

Faculty Professional Development Guide:
Making Your First Class Meeting Truly *First Class!*

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I. Pedagogical Summary

Experts in the field of faculty development stress the importance of the first class meeting for setting the stage for a course. Goals to consider for the first class meeting include:

a) motivating students about the course, b) developing both academic and social expectations, c) completing *essential* administrative tasks, d) determining students' prior experiences and understandings of course-related concepts, and e) getting acquainted with the instructor (and her/his teaching and learning philosophy), classmates, course materials, and course technology.

The primacy effect¹ encourages instructors to take advantage of the tendency for students to remember best the information presented at the beginning of a teaching period. The most common explanations for the primacy effect are:

- Students pay more attention and often mentally rehearse items placed at the beginning of a sequence; hence, this information is more likely to become part of long-term memory.
- First-day information is first; hence, nothing precedes it that might interfere with learning.

II. Faculty Professional Development Goals

Faculty will be able to:

- Select course goals to establish at their first class meeting.
- Design learning activities to meet these goals.

III. Faculty Professional Development Concepts and Examples

In order to take advantage of the primacy effect, design your memorable first class meeting to include *some* of the following six (6) goals:

Goal #1 Establish motivation for the course

- Design a vivid demonstration or activity.
- Discuss course benefits, both personal and career.

Slavin, R. E. (2003). *Educational psychology: Theory and practice, 7th Ed.* (pp. 190-191). San Francisco: Allyn and Bacon.

Goal #2 Frame the entire course

- Pose essential questions the course helps to answer.
- Show a flow-chart (one-page holistic visual) of your course.
- Address course objectives/outcomes in the syllabus.
- Illustrate course purposes for GE, the program, or major.

Goal #3 Establish expectations

- Start/finish class on time (promoted by your punctuality).
- Discuss class rules/norms.
- Begin group work today (if this is part of the course).
- Define community-engagement assignment (if this is part of the course).
- Introduce tools students will use:
 - Learning Management System (syllabus, online quizzes, discussion forum)
 - Library and Web resources

Goal #4 Complete *essential* administrative requirements

- Take roll or collect student surveys to determine attendance.
- Explain the add-course policy (meet after class to complete the paper work).

Goal #5 Assess students informally

- Determine students' prior knowledge of course concepts, both their understandings and misconceptions.
- Determine students' attitudes towards this subject or course.

Goal #6 Create a comfortable *learning* climate

- Communicate your teaching philosophy and your methods of supporting student success.
- Help students get acquainted with classmates:
 - Have a course-related get-acquainted activity (share interest in the subject).
 - Share a few names and e-mails (students write on course syllabus).
- Teach a difficult concept by relating it to students' prior knowledge, showing students that they already have a leg-up on course subject matter.

MERLOT ELIXR Project [<http://elixr.merlot.org/>]

See *The First Day of Class* video case story with five faculty from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo: Drs. Lorraine Donegan, Fred DePiero, Bill Kellogg, Kenneth Habib, and Jodi Christiansen. Firefox and Safari are recommended browsers.

IV. What Some of the Experts Say

Ken Bain (2004). What the Best College Teachers Do, chapter 2

1. Determine students' misconceptions about the discipline – Students often hold firm to mistaken beliefs, even when confronted with phenomena that contradicts those beliefs (p. 23). To uncover these misconceptions on the first day of class, ask students to define and explain a few key concepts from the course. From this pre-assessment the instructor might design learning opportunities to untangle misconceptions (also known as *alternate* conceptions) before accurate conceptions are learned.
2. Discuss the *big* (sometimes called *essential*) questions the course will answer – Students learn about the provocative questions this course will help them answer. This often gives students some control over their education, connects with current topics, and focuses on some of the students' questions (p. 36).

William McKeachie (2006). Teaching Tips, 12th edition, chapter 3

1. Set the stage – Arrange the room, post agenda, name on board, and chat informally before class to determine interests.
2. Break the ice – Get acquainted, start to learn names, and share emails.
3. Introduce the syllabus – Help students to understand the plan and rationale for the course structure, objectives, assignments, and timelines.
4. Introduce the textbook(s) and technology – Explain their role in the course.
5. Introduce the subject matter – Teach a few exciting key concepts.
6. Welcome questions and reactions—Ask for students' questions, many of which will be designed to learn about you and your teaching and grading style.

Linda Nilson (2003). Teaching at Its Best, 2nd edition, chapter 7

1. Motivation – Say a few words to market the course and the materials. Enthusiasm is contagious.
2. Your Anxiety – If you think you will have stage fright, practice your first-day presentation in advance.
3. Two-Way Information Flow – Tell students something about your educational and professional background. Give the students a survey to learn something about their experiences and interests.

V. Learning Activities – A Few Suggestions

1. As a total group, workshop participants *brainstorm* responses to the following question: *What are the most important goals/activities for you to discuss with students on the first day of class?*
2. As a total group, workshop participants do a *reverse brainstorm* of the following question: *When you were a student, what were some of the most ineffective activities/situations you experienced on the first day of class?*
3. Next, reverse the valence of the list developed in #2 (directly above) to create an “effective first day of class goals/activities” list.
4. Small groups compare their “effective first day activities” list with the handout on page 5 and add to it. Small groups share results with the total group.
5. Individually, select *some* of the *Six Possible Goals for the First Class Meeting* to focus on for a specific course. Next, as a small group, discuss the choice.
6. Individually, faculty design first day of class activities to meet their first day of class goals. Discuss in small groups.

VI. Assessments – A Few Suggestions

1. Faculty complete a one-minute paper describing their satisfaction with the implementation of their first day of class goals.
2. Faculty administer a questionnaire to students the 3-4th week of the term asking: *What activities did we do the first day of class and how did they set the stage for this course for you?*
3. Faculty submit a redesigned first day of class plan for a new term, highlighting changes made from the previous term.

VII. Follow-up Activities – A Few Suggestions

Meet in 3-4 weeks (online or face-to-face) to discuss:

1. Results of the first class meeting goals and activities. What worked? What did not work? Why?

2. How faculty are continuing to address or reach these first class meeting goals over the term?
3. Will faculty link the last class meeting exit goals to their first class meeting goals? If so, how?
4. The redesign of next term's first class meeting.

VIII. Handout

Six (6) Possible Goals for the First Class Meeting

Design your memorable first class meeting to include *some* of the following goals. Note that overlap may occur between goals (e.g., the essential questions may also be motivating).

1. Establish motivation for the course
 - vivid demonstration/activity
 - course benefits for students
2. Frame the entire course
 - *Essential questions this course will answer are....*
 - Graphic flow chart of the course
 - Course syllabus/outcomes
 - Course purpose (GE, program, or major)
3. Establish expectations
 - Start/finish class on time and discuss class rules/norms
 - Begin group work and/or define community engagement assignment
 - Discuss course tools/resources (e.g., LMS, Library)
4. Complete *essential* administrative requirements
 - Take roll?
 - Add this class?
5. Assess students informally
 - Prior knowledge
 - Course concept understandings and misconceptions
 - Attitudes towards this subject
6. Create a comfortable *learning* climate
 - Get acquainted and share your teaching philosophy
 - Teach a new concept to show that *learning is what we do here.*