First Impressions: Using a Flexible First Day Activity to Enhance Student Learning and Classroom Management

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Every class has a first day, yet many professors only read the syllabus to students rather than more intentionally leveraging the day to set up understandings that enhance learning and classroom management. Logic, experience, and research indicate that it is not just content expertise that matters to student experience and learning: it is also the environment that the faculty member creates—ideally engaging students as active participants. This paper will increase awareness of the importance of planning and performing the first day, review alternative first day approaches in terms of the primary goals they satisfy — content connection, interpersonal connection, student face needs, motivation, and expectation setting — and provide a detailed outline, and rationale, for a flexible, transdisciplinary first day exercise, the Three Boards Activity, that offers benefits to both the students and faculty member and is adaptable to any size class. Handled thoughtfully, the first day can do more than convey basic information: it can also set the tone and model optimal attitudes and behavior for the classroom.

Much has been said about the value of active learning, yet how many take advantage of its benefits on the first day of class? Whether one uses their own personal experiences and those of their immediate colleagues as data or follows the literature on what faculty do on the first day of class and its effectiveness, it appears the opportunities to instruct and inspire for key learning are often squandered. This is unfortunate given that engagement on the first day has potential to ripple throughout the course and to connect to larger institutional concerns like retention (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009; Provitera-McGlynn 2001). The expert observations of experienced teachers and a slowly growing literature from interviews with outstanding professors (Iannarelli, Bardsley, and Foote, 2011) to "how-to" reports and quantitative studies support the potential for the first day to make a lasting impression (Laws, Apperson, Buchert, & Bregman, 2010). Thus, it behooves faculty to take control of, and optimize, those impressions.

Despite evidence that what occurs on the first day or in the first week of class matters (Hermann, Foster, & Hardin, 2010), the first day is often used just to read the syllabus to convey course objectives and policies. This is better than simply passing out the syllabus and then dismissing class, but simply reading aloud or otherwise lecturing the students — even if it is on how they can succeed in class (Eves & Redd, 2014) — can convey that this will be another "shut up and listen" class where the teacher expounds and the students listen passively. Even if one has a lecture-based class and having students simply listen on Day One models much of what will happen later, there are still more productive ways to begin to increase the likelihood of *active* listening and to cultivate an environment of engagement and discourse that one presumably desires from students throughout the term. While faculty might habitually offer, and students might report preferring (Henslee, Burgess, & Buskist, 2006), the conveyance of basic course information, first day activities need not be limited to organizational information, nor do they need to be solely the opposite, say, only a fun ice-breaker where personal information is exchanged.

Initial attempts at quantifying what happens on first days or what students might prefer indicate that students like an overview of the course and some detailed requirements (Bassett & Nix, 2011; Henslee et al., 2006; Perlman & McCann, 1999). Some of that is logical to offer, despite it being in the syllabus, but student reports of what they prefer should not be prescriptive as many would also prefer to not have to take the course at all or prefer to be handed an easy "A" grade. It is conceivable, if not likely, that students report this simply because that is what they generally experience and are not — by virtue of experience, and possibly maturity or ability to perspective-take — aware of well-crafted alternatives. Yes, students will want to know some about the content of the course, but they already will have some sense of what the class is about from the title, whether it is a required or an elective course, presumably having seen the books, rumors from friends, etc. Indeed, giving them a sense of the depth or breadth of the content — some of the big concepts or questions that the course will address — is useful. Yet there is arguably something more important on their minds that they cannot get from titles and books. As common sense, experience, and literature supports, the student first day agenda includes determining "what the professor is like, who the other students are, how instructors and students will behave, and what climate will prevail" (Erickson & Strommer, 1991, p. 87).

Indeed, sizing up their faculty members and how they personally will integrate naturally into the class — or need to grow to "fit in" — is key, especially when most students can, in theory at least, take a particular

class with a different professor or possibly at a later time if they do not like who they meet that day. What an individual student looks for in a faculty member likely varies, as some prefer "easier" or "harder" teachers, some tolerate harshness better than others, and some may see kindness as a sign of weakness. But all students are likely interested in how invested the teacher is in them and the material, as well as what "style" of class they are getting into. Logic tells us this, and, for instance, Wilson (2006) found that evaluations of a professor's attitude toward students are positively related to student motivation, learning, and overall ratings of the instructor. Thus, thinking through how we as professors are perceived at the start is worthwhile.

The first week of classes, and especially the first day, can help faculty and students alike have a more successful term if those initial interactions are used well to establish a productive tone, set norms for optimal attitudes and behavior, and help underscore the meaningfulness of the course material to individuals, the field, and/or the world. That can all be done while correcting misperceptions about the course and preparing the students for the work that lies ahead. Building rapport with and between the students creates the potential for a bond that conveys, "There's something here worth learning with an interesting group of people," rather than, "This is going to be another boring/hard/useless class I have to get through with other people that probably feel the same way." Consider what tone you set. Is it accidental or intentional? Psychology researchers found that even a brief first day intervention to increase motivation did, in fact, increase student perceptions of course interest and instructor caring (McGinley & Jones, 2014). In a different vein, Kaplan, Stachowski, and Bradley-Geist (2012) found that students who engaged in a demonstration involving making personality (dis)agreements on the first day of introductory and personality psychology courses later performed more accurately on relevant material than students who did not engage in that first day activity.

Whether working with traditional younger students (currently the Post-Millennials or Generation Z, with the Gen Alpha close behind), returning students, or non-traditional adult learners, people are busy and distracted, and they may approach the class with a consumerist attitude and be less practiced in taking responsibility for their own learning. Many are accustomed to being connected to technology and multi-tasking, so if the first day is a snore, it could undermine their interest and motivation for the coming days. If it is dynamic, it conveys the possibility of that energy being there in future days such that even if the class is of necessity, in general, dense or plodding at times, the first day can buy some grace in their attitudes toward the teacher and the material. Similarly, the more compassionate or

competitive among the students may participate more later to "help the teacher out" based on the attitude they formed of the instructor on the first day.

Given the logic and benefits of making productive use of the first day, it behooves us to reflect on what we do with the first day and why. Are we acting out of habit or modeling after other neutral to ineffective first day examples we've seen? Might we choose out of laziness or some sort of fear or shyness? Do we do what we do simply because we don't have any better ideas about what else to do or how? Rather than sharing one's bio or reading the syllabus aloud—both of which are items the students can read in detail outside of class, and even be quizzed on Day Two or online—the time and attention should be diverted to making the class mostly about the student(s) and the material.

Beyond presenting discipline-specific content on the first day, faculty have used a number of different alternative first day activities to enhance learning and classroom management. While there is a wide range of activities, they all have in common that they attempt to create a fertile learning environment, and they attempt to make the material more interesting for the students and thus motivate the students to engage the material on a deeper level. How they achieve this varies. Some approaches attempt to establish stronger connections amongst students and/or between students and faculty. Others aim to provide more meaningful connections between the subject matter and the students.

Productive Alternative Examples of First Day Approaches

While it remains commonplace for many faculty members to limit the first day of instruction to handing out the syllabus and granting early dismissal, there is a growing trend for faculty to take greater advantage of the first day by engaging the students in a variety of activities. Some of these activities are discipline-based and stress content while others concentrate on setting up understandings that enhance learning and classroom management. They engage students as active participants and variously establish a productive tone, motivate students, set norms for optimal attitudes and behavior, help underscore the meaningfulness of the material to individuals and society, and create connections between people in the class. Naturally, there will be some overlap in the categories below—they cannot be wholly discrete—but seeing potential first day activities through these filters will build understanding and underscore how the proposed activity meets several of the goals at once as, presumably, most professors are able to take on the challenge of how to balance creating a safe, even nurturing, community while maintaining sufficient rigor, instructor credibility, and attention on the "face needs" of students, such as feeling competent and included (Gaffney & Whitaker, 2015).

Primarily Content Based

Making more meaningful connections between material and students is often accomplished by engaging students in a demonstration or puzzle that is designed to involve the processes and concepts that they will study. For example, Bennett (2004) had students in a psychology statistics class each announce their date of birth until a match was found with two students born on the same month and day. It turns out that with classes of 30+ students the probability of a match is .75. In a physics course that involved substantial quantitative reasoning, Gaffney and Whitaker (2015) asked students Fermi Questions on the first day. Fermi questions involve providing approximate quantitative solutions to problems for which it is either very difficult or impossible to provide an exact solution such as, "How long would it take to walk from the classroom to a named city?" Another way to make material more meaningful is to show how it can be used in practical situations. Gallia (1996) presented an overview of all of the important concepts to be covered in an undergraduate nursing pharmacology course. After the overview, each concept was presented in turn together with an example of a nursing practice situation in which the concept could be applied. Examples like these highlight how the material can be made more interesting, or at least how it will be useful later.

Some faculty get other people involved in making the first day memorable while still introducing meaningful content. For example, LoSchiavo, Buckingham, and Yurak (2002) had a confederate enter the social psychology classroom prior to the actual instructor. The confederate asked the students to fill out an information sheet and then to stand up and face the back of the room. The confederate then left, and the professor entered the room and asked the students why they were standing and facing the back of the room. The surprised students reported that they were told to do so by the person who was previously in the room at the time and who they assumed was the instructor. The professor then went on to discuss the concepts of obedience, conformity, and deception which were experienced in the activity, concepts to which the students often assume they are immune. Similarly, Higgins (2001), a sociologist, enlisted a student ahead of time (unbeknownst to the others) to behave "deviantly" to foster discussion and connection. Relatedly, Dorn (1987), and Winston (2007) offered insight on how using the first day itself can anchor content, showing how common first day occurrences, such as the act of strangers coming together and self-introductions, can be leveraged to demonstrate a critical analysis of this ordinary experience, sensitizing students to a sociological lens facilitating their "perception, consideration, and ultimately, understanding" of new material (Winston, 2007, p. 161; See also Broulliette & Turner, 1992).

Lest one argue that doing a meaningful content-based first day activity is less possible in certain disciplines, consider from chemistry that there are examples of productive first day approaches for an upper-division undergraduate physical chemistry class that uses the first day to introduce the development of macroscopic, molecular-level, and mathematical models (Bruce, 2013); for a lab course that uses an activity to introduce concepts related to thermal expansion of liquids as well as skills in precise measuring, graphing, note-taking, and analysis (Padgett & MacGowan, 2013); and a general chemistry II course where a brief Jeopardy-style game is used for part of the first day to test/remind students about prerequisite material so they can learn expectations and more quickly connect previously learned material with what is coming up next (Eves & Redd, 2014). From another science, there is an example from a biology course (Metzger, 2013) where playing an organism/key theme related card game sets the stage. From history, Mugleston (1989) outlines how to touch on substantial matters in history—like women's history and black history—to intrigue the often "captive" audiences found in history classes. From economics, Helmy (2016) uses a lottery on the first day that forms the foundation of a structured assignment throughout the term. From communication, Kelly and Davis (2011) offer a way of introducing meta-theoretical assumptions for a research methods course. The list could continue, but, as mentioned above, there is more to consider doing on Day One than primarily content-based approaches.

Primarily Relationship Building

Whereas content-based first day activities are designed to facilitate stronger connections between course material and students, activities in this section are more focused on establishing connections amongst the students and between the students and the faculty member to build community. For instance, Foster and Herman (2011) used a reciprocal interview technique to build such connections. After handing out the course syllabus the instructor divided the students into small groups in which they discussed the syllabus and other aspects of the course. One student from each group was then selected to interview the instructor regarding questions that arose during group discussion. Following this activity students reported feeling more comfortable in approaching the instructor and more comfortable participating in the class. McGinley and Jones (2014) tested two first day alternatives in their psychology classes by dividing students into control and experimental groups. Students in the control group were told to read the syllabus and were then dismissed while students in the experimental group were partitioned into small groups and were asked to discuss

perceptions about the class, feelings about the class, how the class relates to short- and long-term goals, and topics that interest them in the class. Both perceptions of course interest and ratings of instructor caring were higher in the experimental than the control grou In a very different approach, Armstrong (2008) developed a method for establishing connections and building community in her large human development and education lecture classes. On the first day of her class she left time for students to write her a letter sharing something about themselves, including anything they felt she should know, and why they are taking the course. Stopping there would have at least let students feel better known by the leader of the class, but she went further by weaving non-controversial information she learned from those letters into her lectures throughout the course, as a matter of relevance, as a means to reduce anonymity, as a way to show them each attention, and, in essence, as a method of introducing students to each other.

Addressing Face Needs

The common expression of "saving face" pertains to people typically not wanting to look stupid or incompetent in front of others, thus taking steps to avoid it even if they did do something stupid or incompetent or taking steps on behalf of others to help save them such embarrassment (see Goffman, 1955, 1959). Thus, beyond introducing students to content on Day One, some instructors aim on the first day to build student self-efficacy. For instance, Gaffney and Whitaker (2015) explicitly set out to address "face" needs of students by fostering a supportive learning community on the first day of their physics courses with the intention to make students feel competent and included. Sometimes the concerns with face are very evident and tied to the class content, like when a professor helps students reduce fears around speech anxiety on the first day of a public speaking class (Pulaski, 2007), and other times they are more diffuse, like when a professor of German aims to create enthusiasm for the language and culture in such a way that intentionally allows the students to see themselves as able learners with existing knowledge and skill upon which to draw (Bjornstad, 2004).

Setting Expectations / Increasing Motivation

Whether one uses a primarily content-based approach that is student-centered or teacher-centered, another facet to consider is what behaviors one is modeling and hopes to instill in the students starting from Day One. Using the first day to engage students in some of the behaviors they will be employing to accomplish semester goals, rather than waiting until

later, makes good use of the time and helps set expectations for the course and, in some cases, for the field in which they might later work. For example, if one wants question-and-answer as part of each class day in a lecture class, then pose questions and/or take questions to create such interactions on Day One. If one intends students to interact with one another, then the professor can provide an opportunity to do so on the first day, as well as explicitly model the attitudes and behaviors that he or she wants to govern those interactions. For instance, one might point out what *ad hominem* criticisms are and that they won't be accepted as a basis of argument in this class. Or if making the students more comfortable asking empathetic questions is a goal—for the class and to underscore the importance of it for certain professional settings—then one can model empathetic questioning in relation to course expectations on the first day. Empathetic questioning has been shown to help patients feel more comfortable during attempts to elicit important information, as medical faculty have demonstrated on the first day of clinical training with new M.D.s dealing with real patients (Hoch, 1993).

Some teachers use popular culture to situate the course while setting expectations for the class in general and modeling or pointing out useful behaviors. For instance, Koval (2013) reports that 91.6 percent of his sample was more interested in the course, and all reported to understand the class expectations better, after his first day role-playing and problem-solving activity based on the television show called *24* that works for his legal environment class. Other professors capitalize on the performance aspect of teaching, for at least part of the first class, to highlight that students also have expectations beyond those the professor sets. For example, Johnson (1996), an English teacher, entered and started class three different ways on the first day—as a demanding former Marine, as an "anything goes" Valley Girl (a stereotype of southern California youth that started in the 1980s), and as a well-intentioned, pragmatic professor—to engender discussion on expectations. Similarly, a botanist chose to start his courses wearing full academic regalia to drive home points he made, through a combination of lecture and demonstration, about perspectives on education, research, credibility, and trust in a field, as well as how certain class behaviors build trust amongst classmates and with the professor (Ribbens, 2013).

One need not be a thespian to realize that thinking through one's performance on Day One can be helpful, as can be thinking of how to get the audience involved in the act. Whether based on short- or long-term experience with classes or anecdotal, qualitative, or more formal quantitative or experimental methods, evidence supports that better/positive first day experiences ripple through the course. For example,

Wilson and Wilson (2007) report a study in which the class is divided into two sections. Both sections are shown a 15.5 minute video of a professor covering information in the class syllabus. For the positive group the professor was friendly and spoke with emotion while for the negative group the professor covered the material avoiding emotional tone. Students shown the positive video reported higher motivation for the course and received significantly higher grades at the end of the term than the group that received the negative video. Similarly, Hermann and colleagues (2010) found that conducting a reciprocal interview technique during the first day resulted in students reporting having greater clarity regarding their course responsibilities and receiving more support from their instructor than students not receiving the technique. Of course, students will not typically realize that a professor who facilitates a thoughtful first day activity is doing so, in part, to help students with their grades or to earn more positive regard for themselves, but some activities make these intentions more clear. For instance, Gagnon (Sautter, Gagnon, & Mohr, 2007), a marketing and hospitality faculty member, relates first day activities that one might use for any class where the majors are considering pursuing a career in the field or the faculty member wishes to emphasize the value of a class. Gagnon anchors his and his students' success in class by starting with asking questions from the final exam and moving into what recruiters look for during job interviews. He also calculates with them how much per minute the students are paying to be in that class, and students are given an opportunity to interview him for his fitness to be their professor.

An All-Encompassing and Flexible First Day Activity for Any Discipline

The previous review provides evidence of the potential inherent in the first-class day, potential that should not be squandered. Any thoughtful attention paid to the first impressions made on Day One is better than reading the syllabus aloud and dismissing the class, but an activity that addresses many of the goals at once is better still. The exercise that is outlined below and detailed in the Appendix — the Three Boards Activity — is an "all of the above" approach to starting the semester off effectively. Relating to common first day goals discussed above, this activity allows for the interactive communication of basic course information and expectations while establishing interpersonal connections amongst the students and with the professor. Along the way it models behavior and it starts to address face needs as the students participating in a low-stakes activity on Day One can feel more efficacious about participating thereafter. It works for any discipline, in general, and

one part of it is especially well-suited to adapt to the content-specific needs of a given course. Overall, the students get what they need, including a strong sense of the professor's personality and standards. That, paired with the overall positive tone this activity sets, enhances classroom management.

In the sections that follow the Three Boards Activity is described in sufficient detail to allow the reader to understand the basics and to demonstrate how the activity meets the goals of a first day activity listed above. While the overview description here offers a clear presentation of the activity, it does not cover some of the details that are useful when actually using it, thus the script and process notes are in the Appendix in order to allow practitioners who use the activity in their classes to anticipate questions and avoid pitfalls that might arise. While the script and process notes offered in the Appendix are from a first-year honors seminar, capped at 21 students, it will explain how the same exercise is easily adaptable to much larger classes. Similarly, while this example class script is based on a course that the department faculty agreed must require frequent and substantive discussion from the students, and less than 30% of class time spent in lecture per class, it will be made clear how to adapt it to other class types, like to "lecture" classes. In terms of format, the outline is designed for face-to-face classes or hybrid classes that first meet in person, yet it can be adapted to synchronous online courses with relative ease and at least the concepts gleaned for asynchronous ones.

Three Boards Activity

During the activity, time is allowed for general comments, but not enough time that student attention drifts, then moves to the professor offering, one at a time, a specific prompt shown on the white or black board (or even a flip chart) to which the students will respond in turn around the room. There are ultimately three prompts done in turn, hence the "Three Boards Activity." The students respond to each prompt in a whip-like fashion—offering only a word or two, not long comments—while their responses are written on the board. In a smaller class, of up to about 30 students, all students can participate to each prompt for the boards. After that there is a diminishing return of shared information, or it may be too time-consuming for all to participate, especially if it is a 50-minute class. Therefore, in a larger class it is preferable for only a sub-set of students to participate per prompt. A few different ways for selecting sub-sets effectively are detailed in the Appendix. The first prompt is about their concerns, which gets many of the students' fears and negative assumptions expressed. The second prompt elicits their hopes, goals, or intentions, which turns the focus to what is possible to learn in class in

terms of content and/or process. The professor can then use what the students generated on these two boards to share with them a fair amount of information typically found in a syllabus, as well as clarify what they meant, and set aside or emphasize the reality of certain concerns while modeling a positive attitude and promoting good communication skills (paraphrasing, asking clarifying questions, etc.).

While the first two prompts apply well across any type of course, the third prompt can adjust to the specific needs of the class. The script in the Appendix demonstrates using this prompt with a seminar-style class, so the prompt invites students' ideas about what makes for an effective group discussion community. If one is teaching a lab class instead, the third prompt might ask what they consider safe lab behaviors. If one is teaching a class on research methods, one might prompt for what skills, ethics, or mindsets they think are useful in that endeavor, etc. Whatever context is set—whether effective discussion guidelines, lab practices, or something else—the professor can then process with the class what is reflected on the board and offer affirmative responses, like, "Yes, this is indeed important," where appropriate, or offer corrections, deletions, and additions when a problematic item has been offered or something important has been omitted. These corrections can be handled either by fiat or by asking questions to facilitate thinking and discussion to lead to the best answer. Regardless of what one chooses to do with the last prompt/board, it is another opportunity to address class expectations and/or course content in an interactive way while attending to some of the face needs of students as they build their confidence and sense of inclusion in the class.

It is evident, then, that this activity, or variants thereof, can allow the professor to address a wide range of recommended first-day goals through communicating expectations, acknowledging common concerns and uncovering students' intrinsic motivations. In addition, if done with reasonable sensitivity and a neutral to positive tone, it can address face needs and build relationships. Content, key skills, or awareness related to the course can be communicated while facilitating all of the boards and most clearly in regard to the third board, depending on how one adapts the prompt(s). People learn by doing (Hackathorn, Solomon, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Garczynski, 2011), so selecting a prompt relevant to what the students will be doing in the class, or career related to the field, is most useful. In the context of the overview offered above, and related to the example script in the Appendix, for a discussion-based seminar course it is especially useful to get students speaking on the first day to underscore the expectation for that and build their belief in their ability to do so. Regardless of whether one teaches a large or small lecture course, in any discipline, this exercise works well, in part, because it goes quickly, without turning the class time over to groups or pairs, as it is often most useful for the teacher to still "hold the reins" at the start to be sure key information is conveyed on the all-important first day.

Discussion

The Three Boards Activity can aid in setting the students up well for a successful experience in class and can ease or eliminate classroom management issues. Having done this activity in almost every class I have taught in person (and variants online) in traditional disciplines and interdisciplinary classes of different levels and sizes for two decades, I can attest to its utility in creating an atmosphere that inclines students toward attentive, on-task, cooperative behavior and toward evidence-based and respectful participation. For instance, in a reciprocal college mentoring program at my institution, one colleague visited my classroom much earlier than typical—in Week 2 of class—and reported being stunned that the class was already performing at a level that he found it usually takes professors half the term to build. I credit that to a successful Day One and immediate and continued modeling from there forward to support their reaching the high bars set for them, which is a benefit to them, certainly, but also makes it such that serious classroom management issues or grade disputes are minimized, which is a benefit to the faculty member and administrators.

Doing an activity like this does require letting go of some control and a fair amount of thinking on one's feet as one solicits and processes the board comments, but control is maintained by redirecting all comments to one's pedagogical ends, and the information shared in response to student comments comes naturally as it is a more fluid version of what used to be "scripted" and read aloud from the syllabus. This activity also allows the students to see the professor's personality, get a sense of how difficult the course will be, understand class standards, and learn some tips for success—all matters students report wanting some information about on Day One (Bassett & Nix, 2011). Whether the students like what they see or not cannot be predicted, but at least they are clearer on who and what stands before them. Additionally, this activity builds a kind of camaraderie that can be useful to refer back to on those days when student behavior is a little off-track or their engagement is waning. Similarly, referring back to the concerns, hopes, and class guidelines the students generated can help make certain points, establish continuity, or offer an opportunity for reflection. For instance, it can help the students see how much they've grown during the semester. In sum, whether or not one tries *this* activity, careful thought about what occurs on Day One is for the benefit of the students and faculty alike.

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Appendix
Cracking the Whip: The Three Boards Activity

Sample Script, Rough Timing, and Process Notes

Pre-Class Emails

I email students twice before classes start, typically once seven to ten days ahead and once three days in advance of class, reminding them what to get from the bookstore, and that Day One matters so I look forward to seeing them then. Legg and Wilson (2009) found that an email from the professor one week in advance of class enhances student motivation and attitudes and aids in retention. In my experience, the email allows for less time to be spent on the first day on anything mentioned in the email.

Day One Welcome

Script: 00– 01 minute
Welcome to _____ (class). I'm Dr. ____. If you are in the wrong class, let me help you get to the right place. If you are where you belong, please join me in turning off your cell phones, laptops, smart watches, Google glasses, etc., and put them away. We'll need to focus on the material and each other in the 1 hour and 15 minutes we have together twice a week, so we'll not have out devices that can be a distraction to you or others. You won't need to worry about time either, as I will keep my phone out to keep track of time when I don't wear a watch or when the wall clock is incorrect.

Process Notes: In terms of manner and tone, I maintain a professional distance but aim to be approachable and "human." No matter my mood, I make an effort—especially on the first day—to present myself with an interested expression, something of a smile on my face, and some positive energy in my voice.

Adaptation for a Large Class: Even in large classes I ask for items to be put away and set the expectation for undivided attention. If one needs or allows students to use such devices in class on other days, I recommend that they be required to put them away at least on *Day One* so they participate fully in this activity.

Roll-call

Script: 02- 04 minutes

If you prefer to be called by a variant of your name, or a different name altogether, please let me know. If you prefer we use a different gender pronoun for you feel free to let me know publicly now or privately later.

Process Notes: I pay attention during roll call and make an effort to encode their names in my mind. I then try to use their names during the coming board exercises to model that I expect them to as well. I ask that they correct any inaccurate attempts and I point out that this demonstrates that it is okay to be wrong in class and we'll help each other get it right.

Adaptation for a Large Class: For unusually large lecture classes, one might not have the time or inclination to do a verbal roll-call. But class lengths vary so it still might be do-able that once to help reduce the feeling of anonymity students in large classes might feel, plus the professor can at least begin to learn a few names or at least better recognize the faces of the students. One could consider the pros and cons for their particular class and students and adjust the length of time spent on one or more of the boards, as discussed below, as well. At the very least, however, I do recommend some form of roll be taken via perhaps collecting an information sheet to learn about them as individuals, or, more minimally, a sheet asking for their printed name and signature can be passed around to later compare to the roster. Some sort of accountability for being there sets the stage that attendance matters.

Opening Overview

Script: 05 – 10 minutes

Professors will vary in what they do the first day of class. Some will read you the syllabus—or just hand it to you—and dismiss class. In this class we'll go over some of the standard syllabus information but we won't do it that way. You are in college now so I trust you can and will take the initiative to read the syllabus. You should do that in all your classes to know what you are getting into, to put due dates in your calendar and such.

Thus, I assign and expect you to read the syllabus online and ask me questions at the next class if you have them. To help ensure you do read the syllabus, a syllabus quiz is due online the night before our next class meets. You'll also do a brief discussion board post to acknowledge that you read the participation guidelines and have identified a good habit you have as well as set a goal for an area in which you want to improve. What you put into the class is what you'll get out of it.

Before we part ways today, you'll know the books for class, have your reading for next time, and have an initial sense of the class, expectations, etc., as we use the white boards to generate three sets of items about which we will talk.

Process Notes: I briefly review the books they'll need, their cost, whether or not I expect physical books or accept e-book usage, etc., and emphasize that they will indeed need to do the readings and can't get by on just coming to class and listening.

Course Overview

Script and Process Abstract: 11-17 minutes

I introduce the teaching assistant (s) with respect and a sense of humor, and remind them where to find our office hours, show examples of a key, on-going assignment for my class to anticipate questions I have learned are typically asked about it. And I explain the interdisciplinary nature of the class. For instance I point out some of the big, enduring questions we will engage, or I ask them to offer what some of those questions might be, and share why it will be useful to their academic, civic, and professional futures, or to their existence as human beings.

Concerns / Worries / Fears – Board 1

Script: 18 – 25 minutes

This course is discussion based and much of your final course grade will be based on participation so we will get the ball rolling by having you each speak briefly today, and along the way you will get to know each other a bit and we will touch on some syllabus-related items as we get you thinking and talking.

We'll start with your concerns. Perhaps you've heard a rumor about me, or are worried about the nature of the class, the college, or the field. Maybe you have some doubts or insecurities about your skills or foundation coming in here. So think about a worry, concern, or fear you have about this class or being in school this term, but I'm not looking for fears like of snakes, spiders, or heights! This isn't a group therapy session.

We're going to do a "whip" around the room, meaning we'll just quickly move from one person to the next for a word or two to write on the board. A whip moves fast…meaning we don't need your life story, a paragraph, or even a sentence. Ideally, I just want a word or two that will help us create a bullet-point list on the board. So when we get to you, please state a concern, fear, or worry. Please don't just echo each other…you won't do well in this class if you just say "I agree" or "that too" so if you have the same fear, think of another or dig deeper to get at a different aspect. Let's start with you.

Process Notes: As they call out concerns I write the words or phrases on the board under a header called "concerns, worries, fears." I don't address the worries as they call them out unless it is to shape them toward the kind of concerns appropriate to the task. I just write on the board as quickly as I can, usually repeating what they said verbatim or in my own words. I sometimes turn to the room to keep an eye on them, otherwise I might keep my back to them much of the time and just say "thank you" and "next" and keep writing.

I might occasionally pause and ask "do you mean x or y?" to clarify but, depending on what it is, it can be better to wait until everyone has had their turn to reduce distraction or accidentally stealing someone else's reason. Whether I ask a question immediately or wait, I model polite inquiry and paraphrasing, which I point out at some point in the class as skills they'll want to practice and use in this course.

If a student says "I have no concerns" I say something like, "That's good, but it is unusual…so dig deeper, think more widely, and I'll come back to you." Then I move on and come back to them after every 2 or 3 students until they offer something. I don't let them off the hook too easily as, again, I'm setting the expectation that they will need to find a way to contribute.

Similarly, if a student says "I have that same concern" or offers something essentially the same as what someone else said, the first time I usually underline the word/phrase I had put up there before and say, "So we see this is a shared concern, okay, yet let's not have too much simple repetition as there are plenty of potential concerns to think about as you enter a new class or endeavor." Then I move on. I discourage repetition by reminding them that they probably have something else on their list or, if it happens more than once, by saying what I do to the "no concerns" student about coming back to them. It depends on where we are in the whip (it is harder to come up with unique concerns the longer the whip) and the tone/attitude with which they offer their comment. Is it genuine blank-minded repetition? Or are they being truculent somehow? I politely deal with either to set the expectation of them needing to "step it up" in this class. I remind them that in a discussion class saying "what she said" isn't usually enough to do well, so while it might be okay today it won't be going forward. While I don't necessarily want them to manufacture concerns, I do want them to think more widely about themselves or imagine what could become a concern for them or someone else.

Adaptation for a Large Class: When considering this procedure for use in a large lecture class, or even in a class over 25 or 30 people, there is a point of diminishing returns in trying to have each student participate on each board as there are only so many concerns, hopes, etc. to bring up, and if there is a shorter class period it might not be prudent to attempt to have all students participate on each board. A simple adaptation involving sampling the class for responses permits the three boards to be completed for even large lecture classes. Even though each student might not verbally participate in each of the boards they will be attending to what the other students offer.

For instance, a reasonable choice would be to start the whip with X number of seats/rows in a large class and after a portion of the class has participated—perhaps a third of the class, or maybe only 20 students or so, or whenever fresh ideas seem less forthcoming—then stop work on that board. Introduce the second board and continue the whip from the cut point (or start at the other end of the class, to keep them alert) with the next X rows/students contributing to it, stopping again at a set or intuited point. Finally, proceed through the room as the next X rows/students offer content for the third board. Alternatively, after each board one could ask if anyone (not in order of the whip) wants to offer another idea that isn't already represented on that board before moving forward. Or pose that question after processing all the boards.

Goals / Hopes / Intentions – Board 2

Script: 26 – 33 minutes

I'll address many of the concerns you mentioned in a few minutes and we'll see if these fears match up to reality, but let's first think about that you are in school and in this class for a reason. What do you hope to get out of it?

Whether a class is required or not required, you put yourself here by choosing to some degree or another this major, this experience, this class, time, day, and teacher. If you don't want to be here, then consider why you are in attendance. If you don't want to take a required class, consider why it is required and get into the spirit of that—or consider changing majors. I wish for you a good fit and a lot of that is up to you. If you are going to spend your time on something you might as well make it a worthwhile experience for yourself, right? Take responsibility for your actions and learning.

So regardless of why you are here, remember we aren't fully formed, perfectly able and wise people coming out of high school or college…and, trust me, I'm not either as I'm learning and improving all the time. So please think about what you hope to learn about content or process, about yourself, life, or

whatever in this class. What is a skill, hope, target, goal, intention—pick your favorite word—that you have for the time you'll spend in this class?

Let's reverse the whip and start with you where we ended last time…what do you hope to get out of this class experience?

Process Notes: As before, I write down what they offer. I tend to comment on these a bit more along the way, offering in encouraging ways how that might happen in the class, but, in general, I don't get off track. Also, what I say might come off as "harsh" when read in print but the tone in which I deliver it is "matter of fact" and more friendly than harsh, though one can never predict how any one student will interpret it.

Processing Boards 1 and 2 to Discuss Course Expectations, Policies, and More.

Script: 34 - 44 minutes

Before we move on, to our last board let's go over some of what's on these two boards. Let's see…

Let's start with concerns about papers…So what do you consider a 'long or difficult paper'? What number of pages or words? [Student(s) answer.] Oh, well, good news…by your standard the papers aren't that long! They typically are ___. But in terms of "difficult" that's subjective as that has to do with your understanding of the material and effort. Of course you will hopefully be challenged by them — as you are in college to stretch yourself, learn, build new skills — but the papers are manageable. And, by the way, if you don't know this already, sometimes a shorter paper is harder to write than a long one as you must write tightly and can't ramble on or use filler, or the like.

I see there are worries about grades in general or how I grade in particular. I don't force a curve on individual assignments or the final course grades so, yes, you all can earn an "A" if your work is truly excellent. You all have the potential for excellence but, in my experience, you may not all, for whatever reasons, earn A grades.

Either way, it is healthy to remember that getting an education should be more about learning and improving skills rather than over-focusing on grades. If you focus on the learning—if you really apply yourself to the material and instructions and use the ample resources available to help you—the grades tend to take care of themselves. While you may have a preference, it doesn't really matter whether a professor uses letter grades or a point system, just remember that the grades aren't about YOU but are assessments of work you offered in that class. That is, don't take grades personally but rather as feedback on where to learn more, study/work differently, etc. as you grow.

Process Notes: As demonstrated in the script example, I use what is put on the two boards as fodder to clarify expectations, introduce tips for success, and point out traps to avoid. I ask more detailed questions and/or offer perspectives on what's there, as well as make statements about attitudes and behaviors that are more or less helpful. This is where I weave in additional information from the syllabus or general expectations. Clearly, what comes up for your class may be different depending on your course or student body composition. Some concerns and hopes may surprise you but they generally clump together in predictable themes so you can address several at once.

Ignoring or deferring some stated concerns is alright as not everything the students bring up is germane to the course, their academic success, or general well-being. If something is particularly off-target, personal, or complex, it is reasonable to not comment on it or say "Let's talk about this one after class." Similarly, one needn't feel obligated to discuss every single concern or goal separately as if it were a to-do list. If after spending the allotted time to handling the primary concerns — and introducing any ideas the students didn't offer but should consider — one can say something like: "Let's move on for now but if there are still questions at the end of class, I'll answer a few then if time allows, or you can jot them down to remember to see if they are answered by the syllabus. They likely will be but if not, or if you need clarification, you can ask me at our next class." There rarely are any more questions.

While some student concerns are shared across any type of class, what any given professor brings up or emphasizes will vary but the format of this exercise allows a wide range of expected and unexpected concerns to arise that helps professors and students better understand each other.

Community-Creation and Discussion Guidelines – Board 3

Script: 45-60 minutes

We've addressed some individual concerns and intentions but let's go in a new direction now and think about our class as a community instead of only ourselves. As this is a discussion-based class, our goal is for interesting and meaningful class discussions that are polite, productive, and evidence-based as we build our understanding of the texts.

One can look at how some behave in the media or on talk shows to see how rapidly discussions can disintegrate, so it is important to learn how to engage in civil discourse, disagree in agreeable ways, and operate from a spirit of inquiry. In this class I want you thinking about building bridges of understanding, not walls of arrogant self-righteousness.

So let's generate ideas about what helps make for a healthy discussion community from your perspective…let's do the whip around the room again and have you offer what helps create a safe and productive environment. Let me see where you are with this and then I'll clarify what works well and what I'd like to see in this particular class.

Process Notes: I then reverse the whip again, starting with the person I left off with before and the students offer their thoughts. I usually write these down with no comment and process them once all have contributed, but it can also work to make a few brief confirming comments or clarifying remarks as I write before stepping back to consider the board as a whole.

The key is to get the students thinking, and hear what they have to say and then shape what you want to see happen in the class. In this exercise I am not suggesting that what students offer be unequivocally used as a contract for the ground rules for the class as some faculty might. Sometimes they come up with off-target ideas or leave out key behaviors one seeks to see in class, but doing this board allows a less lecture-like way to point out what you seek and give the students some credit for some ideas, which can increase their confidence and motivation. At the same time, there is the opportunity to politely say "no" to some ideas, like "Thanks for bringing that up, but while that would be good in some classes in this one aim for more ___." As with the first two boards, I look for patterns and gaps and comment on those. I also have in mind things I will typically mention regardless of what shows up on the board— though they usually do offer something that allows me to anchor my key items to theirs.

Some typical things I bring up include making any number of subtle or not-so-subtle distinctions. For instance, there is a fine line between being confident and cocky. I point out this is a discussion class not a debate class. Disagreement is okay, and even encouraged, to help get to better understanding, but tone and intention matters. I remind them that while I do expect them to contribute to each class, good participation isn't always about quantity or speaking more than others as much as it is about the quality of content. It isn't about winning or competition but about building understanding and getting clear on, for instance, what a text means or the concept the author would want the reader to leave with rather than what a student wants to twist it into. I point out it is not an opinion-based class, though some might enter in, because while everyone has an opinion not all opinions are equally valid, thus we'll go to the text for evidence to support assertions. I encourage them to assume the best of each other. That, yes, in the heat of a discussion someone might unintentionally hurt feelings so we should learn how to handle that with grace, and while we aim to be kind to each other we would do well to learn how to "thicken" our skin too and not always react or over-react.

Note: I typically spend the last 15 minutes of a 75 minute Day One (so minutes 61-75 if this script example were to continue), in a name-learning activity with the students. I flex on this, though, sometimes saving it for Day Two, in the event I ran long on any of the three boards.

Adaptation for Content-Specific Concerns: Naturally, if the class being considered for this first day activity is not a discussion-based seminar then simply adapt the third board to the topic/prompts that is more relevant to that class. For instance, one might ask for a student-generated list of lab safety rules, research skills, ethics, active listening skills, or whatever topic fits with ground rules or guidelines needing to be established for that class. The exercise provides a forum for active interaction to confirm and correct rather than lecture about rules and reminders.

Similarly, one might still desire/expect participation in a lecture course, so one could generate a board about that or how to stay attentive in class or how to prepare for some assignment that is critical to

the class (like a portfolio show at the end of an architecture or design course about which students commonly worry from Day One) or how to engage in effective group projects (if there is one).

Alternatively, in a given class a professor may prefer to do only one or two of the three boards, depending on their content and time constraints. The concerns/hopes boards could also be combined as one, asking students to offer one or the other to comprise that one board.

Adaptation for Nervous Students: If one is concerned that the students in a given class will be too shy or timid to readily participate it can be helpful to have the students briefly write something down in response to at least the first of the three prompts you plan to use for the activity. It is best to do this before they know it will be something they offer aloud so they don't over-edit themselves at the start, especially since everyone except the first couple of students can still edit themselves while the activity proceeds.

For instance, I usually distribute a sheet of paper to collect basic information from students to help me know them better. (I ask about their favorite and most recent book and movie, where they went to high school, favorite class, major, current career hopes, etc.) While sometimes I have them complete that outside class, they usually fill it out while they wait for class to start though I don't collect them until the end. Thus, if I get a sense that a class seems on the quiet side, I sometimes have the students turn that sheet over and write their concerns, worries, or fears on the back of that sheet before I say that we'll do the whip out loud to help them have something in mind already. Allowing that extra minute or two for them to write some thoughts down first somewhere (even if is on their own paper if you choose not to collect an information sheet) builds their confidence, which helps address face needs.

Similarly, there's no sure-fire way to know the best place to start the whip but logic and observation help determine it for each class and room arrangement. The general idea is to start at one end of the room/table or the other (or some "landmarked" place) in order to keep track of where you are in the whip. Usually it doesn't matter, but sometimes it is clear that there is a particularly shy person (not making eye contact as much, fidgeting) at one end and a more out-going person at the other, so that can influence the decision. Sometimes it is better to start with the shy people so they can "get it out of the way" yet sometimes it is better to start with a more out-going person so the shy person has a few minutes to pull him or herself together. That said, if students write a brief response to at least to the first board prompt, before knowing they'll be asked to share it, that will help support their idea generation so it will be more comfortable for even the shyest student.