



The First Day of Class: Fostering a Zest for Learning with a Sense of Empathy

SPEAKERS

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Tierney King 00:00

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. This episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Online Conference. Join us from the comfort of your own home and transform how you teach with nationally recognized teaching and learning presenters. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. The first day of class is filled with emotions. Whether or not you feel confident, calm and collected doesn't mean your students are feeling the same way. So how do you use the first day to foster a zest for learning? How do you make sure they know you care? How can you decrease their stress that they may be feeling? In today's episode, we'll cover some teacher-tested activities for the first day of class and how you can make slight tweaks to make meaningful strides in relieving student mental health concerns and stress on the first day. By setting the stage on day one, your students will be invested, interested, and ready for your class. To start, Alexia Franzidis explains how she uses trivia and wishlists to make the syllabus a working document in this program, How Can I Use the First Day to Set the Tone for a Semester of Learning?

Alexia Franzidis 01:14

I'm a big fan of trivia. And so one of the big things I like to do on the first day is I get the students to divide themselves up into small groups. And they introduce each other, you know, within those groups, and they come up with the team name. And then we have to do trivia. So I will ask things like, "What is the late penalty for handing in an assignment two days late?" and, you know, they have to look through the document, or I'll ask them to read it beforehand, and they'll come up with an answer. And then that way we kind of actually work through it. So it's important for you, if you're going to do that sort of thing, it's important for you as an instructor to really figure out what are those key things that you know, are important for you within your class that you want the students to know and turn it into like a trivia or a quiz. You can do it individually, you know, you could ask them to do just a quick thing, you could go online, get a little quiz set up and get them to do that. Or you could get them to do it actually in class in pairs or in a group. So depending on your class size, you may or may not wish to implement technology. But I found that to be a very successful tool to get the students, you know, actually engaged with it, with the content in the syllabus to remember the things that are important to me as an instructor, but also for for them to kind of get to know each other another thing that you can do, which is also fairly interactive, as you can make the syllabus almost a working document. So what I mean by

that is your syllabus is kind of broken up into a couple of key things. So the first thing is you have a sort of your non-negotiables. So you know, the the code of ethics for the university, whether that's specified in the handbook, whether it's something that your university has an honor code that the students must obey, you know, those are pretty non-negotiable items. Same thing for prereqs for classes. So you stipulate that right at the beginning, these are the things that, you know, will not change within the class. But grading scale, you know, whether that's set from the university, or within a particular program, so you know what those things are. You also tell the students what you're going to give them. So for me, as an instructor, I'm always going to come to class, and I'm going to be prepared. And I'm going to be creative, and think about ways that I can make the content that they need to learn interesting and fun and interactive. I'm also going to be flexible on certain things, or I'm going to be empathetic. So I tell them the things that I'm going to give them throughout the semester, I then ask them to think about what are they going to bring to class? What are they going to give me in return? So I'm giving them things, what are they then going to give me and the class in return? So are they going to be punctual? Are they going to be turning in their assignments in time? Are they going to be respectful towards each other? And so the last thing I do is I get them to think about what is kind of their wishlist? What would they like? Would they like to have a sort of free pass for coming into class one day late? Would they like to have the opportunity to drop the lowest grade in the class in for an assignment? Or would they like to have the opportunity to have some kind of, you know, bonus activity at the end, to replace a low grade? So what I say to them then is, you know, these are things that they may want, these are privileges that they may want, if they give me the things that they say they're going to give me - to be respectful to one another - then they will get these privileges. However, if they don't do what they say they're going to do, then they're not going to have those privileges.

Tierney King 05:10

In addition to this working document, Franzidis has also found different interactive games to be effective in the introduction process of class, from words sorts to quizzes to lists, you can engage your students right away and get to know more about them as individuals.

Alexia Franzidis 05:25

So there are a few tools out there that you can use. Again, a simple internet search will bring up a lot. A couple that I found to be really effective is a true colors word sort. And basically, you have a list of words that you choose and characteristics, and the students will decide which one really aligns well with their personality. And then at the end, they tally it up, and it's associated with a color. And that color then has some kind of, you know, personality trait, or behavior trait. And so that's a fun thing to do. And again, you can get the students to do it individually, and they can then share that with the classmates. What I've done before is the students will fill it out, and then you'll have sort of like orange and greens and blues and yellows, and then at the end, you'll get all the all the yellows to kind of go in a group and you'll say, okay, yellows, so do you like to usually do whatever? And so a lot of them will be like, yes, etc. And you say, okay, well, then how are you going to work with the oranges in this particular group? So it's kind of a fun, easy thing to do. But it's nice, because it also makes it a little bit more reflective. And it's useful for some of those sort of like upper level or classes that have some kind of community outreach or community engagement. Another one that you can do I know is Schwartz has a theory of basic values, students are presented with a list, and they get to sort of pick which ones they align themselves with. And then from there, they get an idea about sort of what their values are, and

how that might then impact their viewpoints or their behaviors going forward for the rest of the semester. So again, there are a lot of different activities that you can do, those are just two that I find to be quite effective. I think it's really important when you are doing activities to match them with what it is that you're actually trying to do in the class. And what is it that's important, or what the nature of the class is. So as I mentioned, if you're going to be doing something, if your class was a lot of community engagement or a lot of fieldwork, you might decide to do an activity that really gets a class either involved with talking to one another, something highly interactive, or something that's a little bit more reflective. And then from there, making that interactive. While thinking of activities that you can use on your first day, you can also consider the day-to-day strategies that you use to implement on your first day as well. From unanswered questions to a picture of a moose, Lolita Paff explains how she uses curiosity triggers to release students natural zest for better learning.

Lolita Paff 07:59

What are some day to day strategies that you could use to spur student curiosity in your in the content that you're teaching? One important strategy would be to frame the day's lesson around a key question, to use the question as a context and a structure that drives all the activities and the sequence that you follow throughout the day. Another would be to employ a curiosity trigger. For example, the other day I was teaching and I brought in a picture of a moose. And I'm teaching economics, and I showed the picture of the moose to the class and I asked them what it was. And I told them to remember the image of the moose, because I have an important question that's going to foster some of our discussion later on in the class. The effect of that is that students started to wonder, what does a moose have to do with microeconomics? How is she going to tie this in? Where's this going to lead us? And then when I went back to the picture, I didn't answer the question. And the question was, what is the price of a picture of a moose? What might a seller charge for that product? How would we decide what to charge for that product? And I didn't answer it. Because an unanswered question is more powerful than the actual answer itself. Students can be pondering this long after they leave the class on a more general basis, thinking about products and services that they deal with every day. And in that I'm having them think about economic concepts like supply and demand and prices and quantities outside of the class. By emphasizing questions over answers, it allows them to think about other questions and drive further learning. Another strategy is to incorporate guessing with immediate feedback. And there are really two purposes that are satisfied with this strategy one In the act of guessing, formulates additional connections in the brain, students, even if they don't know the answer and don't have any other context, the act of formulating a guess starts to create some structure within their brain. So that as additional questions and additional bits of content are added, they'll be making these extra connections so that for long term retrieval, and retention and memory, they're, they're all going to be enhanced. And the other reason to employ guessing with immediate feedback is that it drives and continues to maintain momentum throughout the entire class. So you ask the question, and you have students guess, perhaps you have them discuss their answers, and then you provide a bit of feedback. And then you repeat the process in a way almost hoping that they are getting the answer correct to start with, so that they've got lots of different things to think about throughout the course of the class period.

Tierney King 11:00

In addition to engaging activities, your students, more than anything, want to know that you care. So how can you assure them that your course isn't intended to add stress to their lives? How can you

intentionally create a course that decreases student stress and make meaningful strides in student mental health? In this program, Rob Eaton explains a four-step process that will lead to a more inclusive teaching approach and relieves student stress.

Rob Eaton 11:27

The fact is that things we do can unwittingly make life better or make life worse for our students with mental health challenges. And our proposal here is not to eliminate all the difficulties but to be more deliberate about the difficulties we do create. I'm a believer in desirable difficulties. But as Robert Bjork who coined the term himself acknowledges, the fact that something's difficult doesn't automatically make it a desirable difficulty. So my co author, Steve Hunsaker, Bonnie Moon, and I propose a simple formula for intentionality. We suggest doing a cost benefit analysis, weighing the pedagogical benefits of any course design decision against the mental health impacts on our students. Some of the practices will keep others will tweak and others will abandon altogether. It's a simple four step process. First, we ask how, how does this particular practice affect my students with mental health challenges? Second, how central is it to the outcomes of my course. Third, is there are there any good alternatives things I could do instead? Forth, is there a way to tweak this man aspect of course design so that it knocks off some of the rough edges? Let me run one particular example through this cost benefit analysis. When I began researching this subject, about three years ago, I sat down with a couple of counselors from my campus counseling center. I asked them if there were any things that faculty members did that unwittingly exacerbated mental health challenges for students. To my disappointment, they said yes, oral presentations. I love oral presentations. I required them in different courses that I taught, and I don't teach public speaking or in a discipline that's necessarily preparing students to speak publicly a lot. I just like oral presentations. I was trying to get some active learning done. But I'm embarrassed to admit this, I hadn't paused to consider how that particular assignment would affect my students with high anxiety or my students who are more introverted. Consequently, my decision to keep it in the course had not been especially intentional. If I thought about how central that was to the course outcomes, I probably wouldn't have kept it or at least would have given students choice. It's a simple alternative. They could do a blog, write a paper, or an oral presentation. Or if I wanted to keep it, maybe I could have them do it in a different way. In fact, some successors to a course I helped create ended up replacing the oral presentation requirement that some colleagues and I had originally put in the course, with one where students recorded a video of themselves and posted it online. They discovered when students had multiple chances to record this in the privacy of their own rooms, the quality went up, and they weren't even thinking about mental health challenges. It's a simple example of how running something through this cost cost benefit analysis can lead to changes that reduce stress for our students and boost learning for all students address mental health challenges proactively in the syllabus, and telegraph some reasonableness and flexibility. I was surprised that one of the most consistent strains of thought and sentiments that ran throughout students in our focus groups was how concerned they were about how professors felt about mental health challenges. Almost all of them that had at least one negative experience with a professor who essentially seemed to say just Buck up, or to doubt the reality of mental health challenges. professors who've been completely unwilling to be flexible in any way. So they were watching us closely to see what we thought. And they knew that if we felt that way they were toast if they froze up for a week or two in the middle of the semester. By contrast, students who read the provision that I've started putting in my syllabus felt like it was a security blanket. One of them said, when she read it, it makes us still feel like a person. It was a really interesting

comment. This meant a lot to her. And frankly, most of my students, including those with mental health challenges, never used this provision and the flow flexibility provides, but just knowing it's there, sent a powerful message to her. Another one said, and she was in my class and never used it. Once she read it, she said, it was the most reassuring thing. Oh, my goodness, it was crazy. Good. So by letting students know that we'll be frankly, as flexible as most of our bosses in our working lives have been with us. We can relieve a lot of stress, and in some cases, students who would have just thrown in the towel when they got too far behind. No, it's possible to come back and make up the work. Now I make it clear in these provisions, you're going to have to do just as much work as anybody else. But I might be able to be flexible with you. So come and talk to me and do it sooner rather than later.

Tierney King 16:17

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