



First meeting with students



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Your goal in your first meeting with students should be to convey the feeling that your lecture theatre/laboratory/tutorial will be a positive, effective and comfortable learning environment. It is useful for you as a new teacher to reflect on your own experiences as a student, and think about your feelings and expectations as you entered new classes. What strategies could your teachers have used to make you feel more comfortable in the learning environment?

Ericksen (1974) argued that students enter every classroom on the first day with at least four questions: Is this class going to meet my needs? Is the teacher competent? Is he or she fair? Will he or she care about me? You need to attempt to provide students with a positive response to each of these questions.

What to do in your first class...

- Introduce yourself to the class and include the title/name by which you prefer to be called. Write your name on the black/whiteboard, explain your role/function in your school or in that course, perhaps give a brief professional background, and give them your office location.
- Assume students have no previous knowledge about your discipline or school or the University, particularly if this group is largely first year students.
- Show enthusiasm for your course - how and why does this field excite you?
- Be well prepared - this includes content and arrangements in the lecture theatre/classroom. Ensure all equipment and materials are working properly and arranged as you wish.
- Start the class on time.
- Identify student fears about your course and relate to these fears.
- Share something of yourself with your students - who you are and what you are like are of great interest to students and will give them a sense of you as a 'real' person. Share your philosophy of teaching with students.
- Include an activity that really captures students' interests and attention.
- Provide a structure for the course that is clear and unambiguous.
- Show students that you aspire to being objective or 'fair'.
- Avoid focusing on your own inadequacies or limitations.
- Leave students with the impression that not a minute of time spent in your class will be a waste of time.

- Leave time at the end of the first meeting for student questions.
- Invite student feedback at the end of the first class. Ask them to write for two minutes about their reactions to the first class. These can be handed in anonymously and you can use their feedback to provide clarifications, feedback or reassurances at the beginning of the second class.
- Suggestion from Dr Helen Ogle, School of Land and Food Sciences
 “I try to get to the first class a little early so that I can write the course code and name on the board. That way students who are in the wrong place can retreat with dignity while other students are milling around, rather than after the other students have taken their seats.”

Housekeeping matters

It is very easy to spend most of the first lecture dealing with housekeeping matters. Try to include some content in this first meeting so students can make a connection with the real substance of the course, not merely administrative details. Students want a structure for the course and a clear idea of your expectations of them. Reference in either oral or written form to the following should be made in your first meeting with students:

- Course outline or course profile - what is this course all about? Include: course code and title; unit value of course; number and nature of contact hours in course; names of course coordinator, teaching staff and contact details; pre-requisite and companion course; welcome to course; overview of course; learning objectives; syllabus - topics to be covered with dates; teaching modes or approaches with rationale; resources including required texts; and assessment (see below).
- Assessment items, criteria and assessment procedures (e.g. presentation and citation requirements; late submission rules etc). According to The University of Queensland [Policies and Guidelines on Assessment](#), lecturers must provide “a written statement on the objectives or goals of the course, how performance in the course will be assessed and other general assessment expectations and penalties” at the beginning of each semester.
- Introductions to other teachers in the course by slide or in person.
- Attendance requirements.
- Work expectations - how much time students need to study or research for this course.
- Appropriate behaviour - tardiness, lecture decorum, good laboratory practice.
- Recommended or set texts - outline how you expect students to use the text in their learning and what is useful about the text.
- How to best use the library in this course - invite a member of the library staff to speak to students about information skills.

- Information about your availability to students and the appropriate ways to contact you outside of class.
- Relevant School or Faculty or university policies.

Icebreaking activities

A crucial part of your task in the first meeting with students, particularly in large classes, is to alleviate the students' feelings of anonymity. This may be done in a small way by spending some time on icebreaking activities. These activities are designed to set a friendly and open tone in your class. Many of your students will not know other people in the class, so it is important to facilitate friendship building if possible. These activities may be more or less successful depending on the class numbers. The use of names is central to most of these activities because it is an important way of establishing that you take a real interest in students as individuals and do not merely see them as a mass of unknown faces.

- Greet students at the door to the lecture theatre, laboratory on the first day.
- Pose a problem that is central to your course and seek responses in small groups or from the group as a whole.
- Ask students to work in groups (if large class) or lead a class discussion to identify the problems or issues they would like to explore in the course. Accept all suggestions in a non-evaluative manner and work through course objectives in light of student suggestions.
- “Tell me the gossip you’ve heard about this course” - deal with students’ misconceptions and conceptions about the course and attempt to work towards a common understanding of the course, your expectations of them and their expectations of you.
- Get each student to interview the student next to them about their backgrounds. If a large class, have them introduce that student to someone sitting close by and include a brief summary of their background. If a small class, the introduction can be to the whole class.
- Distribute an interest or experience survey, mapping experiences of relevance to this particular course. You can summarise the feedback for brief discussion in the second class.
- Select a key word from the course title and have students do an ‘association exercise’, reporting what first comes to mind, record answers on whiteboard or overhead and use these as the basis of an overview of the course.
- What are your goals for learning in this course? What do you plan to do to meet those goals? What do you want me to do to meet those goals? Revisit these goals throughout the semester.

- Conduct a 'living demographic' survey by having students move to different parts of the room/lecture theatre according to categories - size of high school; rural vs urban; like cricket; hate Seinfeld; position in family etc.
- Set up 'buddy system' or study groups, so that students can contact each other about assignments, missing lectures etc.
- Naming game - the first student gives their name (i.e. "I'm Ann") then the person sitting next to them introduces the first student and gives their name (i.e. "This is Ann and I'm Tom"). This process continues around the class, continually building the list of names to be recalled.

Strategies for learning students' names

One of the greatest challenges at the beginning of a new semester is coping with new students' names. No matter how large the class it is worth persevering so students have a sense that you care about them as individuals. Some suggestions to assist in coping with the challenge of learning names (or at least some names):

- Have students sit in the same seats for the first few weeks until you are able to match names with faces. Pass around a seating chart for students to fill in (warn them that joke names will not be appreciated!).
- Have students give their name before they speak. This can be continued until everyone (both teacher and students) feels they know each other.
- Use students' names as often as possible.
- Have students make nametags on the first day of class that can sit on the desk in front of them.
- Take a class photograph of students or get access to students' library card photos (you'll need students' permission to do this) and put their photograph beside their name on the class list.
- Have students introduce themselves to the class by a descriptive adjective - for example, Gorgeous Greg, Brilliant Betty.
- Put students into groups of four. Challenge the group to come up with five things that they all have in common that are not university or work-related. Each group introduces its members with an explanation of their common feature.

Further reading material

Brandes, D. & Phillips, H. (1977). *Gamesters' handbook: 140 games for teachers and group leaders*. London: Hutchinson.

Dick, B. (1991). *Helping groups to be effective: Skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*. Brisbane: Interchange.

Forbess-Greene, Sue. (1980). *The encyclopedia of icebreakers: Structured activities that warm-up, motivate, challenge, acquaint and energize*. St. Louis, MO: Applied Skills Press.

Forte, I. & Schurr, S. (1997). *180 icebreakers to strengthen critical thinking and problem-solving skills*. Cheltenham, Vic.: Hawker Brownlow Education.

Foster, Elizabeth Sabrinsky. (1989). *Energizers and icebreakers for all ages and stages*. Minneapolis: Educational Media Corporation.