUCING THE SYLLABUS

Your syllabus will provide some of the answers to the concerns raised in the problem posting. In presenting the syllabus you give the students some notion of the kind of person you are. The syllabus is a contract between you and your students. But a contract cannot be one-sided. Thus it is important to give students time to read and discuss it. Give them a chance to have input and to be sure that they understand what you expect. Help the students understand the reasons for the plan you have presented, but if they have good reasons for changes, accept them. The students are, of course, interested in course requirements, but they are at least as much interested in what kind of person you are. One important issue is fairness.

Testing, Grading, and Fairness

Promoting the notion that you are objective or fair can best be handled in connection with marks and the assignment of grades (see the chapters "Assessing, Testing, and Evaluating" and "The ABC's of Assigning Grades"). A large part of the students' motivation in the classroom situation is (perhaps unfortunately) directed toward the grades they hope to get for the course. The very least that students can expect of you is that their marks will be arrived at on some impartial basis. Thus give some time to discussing this section of your syllabus. Try to help the students understand how grading and testing are tied to course goals.

The simplest way to show students that you are objective and fair is to let them know that you are willing to meet and advise them. Let them know they can tell you if they are likely to have special difficulties because of health or personal issues. Indicate your office hours. In addition, students appreciate it if you are willing (and have the time) to spend a few minutes in the classroom after each class, answering specific questions. Such queries most often concern questions of fact that can be answered briefly and would hardly warrant a trip to your office at a later time. If time permits, adjournment to a convenient snack bar or

lounge may give students with special interests a chance to pursue them and get to know you better. If you teach an evening class, schedule some evening time to see students.

The first class is not the time to make sure students understand your inadequacies and limitations. Frankly admitting that you don't know something is fine after the course is under way, but apologies in advance for lack of experience or expertise simply increase student insecurity. They need to feel that you are competent and in charge even if you are shaking in your boots.

INTRODUCING THE TEXTBOOK

To continue with the discussion of the first meeting of the class, we turn now to the presentation of the textbook. Explain the features that led you to choose it. Describe how students can learn from it most effectively. Since disagreement between the teacher and the text is inevitable, the students have a right to know what they are supposed to do about such discrepancies on examinations. By facing the situation squarely, you can not only escape from the horns of this dilemma but also turn it to your advantage. Explain that rival interpretations stand or fall on the basis of pertinent evidence and plan to give your reasons for disagreeing with the textbook. This procedure will accomplish two things: (1) it will give the student the notion that your opinions are based on evidence, and (2) it will frequently point out current problems in theory that often have great appeal for the serious student.

ASSESSING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

The most important characteristic determining student learning is prior knowledge. Thus you need to get some sense of the diversity of your class's background. You might simply ask questions like "How many have had more than X previous courses in this subject?" or you might give a short, noncredit test of relevant knowledge sometime during the first few class sessions. For students who lack sufficient background, you might advise that they transfer to the needed courses, or if this isn't feasible, you

can at least suggest materials for their own self-study that would help them keep up with the other students. For those with very high scores, you might suggest that they skip your course and go on to a more advanced course, or at least suggest supplementary materials that would be enriching and challenging.

In a diverse class, adult students or students from other cultures may feel at a disadvantage relative to students who have had previous courses that are relevant. Reassure them by pointing out that a diversity of experiences not directly related to the course can enrich class discussion and contribute to learning.

QUESTIONS AND REACTIONS

Even in a large lecture it seems wise to interrupt these first descriptions of the course for student questions. Some of the questions will be designed as much to test you as to get information. Often the underlying questions are

- "Are you rigid?"
- "Will you really try to help students?"
- "Are you easily rattled?"
- "Are you a person as well as a teacher?"
- "Can you handle criticism?"

Ask students to take two minutes at the end of class to write their reactions to the first day (anonymously). This accomplishes two things: (1) it indicates your interest in learning from them and starts building a learning climate in which they are responsible for thinking about their learning and influencing your teaching; and (2) it gives you feedback, often revealing doubts or questions students were afraid to verbalize orally.

WHAT ABOUT SUBJECT MATTER?

Many instructors dismiss class early on the first day. As the preceding sections indicate, I think the first day is important even though the students have had no prepared assignment. I like to

give at least some time to subject matter. Typically I give at least a brief overview of the course, indicate some of the questions we'll try to answer, and perhaps introduce a few key concepts. Either on the first day or during the second class period, I ask students to fill in concepts on a concept map (a diagram of key concepts and their relationships).

But there is a limit to what you can do. The balance between content and other activities is one that different teachers will decide in different ways. My only admonition is to use the time. The first day is important, and by using it fully you communicate that you take class periods seriously. By the end of the class period, students should feel, "This is going to be an exciting course."

IN CONCLUSION

By the end of the first day, students will have

1. A sense of where they're going and how they'll get there.
2. A feeling that the other members of the class are not strangers, that you and they are forming a group in which it's safe to participate.
3. An awareness that you care about their learning and will be fair.
4. An expectation that the class will be both valuable and fun.

Supplementary Reading

- B. G. Davis, *Tools for Teaching*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), Chapter 3.
- Baron Perlman and Lee McCann, "The First Day of Class," *American Psychological Society Observer*, 2004, *17*(1), 13–14, 23–25.

Part 2

Basic Skills for Facilitating Student Learning