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AUTHOR Hayward, Pamela A.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated teaching assistants' beliefs about the first day of class, the intersection between their beliefs and expectations, and the strategies they plan to use. Subjects were 12 teaching assistants (TAs) assigned to teach an introductory or intermediate level public speaking course to university undergraduates. Five teaching assistants had taught before and seven were about to teach for the first time. Subjects were interviewed prior to the first day of class. Results indicated that the TAs: (1) seemed most concerned that students leave the classroom the first day believing that the course will be challenging, fun, useful, and a way to expand their knowledge; (2) hoped that students would leave the classroom believing that the TAs were fair, available to help, and had high expectations; and (3) claimed they would achieve their goals through the use of their nonverbal cues, by talking about course policies, by explaining they are approachable, and by discussing their expectations for the students. Future research might compare what TAs say they will do on the first day to what they actually do.
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Getting it right the first time:
An exploration of instructor beliefs and strategies
for the first day of class

Pamela A. Hayward
University of Illinois at Urbana
Department of Speech Communication
244 Lincoln Hall
702 S. Wright St.
Urbana, IL 61801
(217) 333-9106

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INTRODUCTION

The first day of class can set the stage for instructor-student interaction throughout the rest of the semester. Therefore, it seems prudent to explore instructor awareness of the impact of the first day. Through the analysis of teaching assistant interviews, this paper will focus on instructor beliefs about the first day of class. This paper will also examine the intersection between teaching assistants' beliefs and expectations, and the strategies they plan to use to communicate those to students on the first day of class.

We've often heard that, "you never get a second chance to make a first impression." Instructors intuitively know that adage has validity, but often forget to incorporate this thought into preparation for teaching. We look at teaching at the macro-level: course content, philosophies of our respective disciplines. And we often approach teaching from a very micro-level: attendance, late work policies, class activities. But approaches to the first day of class are often left out from both macro- and micro-level teaching strategies, possibly because the first day is such a mixed bag.

On the one hand, the first day should encompass a general overview of the course and of the instructor. On the other hand, the first day is often filled with required administrative duties. And often, because blending these two elements can be complicated to do well, instructors opt for the easy way out. We call roll, go over the syllabus and dismiss the class. However, as Friedrich and Cooper (1990) point out, valuable ground can be lost when opting for such a surface-level approach to the first day:

"The first meeting of a class is much too important to be treated as something to be gotten over with as quickly as possible. Teachers who simply put in an appearance, see if all the students are there, make an assignment for the next time, and dismiss class early are missing an important opportunity. Not only does this approach send students away frustrated because they do not get their basic questions answered, the instructor misses an important opportunity to demonstrate his or her commitment to the course, to the students, and to the...discipline." (p. 237)

It's time to find strategies we can use to approach the first day of class in ways that are effective. As Eisele (1989) stresses:

"Like many things, a course has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Each class session has these parts, too. The opening class, however, has special significance because it sets the stage, establishing the tone for the course...The first class is for building rapport, discussion of the objectives, and tuning up the "orchestra (p. 31)."

The first class meeting can be particularly important to first-time college or university teachers (Sourcebook: Individualized inservice education for adjunct occupational faculty, 1980): The first question, then, is: How do I start this course in the most efficient way so that students get involved in learning the material? (Garrison, 1968, p. 15)" By reviewing articles and manuals that deal specifically with advice and training for the first day of class, several categories of prescriptions became apparent: 1) preparation for the first day of class, 2) getting acquainted, 3)"administrivia", 4) course coverage, 5) class lecture and 6) class activity.

Miller (1979), in addressing colleagues who claim they just don't have the knack for teaching, reminds them that anyone who wants to be a better teacher can. Beyond orientation and training sessions, all teachers should plan their classes well in advance and organize carefully (Miller). Kelly (1968) recommends going to the classroom early with all materials ready to use. In this way, an instructor will have a better chance of establishing a routine. This also gives the instructor an opportunity to "tune in to pre-class chatter or nervous silence (Eisele, p. 31)," and to get an early sense of the group.

"Perhaps (one of) the most important..questions that students sitting in the classroom on the first day of class have in their minds is "What kind of person is this teacher going to be?" In many cases, teachers do not start the first day with a clean slate. Assuming that the teacher has taught before, campus folklore has already contributed to the students' data base. Teacher reputations start building with the first class taught on campus and continue to shape student perceptions over an individual's teaching career (Friedrich & Cooper, p. 243)."

Friedrich and Cooper explain that the type of impression an instructor will want to create relies on many variables, such as resources, definition of role, course objectives, and student personalities. However, the instructor can set clearer first-day strategies if he/she keeps in mind that the goal of

teaching is student learning (Friedrich & Cooper, p. 244). This means that instructors must not only focus on presenting a warm and likeable image, but on presenting themselves as knowledgeable, and confident as well.

Greive and France (1992) recommend ice-breaking questions to allow students to feel comfortable participating from the start. They stress that it is as important for the instructor to get to know the students as it is for them to get to know the instructor. By getting to know their students, an instructor will be better able to determine their needs and assess their motivations (Garrison, p. 15).

Instructors should save time at the beginning or end of the first class meeting for, what Eisele calls, "administrivia". Friedrich and Cooper recommend working from a syllabus to address student areas of concern, such as course mechanics. The syllabus, according to Friedrich and Cooper, can specify the number of assignments, number of quizzes and tests, and weights that will be assigned to each in calculating the final grade. It is also helpful to address grading criteria. When discussing class rules and course behavior, the main thing to focus on is consistency, according to Friedrich and Cooper.

According to Friedrich and Cooper, there are at least two issues related to course coverage that students would like to see addressed during the first class session (p. 239). These issues are: 1) What will the course cover? and, 2) How will it relate to other work? Course content can be presented in the course syllabus (mentioned above), which, at minimum spells out both the objectives of the course and the topics to be covered (Friedrich & Cooper).

Following a discussion of course procedures and policies, Eisele explains that it is important to "get students started in learning the course content (p. 31)." In order to get students interested in the course, an instructor can play an audio or video tape, or present a brief lecture (Eisele). This initial immersion in content should be followed by a large-group or small-group class discussion.

The first class meeting can be a challenge for the college instructor.

Both instructors and students may be nervous that expectations of the course will not be fulfilled. Despite the wealth of practical advice for first-day instruction, little research has been conducted to discover teachers' reasoning behind their first-day strategies. A first step in approaching this area in a more scholarly manner is to find out what beliefs instructors have about the first day of class. It is also important to see how these beliefs, in turn, connect to the strategies instructors use on the first day. In order to address these issues, an exploratory project was undertaken. This study examines the following research questions in conjunction with instructor beliefs about the first day of class:

- RQ #1: What are the most important beliefs you want students to leave with concerning your course?
- RQ #2: What do you do on the first day of class to contribute directly to these beliefs?
- RQ #3: What are the most important beliefs you want students to leave with concerning you, as an instructor?
- RQ #4: What do you do on the first day of class to contribute directly to these beliefs?

METHODS

Participants: Participants in this study were 12 teaching assistants (TAs) at a large midwestern university. All 12 TAs were assigned to teach an introductory- or intermediate-level public speaking course to university undergraduates. Five of the TAs (three female, two male) had taught before (veterans) and the remaining seven TAs (five female, two male) were about to teach for the first time (novices).

Interviews: All 12 TAs were interviewed individually by the same researcher prior to the first day of class. The participants were asked to answer the research questions (highlighted above) to the best of their ability. The researcher recorded the responses without offering the TAs any feedback or evaluation of their responses.

Analysis: Once all interviews were completed, the TAs' responses were transcribed from the tapes and the transcriptions were analyzed. The analysis was undertaken in several stages. First, each response idea unit was notated. Next, these idea units were given general labels that described that unit's

content. And lastly, the labels were compared and compressed to create general categories of responses.

Results: RQ #1: What are the most important beliefs you want students to leave with concerning your course?

Nine categories of beliefs about the course were discovered. They were, in order of popularity: Want students to believe course will be challenging (8 responses); Want students to believe class will be fun, exciting, interesting (7 responses); Want students to believe course will be useful/relevant (6 responses); Want students to believe they can learn and expand their knowledge base (6 responses); Want students to believe the course will be worthwhile in general (4 responses); Want students to believe course will be manageable (3 responses); Want students to understand importance of rules (2 responses); Want students to realize they will get to know others in course (1 response); and Want students to realize their work will be recognized (1 response). "Carrie", one of the experienced TAs interviewed, displayed a number of the above categories with the following response:

"I want them to believe that this is a worthwhile course -- that it's not a blow-off course. That's probably the biggest thing I encounter with them -- that this is something, you know, something that I take seriously so I expect them to take (it) seriously. That if they think it's a blow off course then they shouldn't take it -- but also -- um -- I realize speaking isn't easy for everybody, you know, and I don't expect -- I'm not gonna 'ream' on them if they make mistakes -- but, you know, then we can have fun too.

RQ #2: What do you do on the first day of class to contribute directly to these beliefs?

Eleven categories were found when looking at how instructors planned to convey beliefs about the course to students. They are: Will explain policies, objectives, assignments, format, expectations, etc. (16); Will tell students they will have input (4); Will run activity (3); Talk about own experience as a student (2); Talk about my availability (2); In the way I present myself (2); Explain that they will meet new people and be exposed to new ideas (2); Will establish relevance to students' present and future (2); Will build respect (1); Will motivate them (1). "Aaron's" response to this question is interesting because he chooses strategies that he hopes will

convey his class is not like "other" classes he experienced as an undergraduate:

"It's the -- it's the time I spend on expectations...that initial...10-12 minutes of class is where I will lay on the line what kind of class it is. I also talk about, um, why it's different than other classes...In this class you will get a smattering of things that will really cause you to stop and think and in other classes you might get a concentration of one area that will cause you -- but in this class -- you also hear a lot of things you couldn't care less about -- but more often than not, um, it will spark your interest -- plus the fact that in my class you will get to meet and talk (to) and know 25 other people -- you will, by the end of the semester, you will be calling people by their first names -- you will see these people at bars and have something to say to them and I, you know, and I remember from taking the class when I was an undergrad that was something really unique that I got out of it. It wasn't like you see people whose faces you know, it was different -- you really, I mean, you've talked to these people, you've hung out, we've created a dialogue in the class and, uh, I don't want to go as far as saying you'll meet your best friends in here -- 'cause that's just corny -- but, um, you will meet people and you'll expand in a lot of ways that other classes wouldn't -- just wouldn't facilitate."

RQ #3: What are the most important beliefs you want students to leave with concerning you, as an instructor?

Seven categories were discovered that dealt with beliefs the TAs wanted the students to leave with regarding themselves as teachers. They were: I am fair, open, respectful (9); I am available to help (9); I have high expectations (7); I am not a push-over (4); I deserve respect (3); I am competent (3); and I enjoy teaching (2). "Kelly's" (a new TA) response to this question was fairly typical, particularly of the novice TAs:

"That I'm fun and they can talk to me. I'm approachable and I want them to want to come to my class -- I want them to be excited because they think that, you know, that it's gonna (be) a positive class that they're gonna (have) as much say in (it) as I do and that I'm democratic and open to their suggestions and beliefs."

RQ #4: What do you do on the first day of class to contribute directly to these beliefs?

Thirteen categories were found to describe what strategies TAs would use to convey their beliefs about themselves to students. They are: My nonverbals (7); Talk about policies, etc. (7); Tell them I'm approachable (5); Talk about course expectations (5); Tell them this information in general (4); Make them feel comfortable in class (3); Explain my background (2); Tell them they will be a part of decision-making (2); Tell them I'm fun, but still the

teacher (2); Field questions from students (1); By being well-prepared (1); By being honest with students (1). "Melanie" (a novice TA) offered the following response:

"I think mostly I would hope to find a balance between being firm and yet, you know, um, supportive -- and there for (them), you know, let them know that I care but, um, I think a lot would have to do with just demeanor. Because, I mean, there's a lot you can say -- but if you intimidate them while you're saying it, it's not gonna matter."

DISCUSSION

The first day of class is too important to waste by merely calling roll, handing out a syllabus and sending students on their way. The first day of a college course offers an instructor the opportunity to set the stage for the entire semester and engage students in the course material. Despite the importance of the first day of class, very little research regarding this topic exists. There is a body of prescriptive literature that provides common-sense advice to instructors, however it is becoming increasingly important to explore first-day teaching issues in a more rigorous fashion.

This paper attempts to provide a first step for exploring first day strategies. Twelve teaching assistants (five veteran, seven novice) were interviewed regarding the beliefs they wanted their students to leave with on the first day. The TAs were also asked what strategies they planned to undertake to help in conveying these beliefs. The TAs were able to answer all four of the questions and relevant categories were created based on their responses.

TAs seemed most concerned that students leave the classroom the first day believing that the course will be challenging, fun, useful and a way to expand their knowledge base. TAs hoped that students would also leave the classroom believing that they, as an instructor, were fair, available to help, and had high expectations.

When asked how they would convey the above beliefs about the course to students on the first day, TAs claimed that they would actually just explain the relevant policies and assignments to them. In order to convey the above beliefs about themselves as instructors to students, TAs claimed they would

achieve their goals through the use of their nonverbal cues, by talking about course policies, by explaining they are approachable, and by discussing their expectations for the students.

This study is merely a beginning in a very long, but worthwhile process. In the future it would prove beneficial to compare what TAs say they will do on the first day as opposed to what they actually do. It would also be interesting to see if instructor strategies are actually effective. For example, do students actually leave with the beliefs the instructor has set out to convey? One might also look at the difference in responses across gender and between veteran and novice instructors. For example, in the above study it was found that novice instructors often became very nervous when asked to respond to the questions. Often they had not actually thought through how they would accomplish their goals and had only focused on overall beliefs. This problem of instilling nervousness in new TAs could be averted by offering training tips or general advice to the novice instructor following the interview.

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