

Planning Your First Day of Class

For new teachers, thinking about the first day of class can be both exciting and anxiety-provoking. Let's listen in as two new TA's are planning for their first day.

Gomez and Juanita are new TA's in their department, and each of them is responsible for teaching a section of Introduction to Meteorology. They have decided to work together so they can share effective strategies, and they have met today to make plans for the first day of class. As they begin to talk, they realize that they have very different ideas about what they should do.

Gomez says, "My primary goal for the first day of class is to get students excited about the course and the small group work we'll be doing in class. I've designed an activity where students will get some data about atmospheric conditions, and they will work in small groups to make some predictions about future weather patterns. After they've shared their predictions, I'll give them a little information about the ways that meteorologists use data to make predictions, which they'll be learning in the course. Then I'll give them a copy of the syllabus and tell them that their homework is to read that document and prepare for a quiz in the next class."

Juanita says, "My primary goal is to give students a clear picture of the syllabus, including the schedule of major assignments and the course policies. I will emphasize that this class includes a lot of group work so they know what they to expect when they come to class. After I've gone over some of the most important points, I'm going to give them time to ask me questions for clarification. I think that will take most of the class period, but it's ok if we end a little early. I know from my own experience as an undergrad that students aren't really ready to get started with the work of the course on the first day."

Take a moment to write down some ideas about what you just read. What is the difference between these two approaches to planning a first day of class? Which instructor's plan is more likely to result in a first day of class that prepares students to be successful in the course?

Both Gomez and Juanita realize that they need to orient students to their course on day one, but they have very different ideas about how best to do that. Gomez thinks his students need to experience the kind of work they'll be required to do throughout the course on the first day. Juanita thinks her students need to hear about her expectations but won't be ready to jump into the work of the course yet. Let's consider the implications these different ideas will have for students in their courses.

What is important on the first day?

Juanita's ideas about the first day of class are quite typical: she doesn't believe that the first day of class makes much of a difference for the course overall and thinks that the real purpose is to introduce the syllabus. But if we examine her plan carefully, we can see that her plan does tell students something about what they can expect in her course. When teachers spend most of the first day of class reviewing the course policies and procedures while students listen, they are putting those students into a passive role right away. Beginning a course this way sends the message that what matters is the teacher's expectations, not the students' learning. This message can present a real problem for courses like Juanita's that will require students to actively engage in the work of their own learning. Telling students that they will do exciting work together isn't nearly as effective

as having them experience some of that work on the first day, and it doesn't help them understand the approaches that will help them be successful in the course.

Gomez's plan does just that: he gives students an opportunity to experience on the first day the kind of engaging, challenging work they'll be doing throughout the semester. When a teacher plans a first day of class that immediately makes students active participants in meaningful disciplinary work, those students will begin to develop authentic curiosity about what the semester will hold in store for them. They will also start learning from experience, not from being told, what is expected of them and how they should engage with their teacher and their peers. And most importantly, students will see that the real point of the course is their learning: they will see that the teacher has designed challenging work for them, and they will have a clearer understanding of what they need to do to succeed.

Planning an engaging first day that prepares students for success

The first step to designing a successful first day is having a clear sense of your course goals. What kind of thinking do you want students to learn to do in your course? What new realizations do you want students to come to as a result of learning about your discipline? What is the work students need to be doing throughout your course to help them change their thinking in meaningful ways? After you've answered these questions for yourself, you're ready to begin designing your first day of class. Here are some approaches that can help you plan that first day.

Don't read the syllabus to students.

Students can fall into passive mode very quickly. When you start an entire semester with several minutes of reading a document to them, they can be led to believe that the point of the course is to listen to you tell them things. Instead of reading or reviewing the syllabus with students, have them do a disciplinary thinking task first and then spend the last 5 or 10 minutes of class doing the typical administrative tasks like introducing the syllabus and calling roll for attendance. You can even assign reading the syllabus for homework: if you want to hold students accountable for that reading and ensure that they will bring in questions for you, give a short quiz online or on the second day of class. The opportunity to use their understanding of the course requirements and overview will prompt meaningful questions that can help you explain any elements of the course that are confusing or unclear.

Start with a task that will challenge students to think.

Many times teachers think it's hard to have students do any real work on the first day because they haven't done any reading or preparation to work with. A more helpful way of looking at this is to recognize that this is actually an opportunity to learn what students already know and can do so you can show them how their thinking will change as a result of your course. Design a task that will demonstrate the limitations of their thinking and introduce them to the idea that mistakes are part of learning. Use the first day of class to create a space where it's ok to be wrong in the service of learning and development.

Use a content-related task to "break the ice" and create a collegial atmosphere in the classroom.

Tasks that require students to practice disciplinary thinking can be designed in ways that are very engaging, so you get the benefits of a social icebreaker with the added benefit of having students

begin the real work of your course right away. This is especially helpful if you are planning to use group or teamwork throughout the semester: it lets you orient students to what the day-to-day work of the class will look like.

Examples of effective plans for the first day of class

From a 19th Century American Women Writers course

Students come into this course not recognizing the importance of women writers in the literary marketplace of the 19th Century. They also don't recognize that there is often an inverse relationship between a literary text's popularity and its eventual inclusion in the canon. This task is designed to begin interrogating those naïve beliefs so that students can more effectively use historical and cultural context as a foundation for analyzing and interpreting literature.

1. The instructor introduces herself and welcomes students to the class.
2. Students are given a list that includes the author, title, and year of publication of several 19th Century American novels. This list includes novels that were best-sellers in the 19th Century but have since been largely forgotten (most written by women) and novels that did not sell well in their time but have established a place in the literary canon (most written by men).
3. Students work on their own to decide which of these novels sold the MOST copies within a few years of publication, and which sold the LEAST copies. They then put the titles into two categories: (A) Novels that would be in the top half of the list (i.e., sold the MOST copies) and (B) Novels that would be in the bottom half of the list (i.e., sold the LEAST copies). They are required to write down their individual answers.
4. Students work with a group of 5-6 other students to compare individual answers and come to consensus on how they would sort the novels. After they have arrived at a consensus decision, each group writes their list on the board and then is asked to explain their reasoning. Disagreements and different ways of thinking surface; the instructor makes notes regarding the differing rationales and asks questions to probe students' thinking.
5. After the groups have thoroughly explained the thinking that guided their decisions, the instructor shares publication data and begins to explain the relation between the popularity of a literary work and its inclusion in the literary canon. She reminds students that they have now made a first step toward recognizing how and why many of the writers on the syllabus were very popular upon their initial publication but have since been excluded from the literary canon.
6. In the last 10 minutes of class, the instructor calls roll and handles any registration issues. Then she hands out the syllabus and remind students that they have already begun the exciting work of the course. Students are asked to read the syllabus for homework and be prepared to take a short group quiz when they come to the next class meeting.

From a Human Development course

Students come into this course with rigid ideas about what a child is and limited ideas about the role that culture and ideologies play in human development. Further, students don't always realize that their own ideas about children, families, and development are limited by their cultural biases and lay concepts. By the end of the course, the goal is that students have a much richer and more

scientific network of concepts with which to make good decisions as future parents, uncles/aunts, teachers, school psychologists, etc. This task is designed to surface some of their limited thinking right away and also get them to practice a key aspect of the course: making a decision about the developmental appropriateness of a tool, setting, or activity.

1. The instructor introduces himself and welcomes students to the class.
2. Students watch about five minutes of a video showing children at play in a playground. They are asked to make note of things that they think are good for the children in the playground and things that they think are not good for the children in the playground.
3. After the short video, students decide for themselves if the playground is a developmentally appropriate one for the children in the video. They are required to write down their answer.
4. Students work with a group of 4-5 other students to compare individual answers and come to consensus on whether the playground is a developmentally appropriate one for the children in the video. After they have reached consensus, groups hold up a card representing their answers (yes or no) and then explain their reasoning.
5. Disagreements and different ways of thinking surface; the instructor makes notes regarding the differing rationales and asks questions to probe students' thinking. After some time, the instructor reveals other ways to look at the playground (if these more disciplinary perspectives have not emerged) and tells the students that this kind of activity is similar to the work they will do every day in the class. The instructor reminds students that they have begun shifting from drawing on lay knowledge and their own experiences (and biases) to more informed positions and scientific knowledge during the discussion.
6. In the last 10 minutes of class, the instructor calls roll and handles any registration issues. Then he hands out the syllabus and remind students that they have already begun the exciting work of the course. Students are asked to read the syllabus for homework and be prepared for an activity where they will use their understanding of the syllabus when they come to the next class meeting.

Resources about the importance of the first day of class

Buchert, S., Laws, E.L., Apperson, J.M., & Bregman, N.J. (2008). First impressions and professor reputation: Influence on student evaluations of instruction. *Social Psychology of Education, 11*, 397-408.

Clayson, D.E. (2013). Initial impressions and the student evaluation of teaching. *Journal of Education for Business, 88*, 26-35.

Laws, E.L., Apperson, J.M., Buchert, S., & Bregman, N.J. (2010). Student evaluations of instruction: When are enduring first impressions formed? *North American Journal of Psychology 12*(1), 81-92.

If you'd like to make sure your first day of class gets students ready to learn in your course, please feel free to [request a consultation](#) with ITLAL.