Creating a Meaningful First Day of Class
Reduce student anxiety on the first day and build your classroom community.

When I was an undergraduate, the first day of class was frequently predictable: syllabus, expectations, teacher’s introduction, a brief lesson, and early release. I tended to be more focused on who else was in the class (Do I know and like someone with whom to sit? If I don’t know anyone else, who do I want to befriend?) than on the information being imparted.

Now, when I teach, I try to remember my own experiences and create a more engaging first class. I have students complete a syllabus scavenger hunt for homework (to free up in-person time). We play a 20-minute name game where every person’s name gets repeated dozens of times. Students complete a gallery walk where they share their beginner perspective on concepts we’ll delve into further in the semester.

By asking students to engage on the first day, I recognize that I am asking them to take risks and trust strangers. I’m conscious that students may be thinking, “Why isn’t this professor just handing out the syllabus and telling me about this course? Do I have to interact with these classmates and professor I don’t know? What if I mess up or look stupid?” I work to defuse anxiety by acknowledging the discomfort, being vulnerable with them (I participate in the name game and stumble my way through, too), and inviting them to be equal participants in their learning.

I have found value from two articles that illustrate interesting approaches to the first day of class:
- Provocation in the Halls of Academe: Bringing Piaget and Vygotsky into the University Classroom
- First-Day Questions for the Learner-Centered Classroom

And, I’m sure that many of you have effective and clever ways to share your enthusiasm, introduce students to new topics, and begin to build community. If you’re considering trying something new, what shift might you make to your first class session for greater student engagement?
Creating a Meaningful First Day of Class
Reduce student anxiety on the first day and build your classroom community.

RESOURCES


Submitted by:
Jennifer Garrett-Ostermiller, M.Ed. [she/her] pronouns
Faculty Professional Development Specialist
Center for Teaching & Learning
The University of Vermont

UPCOMING EVENTS
October 2019
Social Event
October 4, 3:30 pm
At Not Your Average Joes

Article Club:
October 16, 11:30-1 pm
KN 5579
October 17, 1:30-3 pm
FL tbd

Coffee Hour:
October 23, 12:00 pm
KN 1130, FL 1304,
PV 1226, NE 200

Visit ccri.edu/tlc
for more information and to register.

“All things should be as simple as possible but not simpler.”
—ALBERT EINSTEIN