

# Don't Waste your First Day

## General Tips

- Dedicate some time to hooking students into the course content or skill before you distribute the syllabus.
- Students are inundated with new information during the first week, so be prepared to explain or discuss relevance of the course, teaching style, or assignment more than once.
- Ponder how to adapt when students add the class late or miss the first day.
- If you plan to use icebreakers, be aware of "icebreaker fatigue". (Davis, 42-43)
- Select and adapt ideas that best fulfill your needs; don't try them all.
- Some of these ideas could be distributed across the first couple of weeks.
- Consider how BOLT or "clickers" might be utilized to reduce the amount of time in class on some of these activities.

The ideas below are culled from a number of publications about teaching in higher education and meant to encourage further exploration. They are just a sampling.

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## Get to Know Them

L. Dee Fink (2003) emphasizes the importance of knowing situational factors before writing the syllabus or beginning the semester. These situational factors include the physical layout of the classroom, available technology, nature of the subject matter, professional standards and special pedagogical challenges for the discipline, and characteristics of the teacher. Equally important is to know the characteristics of the learners. Fink writes,

- "What is the life situation of the students at the moment: full-time student, part-time working student, family responsibilities, working responsibilities, and the like?
- What life or professional goals do they have that relate to [the course]?
- What are the reasons for enrolling?
- What prior experiences, knowledge, skills, and attitudes do the students have regarding the subject?"

Determining the students' situational factors of course can be accomplished through **short surveys** or **pre-tests**. Knowing prior experiences, knowledge, skills, and attitudes helps us to anticipate where students might stumble. As James Zull points out, "How a learner manages and manipulates facts and information depends greatly on the learner's past experiences, on his [or hers] existing neuronal network." (Zull, 188) While we cannot look inside our students' brains, we can dedicate time to learning more about their prior knowledge, preconceptions, and misconceptions. This can be done at the beginning of the semester and when you start teaching a new unit or concept. Create a short survey or pre-test, and if you don't want to spend class time administering, make use of BOLT. Consider whether or not you want to make the pre-tests or surveys anonymous. In addition, sharing results with students may contribute to a sense of community. The results can be the basis of discussion to begin exploring the subject matter.

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**"Average Student" Activity** is suggested by Therese Huston (2009); her goal is to determine situational factors. Compile a fact sheet about the student population on your campus and present the statistics to students (the facts might include NSSE results for time spent on study, work, study abroad, writing experience, etc). If this data is not easily accessible at BU, you will find national results on the internet <https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/> Then on a 3x5 card or half-sheet of paper, have them respond to the following questions: "Is this you? In what ways is this like you? And in what ways are you completely different?" To delve deeper, put forth two more prompts: "Tell me something about yourself not captured on the list; explain your story behind one of those facts" that make up the typical BU student. Huston suggests students sign their names, but I wonder if you would get more honest responses if the exercise was anonymous. Of course, if you want to use the exercise to identify students who might need extra help, then you might want them to sign names. You should report back the results for discussion. (pp. 188-190)

**Background Knowledge Probes** provide students with a short list of relevant terms or concepts and indicate if they: "have never heard of this; have heard of it but never really knew what it meant; have heard of it and could have explained it once, but cannot recall now; can recall what it means and can explain it in general terms, but cannot explain how it applies to the ... ; can recall what it means and can explain how it applies to ..." (Huston, p. 180)

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## My Advice to You

When a professor stands at the front of class and talks about how to thrive academically, we can be as persuasive as a doctor's advice to cut back on desserts. On the other hand, if former students offer the advice, it might have more of an impact. Stephen Brookfield, whose courses depend heavily on discussion, has a panel of former students pass on advice to the new class in the first days. He is not present when the panel meets with the students. He encourages the panel members to describe their feelings of anxiety, confidence, etc. that they experienced when they took his seminar style class. Additional topics for discussion might include the best methods of preparing for the course, and how the teaching style and assignments benefitted their learning.

A variation on this approach is what I call "**Message in a Bottle.**" Near the end of each semester, I have students anonymously write advice to the next group taking the course. I ask them to be constructive. I might offer one of the following prompts: "If I knew then, what I know now ..." or "To thrive in this course, I recommend ..." The advice is written on 5x8 cards. I leave the room after explaining the prompt, then I have a student complete the next steps: place all the responses in an envelope, seal it, and give it to the department secretary with a note, "Please give to Dr. \_\_\_\_ after grades have been submitted." I also write the course number and semester on the envelope. After the grades have been submitted, I read the advice, which provides me an opportunity to reflect. During the first week of the semester, I distribute the cards to the current crop of students, explain the context, and then have them each read aloud their card. Then we discuss the patterns in order to explore major themes, expectations, and how to thrive.

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## Work through a Problem

Barbara Gross Davis (2009) suggests spending part of the first day "engaging students in coursework [that] gives them an idea of what your class will be like." She summarizes several examples. "An English professor divides the class into small groups and gives each member a line from a poem, which the group is asked to reassemble. Examples:

A physics instructor discusses with the class how normal observations lead to false conclusions about gravity, velocity, inertia, and other laws of nature, using everyday examples; swing a golf club, looking in the mirror, dropping a feather. A sociology faculty member uses a demonstration to show how context can define meaning by having a student provide a small amount of saliva in a sterilized spoon. The instructor then asks whether any students want to swallow the saliva on the spoon. When all students decline, the faculty member launches into a discussion of how sharing a soft drink or kissing is an acceptable exchange of saliva but swallowing a spoonful is not." (pp. 44-45)

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## Syllabus Review Activity

1. Do students read your syllabus? Break from the tradition of pointing out essential parts of your syllabus by having students read and answer questions about the syllabus during class. Therese Huston (2009) outlines her process:
2. Divide students into groups.
3. Distribute the syllabi with a sheet of questions for each group; require one member of the group to write responses on the question sheet. (Alternatively, have the students read the syllabus on their own, then form groups to answer the questions.)
4. Have students answer the questions in the small group as they read the syllabus.
5. Allow them to do this work for "fifteen to twenty-five minutes [including reading time] – depending on the length of your syllabus".
6. Discuss as a whole class the most essential questions.
7. Collect their group responses to determine if you need to address unanswered questions or concerns.

### The questions Huston poses:

1. "Looking at the course objectives, what other classes have you had that will be helpful?"
2. Looking at the course calendar, which topics interest you most? The least?
3. What do you want or expect from the professor?
4. Identify two or three things in the syllabus that concern you.

5. What strategies could you use to address these concerns?
6. Identify two or three things in the syllabus that you're glad to see.
7. When do you plan to submit your first project for a grade? What do you think it will cover?
8. List three questions you have about the course that aren't answered in the syllabus?" (pp. 269-270)

Tailor the questions to your needs. As Huston points out, if you want students to make note of the academic integrity policy, then write a question. You might create scenarios that require the student to consult the syllabus to respond, e.g. "If Ida misses class because of a funeral...." If you have a long syllabus consider these variations: **(1)** Assign different sections of the syllabus to pairs or groups of students, who will then be asked to report to the rest of the class the answers to your questions. (Of course, then you won't be assured that they have all read your complete syllabus.) **(2)** Assign only select parts of your syllabi to be read by all students in class and respond to questions.

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## Learning is the Student's Responsibility

Robert Leamnsen (1999) notes the professor is to teach, "to arrange activities (lectures, labs, assignments, etc) that has the conscious intention of and potential for facilitating learning in another." (p. 51). The students' task is to learn; we cannot do that for them. To encourage his students to ponder learning and teaching, Leamnsen addressed an essay to them "Learning (Your First Job)." Consider reading this essay on the first day. Divide the reading into smaller portions and assign students to read and discuss in small groups or pairs. You may even provide them with questions that they must answer. After which have each group report out what they have discovered. Alternatively, assign the essay as outside reading, then hold a class discussion or have students write a reflection piece that they submit to BOLT. (Watch out though, some students won't read!) You might require students to respond to Leamnsen's essay by having them submit a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) that explains where, how, and when they plan to study; describe obstacles they anticipate and how they plan to meet those challenges; and how they plan to apply Leamnsen's suggestions (the PLP is adapted from the work of Anton Tolman at Utah Valley University researching student resistance to learning).

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## Make your teaching style transparent

Use the first day to help them understand your approach to teaching and learning. Gary Smith (2008) adopted the following approach in the wake of negative student evaluations. Rather than telling students why he chose to use most class time for active learning, he begins the first day with a discussion method technique. He offers the following prompt: "Thinking of what you want to get out of your college education and this course, which of the following is most important to you?"

1. Acquiring information (facts, principles, concepts).
2. Learning how to use information and knowledge in new situations.
3. Developing lifelong learning skills."

Poll for results, share, and discuss. Smith does not recommend you poll anonymously so that students can see how others respond. He points out that the discussion should hopefully lead into exploring assumptions made about how learning occurs and how all three are essential, and not strictly linear and hierarchical.

The next prompt Smith offers: "All three of these goals are clearly important. However, let's think for a moment of how best to accomplish these goals. Learning is not a spectator sport – it takes work; that includes work in the classroom and work that you do outside of the classroom. So, of these three goals, which do you think you can make headway on outside of class by your own reading and studying, and which do you think would be best achieved in class working with your classmates and me?" Poll for results, share, and discuss. Smith then slips into lecture-mode explaining how his course is set up, and that class time will be dedicated to goals 2 and 3. Smith indicated that his student evaluations did improve because he helped them realize that their "first contact with content" should occur outside of class and learning was their responsibility. (pp. 1-4)

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## End the First Day with an Evaluation

Linda Nilson (2010) recommends asking students at the end of the first day to respond anonymously to the following questions:

- "What is the most important thing you learned during this first day?"
- How did your expectations of this course change?
- What questions or concerns do you still have about the course or the subject matter?" (p. 50)

Study the results and respond appropriately to the students in the next class meeting.

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## References:

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