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ABSTRACT

After identifying strategies which are used to avoid some of the unique problems of the first class meeting, the author outlines a model which covers the three general phases of the class: beginnings, work, and endings. In the first phase the physical arrangement of the classroom and the pre-class comments of the students are considered, followed by a discussion of the major tasks of the class, an opening statement by the instructor, introduction of each student, and a brief explanation of the purpose of the class session. The work phases begin with the students identifying problems which they have encountered in the subject area and a presentation of the instructor's frame of reference. The final phase involves a review of the syllabus and bibliography. The instructor should also demonstrate a willingness to receive feedback on the course, negative as well as positive, in order to encourage authentic communications, and he should also credit the students' way of working when this has been honest and productive. Although the author considers that all the elements outlined in this paper need to be considered by an instructor in any subject, he emphasizes that the model is not meant to provide a rigid framework. (MBM)

THE DYNAMICS OF THE FIRST CLASS

by

Lawrence Shulman*

The first class meeting, as other beginnings, has certain unique qualities. It represents new interpersonal relationships, and as such, is accompanied by many of our natural responses to the strangeness of dealing with the unknown. This holds true for both instructor and students. The way in which a course begins can have a profound impact on the classes which follow, and for this reason, the dynamics of first class sessions deserve our attention.

When the first class is not structured to deal with problems of beginning, the initial tension is increased. The instructor may understandably respond by employing one of the following ill-adapted strategies.

The Postponing Instructor: This instructor solves the first class problem by not having any. After introducing himself and handing out a reading list the class is immediately dismissed to "...buy the text and begin the reading." The next encounter is somewhat less tense because after this start it is the second class.

The Timid Instructor: The first class is used for the instructor to point out his inadequacies, in effect, asking the students to be understanding and put up with him. It may sound like this: "I think you should know this is the first time I am teaching this course and you will have to bear with me." Or: "I want to be honest with you--I'm filling in this semester for Professor..... who is on leave. This is not my area and I will have to muddle through." While the instructor may really feel this way, it is his concern and not the students, and sharing it serves to make things worse.

* This is a guest article by Professor Shulman, School of Social Work, McGill University, who has extensive experience training group-process skills.

The Missing Instructor: This first session strategy is to be present in body but missing in spirit. He begins passively in the name of giving students freedom to develop their own course but in effect, is simply committing them to an unproductive and frustrating start. Students need and want the instructor's help in structuring their beginning, for complete freedom is no freedom at all. The key is in finding a way to integrate structure with freedom. The classic "What would you like to do today", an extreme form of the "lazy instructor" opening, does not provide either.

THE PHASES OF WORK

We can think of classroom activity as work to be done in which both the instructor and the students have specific functions. The instructor's task is a complex one. I find it helpful to examine it against the backdrop of time. A class group goes through three general phases in its development: beginning; work; and endings and transition. Each phase carries with it special characteristics and specific demands for instructor skills. Here, we are focussing on the beginning phase only. Just as classes in a semester may be grouped into general phases, each specific class may be analyzed in a similar way. Every class has a beginning, work, and ending and transition phase. The following discussion of the first class will follow this model.

BEGINNINGS

Physical Structure in the Classroom: We often speak to each other through a non-verbal means and seating arrangements are one of many non-verbal languages. Consider the pattern of seating in most classrooms. The students are in straight rows facing an instructor who is usually seated or standing at the front of a classroom. The message in this arrangement is that communications come essentially from the instructor with student responses directed back to him. It implies that it is not important for students to see each others' faces. This physical seating arrangement helps to encourage this pattern of communication and even discourages deviations. In my own classes I arrange the chairs in a circle before the class begins.

Preliminary "Chatter": Even before all of the students arrive and the instructor formally opens the class, the work begins. The opening minutes in every class can be important since they often reveal to the instructor what is on the students' minds. Students will use this period, consciously or not, to begin to raise important issues through indirect forms of communication.

For example, there is the pre-class "chatter" which when loud enough for the instructor's ear is often really directed to him. Here is an example:

> A small sub-group on my left were discussing their other courses in loud voices. One said: "I just came from Ranier's class and it looks like its going to be a hard one - the reading list is as long as a book". Another responded: "You would think they realize we were carrying five classes - when can we read all of this stuff?"

At this point I made a mental note of the comment thinking that they were probably feeling pressured by the many demands of this first day and wondering about how heavy my course would be. I would listen carefully to see if this theme emerged again, more directly, when we discussed my course requirements. If it did, I would respond to it directly by pointing out my understanding of how difficult it must all seem on the first day and add my agreement to discuss the load further if it still seemed to be a problem after a while.

Major Tasks of the First Class: A major factor affecting the productivity of a class will be the clarity with which its purpose is defined. A central question for students in the beginning phase is: "What are doing here together?" If students are clear about the precise purpose of the class, the nature of the work they have come together to do, they can focus their energies.

However, if they remain unclear about the purpose, efforts on the part of students to harness each others' energies for productive work continually collide with the lack of agreement about the nature of the work. Careful analysis of actual class sessions reveals repeated underlying signals that class members are groping for a purpose around which to organize their efforts.

A second area of student question centers on the function of the instructor: "What will he be like?" "How will he run the class?" Students are curious about this person who will play a central role in their work. They have experienced many teachers with widely different

approaches to classroom work. Often they try to get some idea about this instructor's way of functioning from the grapevine which operates in every school - either through a course guide or informal discussions.

As with clarity of purpose, if this question of instructor function is not answered early, it will stay with the class and affect the work particularly in the early stages. Characteristic patterns of behavior can be observed which constitute a subtle "testing" of the instructor.

For example, a student may ask a question or make a comment which indirectly calls into question the instructor's ability to teach the course: "I wondered if you had any practical experience in this area or do you just teach it?" The instructor who responds by simply listing his experience may be missing the real message in the question. A more skillful answer might be to respond directly to the indirect cue: "Are you wondering if I'll be able to help you with this work?"

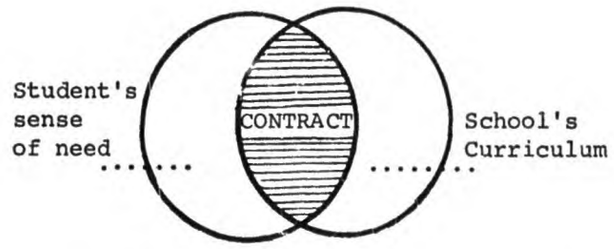
In addition to questions of purpose and instructor function, students are also curious about the structure of the class. How will it work? What will be expected of them? In what way will they be judged?

It is not possible to reach definitive and clear answers to all of these questions in the first session. The tasks of the beginning stage will be worked on over a number of sessions and in fact, may be raised repeatedly during the life of the class. It would be more accurate to perceive the beginning stage of work as dominating the first few class sessions with students needing to review and to test out their early, first impressions.

Even with this limitation in mind it is essential that the instructor be clear about these questions and that he begins to direct himself to them in the first class. The skills required of the instructor in the first session, therefore are those which will help the class group begin to work on its first set of tasks.

Contract: I find the notion of "Contract" to be a helpful one for theorizing about purpose. The term is not being used in its strict business sense where it implies a formal agreement on the terms of a transaction. Rather, it is used to symbolize the area of common ground between the interest of the students and the school in offering the class.

This common ground can be visualized as the overlapping of two circles one representing the students' sense of need and the other the school's area of interest. The shaded area of overlap constitutes the contract.



There are many areas of school interest or individual student need which lie outside the common ground. Unless the contract is openly changed, with the agreement of both students and the school, the instructor must insure that it continues in force.

The advantages of the contract are clear. Once it is developed it allows the instructor to concentrate fully on helping his class work on its own area of interest while confident that he is dealing with the school's interest at the same time. With contract agreement by the students the instructor is free to "demand" that they work on their purpose with real energy - a purpose they have already defined as relevant to them. In short, it is a form of structure which gives students and the instructor freedom to pursue their respective tasks with all of their energy.

THE OPENING STATEMENT

I have found it helpful to begin with a brief, one line introduction of myself and the general area of the course and to indicate how I see the first class session. A sample follows:

> I welcomed them and introduced myself, I told them the subject of the class was social work with groups. I continued: "I thought what we could do this morning to get us started would be to get to know each other, for me to share some of my ideas about what our work would be this semester, to get some feedback from you on my comments and some of your ideas about the work, and perhaps, for me to offer a beginning frame of reference. Would you begin by going around the room and intro-

ducing yourselves. Would you also share, very briefly, whatever past experiences you have had at group leadership."

This introduction structured the first session to begin work on the contract. By asking for introductions I indicated that it was important we know who each of us were. This also offered an opportunity for class members to break the ice and to speak in class.

As students introduced themselves they gave the information to me until I asked them directly to share it with the class. After a few false starts, they got the idea, and began to tell each other about themselves. In this way I began to encourage student interaction.

At the conclusion of the introductions, which is usually punctuated by some students making humorous and tension breaking comments, I am ready to share my prepared opening statement. This statement is a brief and uncomplicated explanation of the purpose of the class session. It includes some notion of the school's stake in the proceedings as well as their own. In addition, I make a beginning effort at explaining my own function - what I see myself doing in the course of the work. My opening statement concludes by asking the students for their reactions to my comments. A sample follows:

> Let me begin by sharing my understanding of our work. The school believes that a social worker should have training that will equip him to work with individuals and groups. That is why all students are required to take this course in group work practice. I suspect all of you are vitally interested in developing whatever skills you can in this complex business of trying to help people. The focus of this course, then, is on the practice of group work. Your working together on this area will not be easy - you will run into many problems along the way. My job is to help you work productively and to share my own thoughts on the subject along the way. Do you have any reactions to this view of our work - does it connect to your own?

Once again, I must underline that I am not suggesting a strict formula or a rigid outline of an opening statement. Each instructor will approach his in his own way depending on the nature of his course and his own personal style.

THE WORK PHASE

Problem Sharing and Encouraging Student Interaction: The next phase of the opening class is an essential one because it will set a pattern for the work to follow. The usual procedure in education follows a model in which the instructor "talks first" and "listens later". The didactic presentation is followed by questions, discussions, etc. This process often works well and is not being rejected (although the teacher must be actively involved in monitoring student non-verbal reactions whenever he lectures). I do not believe, however, that this model fits the needs of a first session. Rather, the reverse is true - the teacher must listen first and then talk.

In my assumptions about learning it is essential that the student find his own stake in the work for any real investment to be made. He also needs to be actively involved in the learning process helping to structure it as it proceeds. An early task of the instructor, then, is to help the student identify his connection to the work. I think this can be accomplished if the instructor structures some time for the students to share some of their questions about the subject area.

The instructor asks the students to look into their past, present or anticipated immediate future experiences to identify problems they have run up against relating to the subject area. Even though their experience may be very limited, what are some of their present ideas, imperfect as they may be, about what they want to learn? Student ability to offer issues depends somewhat on how deeply involved in the subject area they have been. Students in an advanced graduate program may have very sophisticated ideas about the "fuzzy areas" for more work while beginning students may pose elementary questions. The important point, is that from the beginning of the work the student is being asked to take some active part in the agenda building process and to find his own stake.

The problems facing the instructor at this point are typically silence and the difficulty of establishing inter-student communication. Both of these areas are discussed in an earlier newsletter article entitled "The Hidden Group in the Classroom"

(November, 1970). In that article I discussed the meanings of silence, specific skills for responding to silence, and skills designed to encourage student interaction. These included: waiting the silence out; getting inside the silence; interpreting the silence; redirecting comments; and encouraging spontaneity. I will not detail these again although they can be critical to making the first session work.

My focus in this early exchange is to encourage and open up mutual aid. I want them to talk to each other, to respond to their thoughts, and to begin to help even in a slight way. As their work proceeds I credit their efforts and keep track of the issues they raise in my written notes. They soon freely speak to each other. When one or two revert to responding to me I point to the class group and ask them to "share it with the whole class".

Presenting a Frame of Reference: Because of the importance of establishing the mutual aid themes early in the work I let the problem sharing go on as long as it is working well. I usually leave some time, however, for sharing a brief, preliminary frame of reference on the subject area. This is presented didacticly with opportunities for students to question and react as we go along.

I believe sharing part of my frame of reference at the first session is important because it establishes that although I will be making demands upon the class to be actively involved in the work I will still be a "giving" person who will be sharing from his own experiences as we go along. It also gives an opportunity to encourage the norm that challenging my ideas is both acceptable and expected in the "culture" of our class. My presentation of material is qualified in the following manner:

> I would like to share my present frame of reference with you but before I do I want to make clear this is my bias-by no means the final word on the question. I want you to feel it is open for challenge, debate and change...

ENDING AND TRANSITION PHASE

The ending and transition phase of the first class session requires pulling together what has been done and a discussion of the next steps. It is at this point that I share the syllabus-bibliography which represents my view of how we should proceed. I review the outline with the class, pointing out how their questions in the problem sharing session fit. I go over the requirements of the course, my expectations in the form of readings and written assignments. I indicate my ideas about our first steps because in my experience beginning students are unable to make a start by themselves - they badly need some structure to free them to begin. I make it clear that the syllabus is tentative representing my preliminary thoughts about how to proceed. I suggest we can change our plans as we go along.

Reviewing the syllabus usually opens up the question of assignments and grading. If the issue is not raised during the first class it will come up in the second or third. Students are deeply concerned about the ways in which they will be judged. It is another area in which they test the instructor until they are clear about the requirements.

Evaluative Feedback: How Did We Do? In addition to clarity of purpose and individual connection to the work of the class, there is a third major factor which will affect class productivity. This is related to the "culture" of the class and how well students can collaborate with each other and the instructor. Honest and direct communication of thoughts and feelings are critical for the achievement of a "culture of work". It is important for the instructor to begin to encourage authentic communications in the first class session and it is best done if he models a person who welcomes and encourages feedback, negative as well as positive.

It will not be easy for students to risk themselves in this way. They are used to masking their reactions and holding them until the "coffee shop conference" which usually follows a class. There, in the safety of their small subgroup, they will give their real reactions to the work - feedback which is essential for the instructor to be able to shape his actions. It is critical for the instructor to reach for these reactions in the beginning. He must credit the first, tentative attempts on the part of the students to be honest, and illustrate through his reactions that he truly welcomes their comments.

After feedback from students, I find it helpful to share my reactions with them. I do this by "crediting" their work when I think it has been good. There is an important distinction here, in that I am

not approving of the "answers" they have arrived at - it is not my place to sit in judgement of their productions. I can, I believe, credit their way of working when it has been honest and productive.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE FIRST SESSION

Once again, it is important to underline the notion that there is no automatic model for a first session. I believe that all of the elements outlined in this paper need to be considered by an instructor of any subject, with any size class and with any age or type of student. I believe the elements are generic while the specific structure and style can be different in various situations.

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INNOVATIONS. . .AND INNOVATORS

PSI and Fred Keller

Professor Fred Keller (of Columbia and Western Michigan Universities) is the "father" of a personalized system of instruction (PSI) in higher education. In the first issue of the PSI Newsletter, (edited by a PSI Colleague - J.G. Sherman) Keller outlined the basic elements of PSI:

1. The student moves through the course of study at his own pace, commensurate with his ability and available time.

2. The student must perfect a unit of material before he is permitted to advance to new material.

3. Lectures and demonstrations are exciting: they are used as motivators, rather than sources of critical information.

4. There is stress upon the written word in teacher-student communication.

5. Teaching assistants, or proctors, are used to permit repeated testing, immediate scoring, tutoring, and a strong personal-social element.

In practice, PSI should be considered for introductory courses where enrollment is very large, and depersonalization (and, consequently, poor motivation) are almost unavoidable.

What makes this system successful is not a set of multi-media "gimmicks" but careful preparation of self-instructional materials, person-to-person discussion of test results and problems, self-pacing and the use of student proctors.

A number of studies of PSI report grade distributions which show few failing or low marks, and a high relative frequency in the B's and A's. There is ample evidence that this is a function of mastery, rather than "soft" marking.

The PSI system is now being used in scores of college courses and in a variety of subject matter areas. It has been reported upon in a number of articles by teachers of those courses (see for example B.V. Koen and F.S. Keller, "Experience with a Proctorial System of Instruction", in Engineering Education, March, 1971).

PSI is proof that so-called educational technology can be used to humanize learning experiences in college.

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