

Here's your syllabus, see you next week: A review of the first day practices of outstanding professors

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Abstract

Faculty teaching courses at the higher education level employ a wide variety of strategies on the first day of class. Little research has been conducted on the efficacy of these practices. This study examines the first-day practices of instructors of higher education classes who have been recognized as outstanding practitioners by their respective institutions. The information obtained is framed within the learning theories of social constructivism, feminist and liberatory pedagogy. The results of this inquiry suggest practices that may be recommended to all instructors at the college/university level and generate hypotheses regarding the efficacy of first class practices in higher education.

Keywords: First-day practices

The activities engaged in on the first day of class in a college level course are quite diverse. Some instructors disseminate the syllabus and leave, while others attempt to dive into the course content. Still other faculty attempt to engage the class through “ice breaker” type activities. Little research has been conducted on the efficacy of any of these practices. This study examines the first-day practices of instructors of higher education classes who have been recognized as outstanding teachers by their respective institutions.

The faculty-oriented literature on appropriate practices for the first day of class indicate that the first class should a) grab the students' attention, b) introduce the instructor, c) communicate the course objectives, d) set a positive tone or atmosphere for the class, and e) take care of administrative details (Davis, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Kreizinger, 2006; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Nilson, 1998). A study of student preferences for first class activities suggests that students prefer the first meeting focus on basic content information such as course expectations and information on exams and assignments (Perlman & McCann, 1999). This study also revealed variations between upper (junior and senior) and under-class (freshmen and sophomore) students, regarding ice breakers, introduction of the instructor, and course dismissal following the presentation of administrative details.

Neither the faculty-oriented literature, nor the research on preferences of students on first class activities, connects the efficacy of these practices to student learning. It stands to

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reason that in an age of outcomes assessment, it is important to associate instructional practice to their impact on knowledge and/or skill development. Before this direct connection can be made, qualitative, pre-experimental research must generate theory regarding the relationship between first day practices and student learning. This study explores the practices of collegiate faculty recognized for their teaching excellence. Their descriptions of first day practices are compared to the faculty-oriented literature on “best” practice to determine the degree to which they are aligned. In addition, faculty are asked to provide their perceptions of how their first class practices relate to learning outcomes of their students.

Review of Literature

According to one of the most widely recognized learning theorists, Jean Piaget, learning occurs through a process of assimilation and accommodation in which our mental patterns or schemes are revised based on experiences. In essence, individuals construct knowledge by continually adapting their current understandings when faced with new information (Piaget, 1954). This school of thought, known as constructivism, is also founded in the work of Lev Vygotsky, a contemporary of Piaget who suggested that learning could not be separated from its social context. As a social constructivist, he felt that learning was more than a process of assimilation and accommodation; rather it was an integration of the learner within a knowledge community. According to Vygotsky (1978):

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and, later on, on the individual level; first, between people (inter psychological) and then inside the child (intra psychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (p. 57).

Based on the work of Vygotsky it is reasonable to assume that every class is a social context in which learning must be shared between people.

Instructional connections to social constructivism have been presented in the theories of feminist and liberatory pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy takes into consideration experiences and emotions of the individuals in a learning community. According to Schniedewind (1983) feminist teaching takes into consideration the thoughts and feelings of students, and instructors consider the individual nature of their students and themselves within the context of the course. Shrewsbury (1987) recognizes this as a liberatory theory and envisions the classroom as a group of people who are interconnected individuals who care about each other's learning. Shrewsbury further points out that a clear goal of the liberatory classroom is for students to learn to respect each other's differences. Liberatory teachers build on the experiences of students and capitalize on their talents and abilities.

The perspectives of social constructivism, feminist and liberatory theory suggest a great deal about the activities that should take place on the first day of class. If these theories

are correct in their assumptions, a community is necessary to facilitate learning, and that community must be developed. The instructor is the de facto leader of this community and is therefore charged with initiating activities that will establish its existence. Certain practices such as communicating course objectives and completing administrative tasks institute routines and expectations within the community. Other practices, like introducing oneself as the instructor and ice breakers to get to know the learners, are even more deeply rooted in these theories because they develop the social connections that promote a learning community. Practices such as handing out the syllabus and leaving, or jumping into a first lecture without interacting with students appear to be counter intuitive since they indicate to learners that communication from learners to the instructor or between learners is unnecessary.

To date, there is not a clear understanding regarding the efficacy of any of these first day practices. In fact, there is evidence obtained through student evaluation that suggests that practices such as ice breakers and introduction of the instructor are not universally appreciated by learners in higher education settings (Perlman & McCann, 1999). This study explores the practices of professors who are recognized as outstanding instructors. Based on the responses provided to in-depth interviews, connections are made between their practices and learner outcomes based on the theories of social constructivism, feminist and liberatory theory. The results of this inquiry suggest practices that might be recommended to all instructors at the college/university level and generate hypotheses regarding the efficacy of first class practices in higher education.

Methodology

A one group case study design was utilized in this investigation (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). This pre-experimental design does not allow for comparisons to be made. Ideally, a more experimental design would be implemented to draw comparisons between individuals recognized for their excellence in teaching and a second group of those identified as weak in their teaching skills. This type of comparison group would not only be difficult to recruit, but it may be considered inappropriate and potentially unprofessional to attempt to obtain information from this group. Other sources of data on this comparison group, such as department chairpersons or college deans, may not have enough detailed information on the first-day practices of their weaker instructors.

Sample

A convenience sample of higher education instructors who have been recognized for outstanding teaching was recruited from western New York institutions. Each institution was contacted at the level of academic vice president (or similar role) and asked to provide institutional consent and identify the methods by which they recognize excellence in teaching at the institutional, college, and/or departmental levels. They were also asked to provide a list of individuals who have been recognized by the institution in the last five years for outstanding teaching practice. Faculty members were identified by administrators in eight institutions. These faculty members were contacted and requested to participate in a one on one semi structured interview taking approximately 45 minutes.

In total 18 interviews were conducted with faculty members recognized for their teaching excellence. Each interview was conducted by one of the primary authors of the study, 16 were conducted face-to-face and the final two were conducted by phone. The disciplines represented in these interviews include: history, English, mathematics, psychology, communications, art, music, French, biology, criminal justice, physical therapy, engineering, education, and geology. Eleven of the faculty members represented private universities. Seven taught in public institutions. The faculty members were somewhat, evenly distributed among the 8 responding institutions; ranging from a maximum of 4 respondents at 2 institutions to a minimum of 1 respondent at 6 institutions. The respondents were primarily from teaching institutions; only 1 was a research focused university. Each respondent had a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience in higher education.

Interview

Each of the interviews was tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The following descriptive questions and interview guide were followed in each interview:

1. Please describe the activities you regularly engage in with your students on the first class meeting of a semester?
2. Why do you complete each of these activities?
3. In your view, what is the impact of each of these activities on student learning?

Results & Discussion

Initially, an inductive thematic analysis of responses was conducted (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As each interview was analyzed, responses were placed in summary tables using an emerging code system. That is, themes were created as guided by interview response content. Next, in order to provide convergent validity, the interview responses and codes were reviewed by two additional data analysts. Subsequently, themes and placement of interview responses in particular thematic categories were discussed and revised. Since an inductive thematic approach for grounded theory development was utilized in this study, the themes identified below are presented without interpretive analysis or information related to the number of individuals providing responses related to the theme.

The interview responses regarding first day practices represented four relatively distinct themes: 1) Communicating Course Expectations, 2) Learning about the Students, 3) Introducing the Instructor, and 4) Establishing the Tone or Atmosphere of the Course. In addition there were a number of responses that suggested differences in these practices based on the level of the student (ex. freshman vs. senior). The following section presents each of the four themes with representative comments offered by instructors and a discussion of the findings. It is important to note the inherent overlap in each of these categories as certain practices may serve multiple purposes.

Theme 1: Communicating Course Expectations

Interviewees provided many examples of practices associated with Communicating the Course Expectations including presentation of the syllabus and grading processes. One instructor stated, "... The syllabus is a contract and you better have it ready. A consumer knows what he or she is buying in a sense and you better deliver."

In addition to reviewing the syllabus and related course information professors also indicated the importance of involving students in the development of the syllabus. "What I really enjoy...is I let them determine the syllabus." Or, "I want to have enough flexibility so I can address something that a student might raise."

In terms of course grading, also a category within Theme 1: Communicating Course Expectations, interviewees had specific philosophical issues that they shared with the class on the first day, "I tell them that I don't have any reason to hoard points. I tell them I don't turn them in on H&S Green Stamps at the end." Another instructor stated, "There is a minimum you have to know...or you can't pass and if the whole class is below, that it doesn't mean the whole class gets a C, the whole class fails. Their objective shouldn't be to pass the course but it should be to learn the material."

Faculty interviewed indicated that sharing grading procedures and putting grades in proper perspective with learning were important first class activities. One interviewee indicated a clear student learning outcome related to the first day practice of sharing course outlines and communicating course expectations, "I want my students to do quality work and I don't think they can do the quality work that I expect if I don't let them know what I expect."

Outstanding higher education instructors identified communicating the course syllabus and related information as an important first class activity. Although the practice of going over course expectations is not necessarily connected to social constructivism, feminist or liberatory pedagogy, it is viewed as a basic necessity appreciated by students. A survey of students regarding their first day preferences and dislikes overwhelmingly indicated the desire for a course overview, detailed syllabus and requirements (Perlman & McCann, 1999). Students desire "a well-organized, focused presentation containing basic course information..." (Perlman & McCann, 1999, 3). McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) suggest that the instructor's presentation of the outline and mechanics of the course provides insight to the student about the teacher and gives a "feeling" for the class; perhaps a first step to building a learning community.

Theme 2: Learning About Students

Some of the common categories associated with learning about the students in the first class meeting included learning students' names in addition to their background, interests, and expectations. A typical response is illustrated by this participant, "I really make an effort to try to figure out who everybody is and make a point to try to remember names. I don't think you can do education impersonally so I try to learn their names."

Another category in the theme of Learning about Students first day practices included getting background information on students. Professors interviewed collected this information from students formally as well as informally, "I'll have them take a questionnaire. I take in their responses and it allows me to kind of get a look behind the name and I will obviously circle things which are different, unique, interesting, particular."

First day practices within the theme of learning about students included strategies of oral and written responses from students. This is illustrated by this response, ". . . it is important to have them speak about who they are and why they are interested in the particular class...to find out their background, not just their preparedness for the course, but also their preparedness for life."

Another instructor indicated, "If you find something out about their background you find out more about how to reach that student." A final category in the theme of learning about students related to first day practices included finding out student expectations for the course. One professor explained, "I ask them what their expectations are for the class, what do they expect to get out of it...What's the goal of the class?" He continued, "Their expectations of the course many times are not the same as mine."

The importance of knowing the students is underscored in the interview responses. While strategies varied in the process of getting to know students the objectives were clearly more than just a first class ice breaker. Additional student information regarding background and expectations underscore an understanding of the social aspect of learning. Professors indicated the need to identify students' expectations for the course in order to align these expectations to course structures. One interviewee indicated a student learning outcome purpose for getting to know the students background and experiences, "I think the hardest part is to pull out of them what they already know and don't know, and see if you can say a few words to just get them going in the right direction."

Our outstanding instructors generally agree with Kaw (2005) regarding the importance of learning about students and their expectations for the course on the first day. Activities that assist the instructor in learning about the students are much more closely aligned to social learning theories as they indicate to students their value and importance in the instructional process. In his fifteen-year study of college teachers Bain (2004) found that, "...the best teachers ... displayed not power but an investment in the students. Their practices stem from a concern with learning that is strongly felt and powerfully communicated" (p. 139). This investment is demonstrated by outstanding instructors in the very first minutes of a course.

According to McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) students:

Come to the first class wanting to know what the course is all about and what kind of person the teacher is. . . . You can ease them into the course gradually, or you can grab their attention with something dramatically different, but in either case you need to think consciously about how you set the stage to facilitate achieving the course objectives (pgs. 20-21).

Three characteristics seem to be especially appreciated by students when it comes to their instructors: (1) enthusiasm and willingness to work to make the course worthwhile, 2) objectivity, and (3) a sympathetic attitude toward the problems of the students (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). Environments in which these characteristics are present have been found to increase student achievement. Chickering and Gamson (1987) further note that frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class improves student motivation and involvement.

Our interviewees appear to agree with these findings when they describe their first day practices which focus on learning about students. These practices speak more closely to social constructivism, feminist and liberatory pedagogy because they present the instructor as someone who may be open to social interaction as part of instruction.

Theme 3: Introducing the Instructor

A third theme identified in the interview results is Introducing the Instructor. Categories identified in association with learning about the instructor in the first class meeting were: presenting their expectations, describing and implementing their instructional methodologies, and demonstrating their accessibility. Interviewees described their expectations in the context of positive as well as negative behavior in class. One participant explained, “I see them as future professionals and consequently I tell them I don’t accept excuses or whining about anything and I kind of spell that out in the syllabus.” Another said, “I have a cell phone policy. If it goes off you sing.” Another framed his expectations this way, “I guess my goal is to always help them to become better listeners, better thinkers, better communicators because we can teach them all the nitty, gritty. It gets the message across but in a fun way.”

Instructional methodology was also a category within the overall theme of Introducing the Instructor. Interviewees indicated that it was important to model instructional methodology on the first day of class rather than allow students to begin with the old paradigm of lecture and notes. As one instructor noted, “I set up a semester long conversation.” Another explained his practice, “It sort of becomes a Socratic thing rather quickly...where I will be asking them a question and they have to answer and based on their answer they will get another question from me.” Another instructor stated, “...if I just hand out a syllabus and do my lecture that sets the tone that I am going to lecture and they’re going to be sitting there and taking notes and that’s it.”

In the theme of Introducing the Instructor a final category included informing students of professor accessibility. Instructors shared various strategies they employed. One instructor focused on knowing the students’ availability, “Instead of me saying what my office hours will be, I give out my schedule to them and I say, ‘I want you to write down all the times that you are not available.’ ”

Others built strategies into the course, “I schedule homework sessions for the class. I schedule so that everyone can make at least one a week.” Instructors also let students

know their commitment to being available, “I let them know fairly early on that I will do everything in my power to help them as long as they are making the effort.”

In terms of Introducing the Instructor, faculty were very descriptive of the student learning outcomes. Comments included, “If they see you have enthusiasm and it’s genuine (and I really do like this stuff to an embarrassing level) it communicates . . . genuine enthusiasm and love for the material.”

Interviewees indicated that first day activities could include professor expectations and rules or policies for the course. It was also an opportunity to become acquainted with the methodology used by the professor. Professors indicated this was also a time to outline the professor’s availability.

The practices associated with Introducing the Instructor are also social, liberatory and feminist in nature because they present the personal side of the instructor. The individual differences and “quirks” of the instructor are shared putting the learning community leader in a position of vulnerability and establishing the class as a place where individual differences and needs can be respected.

Theme 4: Establishing the Tone

The common categories associated with Establishing the Tone of the class during the first meeting were: build a learning community, engage students with each other, engage students in the content of the course, and motivate students.

Interviewees indicated strong commitments to establishing a learning community beginning in the first class of the course. One interviewee stated, “I treat my class as a community as opposed to an information delivery system.” Establishing a learning community also included consideration of the classroom set-up as one interviewee explained, “I try my best to have students sitting so they can see each other rather than the backs of each others’ heads. If it means rearranging the furniture...It’s important to me.” Developing students’ comfort was a way instructors began to develop a learning community. This is illustrated by this interviewee, “What I am really trying to do is build a comfort level, a sense that this is a trusting place. ...it helps to create an atmosphere where students feel less threatened, more involved, and more able to do something.”

Student to student engagement was also an important goal for first day practices of professors interviewed. Instructors had various ways to accomplish this. For example, “One of the first things is I have everyone introduce themselves to each other in pairs. They pick the groups and anyone that’s not there that day I might funnel into a group.” Another instructor described his strategy, “The first day I think it’s good because it really does get the students to know each other. If you want students to open up in class I think you really have to.” Interaction served to begin developing a community of learners but also served other purposes, “...if they sit and talk about it they argue back and forth they can often get farther in a problem than they would on their own.”

Our outstanding instructors indicated that they engaged the students in content the first day. “. . . it is incredibly important . . . for students to get engaged right away in the content of the class so they can see that it is serious and so they can get a sense of what kinds of thinking they are going to be asked to do.” Instructors described different means of connecting students with the content the first day. “In Composition on the first day...I bring in a short poem, I get the students to read the poem, then write...what they think the theme of the poem is.” Another explained, “By the time we finish...they are pretty much engaged cause [sic] we've got them doing a mini research project on the first day.”

Our outstanding instructors indicated strong commitments to motivating students the first day. “I say things like, ‘We are going to read one of my favorite works.’ The more I get students to talk on the first day and show an interest in the subject matter the better the class is going to be for the whole semester.” Interviewees expressed reasons for motivating students such as this response, “If the student doesn't sense some excitement or something that's going to be valuable . . . then I don't think the student is going to commit to the course in the way you want. They may even drop the course.”

First-day activities related to establishing the tone of the class are most strongly aligned to social constructivism, feminist and liberatory pedagogy because they not only speak to what will happen in the course, they demonstrate active, social engagement in the learning and develop the class community as a structure to facilitate learning. Our interviewees discussed their attempts to establish a community, engage students with one another and with the content, and “wet their appetite” for what was to come. The examples provided by our outstanding teachers are echoed throughout the research and literature on higher education instruction. In an investigation of the role of professor-student relationships Wilson (1997) found that students “wanted and needed open and comfortable communicative relationships with their classmates and with (the professor)” (p. 1). Kreizinger (2006) suggests building critical relationships with the students on the first day of class that connect students to instructor, instructor to content and content to students. Bennett (1999) in a survey of students who were looking forward to the content of the class, found that using an engaging example from the content that elicited student discussion and participation in the first class almost doubled the percentage of students who were looking forward to the course.

Course Level

In addition to the four themes regarding first day practices a number of our outstanding professors suggested their practice differed based on the level of the students. Some of the professors indicated they adjusted their first day practices for freshman. They reported differences in emphasis, “I don't emphasize [essays] as much because I don't expect freshmen to be as good at that skill.” Instructors generally emphasized changes from high school with freshman, “In the past when I have had an incoming Freshmen class, I think one of the first things I have had to do is tell them this isn't high school anymore.” One instructor explained, “You hate to sound threatening but I said ‘You've got to get on the stick or else a lot of you are going to fail.’ ”

Instructors generally indicated they expected upperclassman to be better prepared for coursework. "I've been teaching primarily...to senior undergraduate and graduate students, so I am talking to students who have an interest in the subject already." Some would engage upperclassman in the content faster, "Sometimes in the upper level classes I have given them the first assignment [on the first day]..."

Professors are more likely to prepare for issues of motivation and commitment to content with lower classes while expecting upper classmen to have internalized an interest in the content and an understanding of how college courses proceed. These practices illustrate an understanding, perhaps based on experience, of the different needs and expectations of learners at various developmental levels. In effect these outstanding instructors demonstrated preconceived knowledge about the subjectivities of the students in their class; a highly feminist pedagogy.

Conclusions

In sum the results suggest that communicating with students about the course expectations, learning about students, providing information about the instructor, and establishing the tone of the course are necessary first-day practices. These findings are consistent with the faculty-oriented literature on first day strategies and provide a level of empirical evidence in support of the recommendations offered in the literature (Davis, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Kreizinger, 2006; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Nilson, 1998). Practices that include presenting the course expectations, especially information on exams and assignments are further supported in studies of students' preferences (Perlman & McCann, 1999). Outstanding instructors also seem to inherently understand the need to employ different strategies depending on the level of the student. Developing the community and setting the tone were emphasized more in classes directed toward underclassman. Each of the themes identified within the study, except to some degree that of sharing course expectations is illustrative of constructivist, liberatory, and feminist pedagogy, and in instances where instructors develop the course expectations with students this too reflects social constructivist theory.

For the most part each of the interviewees addressed each of the four themes in their discussion of first day practices. It should be noted however that many of the respondents emphasized one theme over another. Because this investigation was designed for grounded theory development an interpretive analysis comparing the comprehensive coverage of all themes or quantity of theme reference by respondent was not conducted.

Of course there are a number of issues that limit the conclusions that can be drawn as a result of this study. Using in-depth interview as the research methodology involves inherent concerns. Since no direct observations of first-day practices were made it is likely that the respondents behave differently than they indicated in the interview (Deutscher, Pestello & Pestello, 1993). Interviews also lack the context necessary to truly understand the subtle differences in perspective that might be revealed in a participant observation format (Becker & Geer, 1957).

The call for higher education to be more accountable for student success underscores the need to further investigate the best practices of professors. Future research on first day practices in higher education classes should seek to expand our understanding of the themes that emerged in this study. It is important to further determine the value of each theme, especially in relation to student learning within the course. Which practices are most significant when it comes to promoting student engagement and learning? It is also important to compare the implementation of these practices across the population of higher education instructors. Are these practices utilized to a greater degree by highly effective instructors or are they standard practices commonly used by all? Finally, once these practices are validated researchers should determine the degree to which they can be taught or transferred to others. None of our respondents indicated that they had learned the first day practices they implement as part of an organized professional development opportunity at their institution. It is therefore important to identify strategies by which these practices are best transmitted to faculty at various career stages.

The inability of the faculty or the researchers to separate many of the good practices in the first class from good practices used in every class limits the study in terms of its specificity for first class practices.

The results of this study indicate that first day practices are important to the success of a course for faculty recognized for their instructional success. We believe that the practices described by our participants can be easily adapted by all instructors at the college/university level and that our results provide a framework for evaluating the efficacy of first class practices in higher education.

Quality teaching is a complex phenomenon and like all such social constructs, it may be more helpful to understand what it is not, than what it is. Our study did not explore the practices that instructors should avoid on the first day, and our participants did not directly provide insight into this. A number of recommendations can be inferred however, based on the practices our outstanding professors indicate they employ. The following recommendations are offered to higher education instructors as practices to avoid, based on the strategies implemented by outstanding teachers. Higher education instructors should not:

1. Hand out the syllabus and assume it is self-explanatory. Instead they should share the syllabus and their expectations with students. They may even invite student participation in building or developing the syllabus.
2. Dismiss the class following administrative tasks such as distributing the syllabus. Instead they should establish a learning community in which students feel comfortable interacting with the instructor and fellow students.
3. Superficially share contact information and office hours. Instead they should demonstrate their accessibility to students, indicate how they can best be contacted, and what the students can expect from the instructor in terms of assistance and support when facing challenges.

4. Place artificial barriers between themselves and students. Instead they should introduce themselves, identify their personal teaching styles and rules, and demonstrate enthusiasm for what and who they teach.
5. Create mystery about the grading process. Instead they should provide clear expectations for assignments, due dates, and grading procedures.
6. Scare students away from the course. Instead they should provide an open and honest “feel” for the course and what students can expect for the remainder of the term; in effect sell the course to the students.
7. Single out students who are late, confused, or otherwise different than the group. Instead they should establish a culture of trust and safety for future engagement within the class.
8. Present themselves as the imparters of course knowledge or sources of information delivery. Instead they should find out students’ prior experiences and understandings of the material covered in the course and focus instruction on student learning needs.
9. Begin with lecture and or notes on course content. Instead they should stimulate student interest in course content and motivate them to become engaged in their own learning.
10. Play icebreaker activities with upper classmen and graduate students. Instead they should acknowledge that these students already have an interest in the content and engage them in ways that capitalize on this interest.

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