

101 Things You Can Do the First Three Weeks of Class

Introduction

Beginnings are important. Students will decide very early—some say the first day of class—whether they will like the course, its contents, the teacher, and their fellow students.

The following list is offered in the spirit of starting off right. It is a catalog of suggestions for teachers who are looking for fresh ways of creating the best possible environment for learning. Not just the first day, but the first three weeks of the year are especially important. Even if the curriculum is decided and lesson plans are ready to go in August, most teachers can usually make adjustments in teaching methods as the year unfolds and the characteristics of their students become known.

These suggestions have been gathered from a variety of professors and teachers. The rationale for these methods is based on the following needs:

- to spark intellectual curiosity—to challenge students;
- to support students in the process of learning;
- to encourage the students' active involvement in learning; and
- to build a sense of community in the classroom.

Here, then, are some ideas for teachers to use in managing their classrooms during the academic year.

Helping Students Make Transitions

- Hit the ground running on the first day of class with substantial content.
- Take attendance: roll call, clipboard, sign in, seating chart.
- Give a clear, concise list of expectations for student behavior, assignments
- Give an assignment on the first day.
- Call attention (written and oral) to what makes good lab practice: completing work to be done, procedures, equipment, clean up, maintenance, safety, conservation of supplies, full use of lab time.
- Give a learning style inventory to help students find out about themselves.
- Direct students to the Academic Success Center for help on basic skills.
- Tell students how much time they will need to study for this course.
- Hand out supplemental study aids: library use, study tips, supplemental readings and exercises.
- Explain how to study for the kind of tests you give.

- Put in writing a limited number of ground rules regarding absence, late work, testing procedures, grading, and general decorum, and maintain these.
- Show students how to handle learning in large classes and impersonal situations.
- Give sample test questions.
- Give sample test question answers.
- Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty; be clear when collaboration is wanted and when it is forbidden.
- Seek out a different student each day and get to know something about him or her.
- Ask students to write about what important things are currently going on in their lives.

Directing Students' Attention

- Greet students at the door when they enter the classroom. Hand each student the manipulatives, worksheets, calculators or other equipment or information they'll need for that day's lesson.
- Start the class on time.
- Make a grand stage entrance to hush a large class and gain attention.
- Give a pre-test on the day's topic.
- Start the lesson with a puzzle, question, paradox, picture, or cartoon to focus on the day's topic.
- Elicit student questions and concerns at the beginning of the week and list these on the chalkboard. Answer their questions and address their concerns throughout the week.
- Have students write down what they think the important issues or key points of the day's lesson will be.
- Ask a student who is reading the newspaper what is in the news today.

Challenging Students

- Have students write out their expectations for the course and their own goals for learning.
- Use variety in methods of presentation every class.
- Incorporate community resources: plays, concerts, the State Fair, government agencies, businesses and the outdoors.
- Show a film in a novel way: stop it for discussion, show a few frames only, anticipate ending, hand out a viewing or critique sheet, play and replay parts.
- Share your philosophy of teaching with your students.
- Form a student panel to present alternative views of the same concept.
- Stage a change-your-mind debate, with students moving to different parts of the classroom to signal change in opinion during the discussion.
- Conduct a "living" demographic survey by having students move to different parts of the classroom: size of family, consumer preferences, shoe size.
- Tell about your interests in the subject, and explain to students how you got there from your own beginnings.
- Conduct a role-play to make a point or to lay out issues.

- Conduct brainstorming sessions to expand horizons.
- Give students two passages of material containing alternative views to compare and contrast.
- Distribute a list of the unsolved problems, dilemmas, or great questions in your discipline and invite students to claim one as their own to investigate.
- Ask students what books they read over summer.
- Let your students see the enthusiasm you have for your subject and your love of learning.
- Encourage or invite students to hear guest speakers or special programs.

Providing Support

- Keep a list of students' telephone numbers and addresses and let them know that you may need to reach them or their parents.
- Create an email account that students can use specifically to contact you for school reasons. (Create this school account in addition to a personal account, to prevent problems if students play an e-joke on you.) Let students know how they can find you throughout the school day.
- Check out absentees. Call or write a personal note.
- Diagnose the students' pre-requisite learning by a questionnaire or pre-test and give them the feedback as soon as possible.
- Hand out study questions or study guides.
- Be redundant. Students should hear, read, or see key material at least three times.
- Allow students to demonstrate progress in learning: summary quiz over the day's work, a written reaction to the day's material.
- Use non-graded feedback to let students know how they are doing: post answers to ungraded quizzes and problem sets, exercises in class, oral feedback.
- Reward behavior you want: praise, stars, honor roll, personal note.
- Use a light touch: smile, tell a good joke, break test anxiety with a sympathetic comment.
- Organize. Give visible structure by posting the day's "menu" on the chalkboard or overhead.
- Use multiple media: overhead, slides, film, videotape, audiotape, models, sample materials.
- Use multiple examples, in multiple media, to illustrate key points and important concepts.
- Make appointments with all students (individually or in small groups).
- Hand out wallet-sized telephone cards with various ways for students to reach you: office phone, school e-mail address, etc.
- Eavesdrop on students before or after class and join their conversation about class topics. In addition, slip topics from their conversation into your lesson to pique their interest.
- Check to see if any students are having problems and direct those who are to appropriate administrators or resources.
- Give students clear expectations. Tell them what they need to do to receive an "A" in your course.

- Stop the world to find out what your students are thinking, feeling, and doing in their everyday lives.

Encouraging Active Learning

- Having students write something.
 - Have students keep three-times-a-week journals in which they comment, ask questions, and answer questions about class topics.
 - Invite students to critique each other's essays or short answers on tests for readability or content.
 - Invite students to ask questions and wait for the response.
 - Probe students responses to questions and their comments.
 - Put students into pairs or "learning cells" to quiz each other over material for the day.
 - Give students an opportunity to voice opinions about the subject matter.
 - Have students apply subject matter to solve real problems.
 - Give students red, yellow, and green cards (made of posterboard) and periodically call for a vote on an issue by asking for a simultaneous show of cards.
 - Roam the aisles of a large classroom and carry on running conversations with students as they work on course problems (a portable microphone helps).
 - Ask a question directed to one student and wait for an answer.
 - Place a suggestion box in the rear of the room and encourage students to make written comments every time the class meets.
 - Do oral, show-of-hands, multiple choice tests for summary, review, and instant feedback.
 - Use task groups to accomplish specific objectives.
 - Grade quizzes and exercises in class as a learning tool.
 - Give students plenty of opportunity for practice before a major test.
 - Give a test early in the semester and return it graded in the next class meeting.
 - Have students write questions on index cards to be collected and answered the next class period.
 - Make collaborative assignments for several students to work on together.
 - Assign written paraphrases and summaries of difficult reading.
 - Give students a take-home problem relating to the day's lecture.
- Encourage students to bring current news items to class which relate to the subject matter and post these on a bulletin board nearby.

Building Community

- Learn everyone student's name. One tip is to do role call the first day and to make an associate with each student's name. For instance, if you call the name "Robert Clemens" you might ask if he likes baseball, linking his name to Roberto Clemente; or, if you call the name "Brenda Edison" you might ask if she's any relation to Thomas Edison. While these pieces of small talk may seem extraneous, they can go a long way in helping to recall a student's name a week later.

- Set up a buddy system so students can contact each other about assignments and homework.
- Find out about your students via questions on an index card.
- Take pictures of students (snapshots in small groups, mugshots) and post in classroom, office or lab.
- Arrange helping trios of students to assist each other in learning and growing.
- Form small groups for getting acquainted; mix and form new groups several times.
- Assign a team project early in the semester and provide time to assemble the team.
- Help students form study groups to operate outside the classroom.
- Solicit suggestions from students for outside resources and guest speakers on course topics.

Feedback on Teaching

- Gather student feedback in the first three weeks of the semester to improve teaching and learning.

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