Case 1: The First Day of Class

Learning Goals

Support informed decisions about the first day of class by:

• Understanding the variety of decisions to be made about how to introduce oneself to students and what goes into making those decisions.
• Examining how impressions are conveyed to students both explicitly and implicitly.
• Learning about choosing activities for the first day and how those activities establish classroom norms for teaching and learning.

Introduction

The first day of class is, by definition, the initial opportunity for instructors to convey information about the content of the course as well as about the kinds of teaching and learning experiences students can expect in the course. Just like all first impressions when meeting new people, the first day can leave a lasting impression that can support a good semester. The decisions we make about what to do (and what not to do) on the first day of class send explicit and implicit messages to the people in the room. The primary goal of this case is building self-awareness about the kind of control instructors have over the messages students get from us about ourselves and about the class.

This case creates opportunities to consider the information that is conveyed both explicitly and implicitly when instructors introduce themselves and the course. In addition, there are opportunities to view a variety of first day activities and to examine the impressions they send about what being a student in the course will be like.

There are six video clips in this case that are organized into two vignettes. The first vignette contains short pieces from three different instructors as they introduce themselves on the first day of class. The second vignette contains three slightly longer clips from three other instructors. These clips are from early in the class, but after introductions, and capture the instructor’s introduction of the first course activity.
Preview Activity: Who is the instructor to students?
Reflect and make notes, then discuss with a partner, your answers to the following:

1. Think back to two or three of your favorite college teachers (in math or in another subject). Did they go by their first name? By “Doctor” or “Professor”? Why do you think they made that choice?
2. What do you know about those college teachers? What information did they divulge – why do you think they made the choice to share that information? How did the openness or privateness of your professors affect your experience as a student?

Activity 1 – Introductions
We are going to watch short pieces from three different instructors, Kitty, Joe, and Stacy. Each video clip is from the instructor’s introduction of themselves on the first day of class. In each case, students have a paper copy of the syllabus (just handed out) in front of them. Pay attention to what each person seems to be communicating about themselves and about the class. Read the discussion questions and then view the video.
Discussion Questions
1. What does each introduction *explicitly* tell the students about the instructor?
2. What do these introductions *implicitly* tell the students about these instructors?
3. For each, what do you imagine the classroom atmosphere will be later in the semester?
Post Video Follow-Up

4. Write down at least three things you want to convey in introducing yourself, either explicitly or implicitly. Note things you hope you do *not* convey.
Activity 2 – Communicating Norms

In this activity you will notice the constraints and opportunities created by various first day in-class activities. We will see examples from three more instructors: Eric, Bernadette, and Margaret. Each example comes early on the first day of class, right after introductions.

Note on Clip 2: Notice that in the second clip, Bernadette’s class uses the TI-Navigator to answer the questions on their syllabus “quiz” – this is a way for students to use a handheld calculator to enter information and respond to instructor questions; the information is sent to the instructor’s computer and can be displayed on a large screen for the whole class by the instructor (allowing for a variety of calculator display sharing and clicker-type response sharing).

First, read the discussion questions and then, as you watch, pay attention to information that seems to answer each of the questions across the top of the chart (next page).
**Discussion Question**

How do the different activities signal to the students what the instructor’s expectations are?

Suggestion: Make notes in the chart below as you watch each clip

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>What will the instructor normally do during class?</th>
<th>What will the students normally do during class?</th>
<th>How will the students and instructor normally interact during class?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Eric  
Do math | | | |
| 2. Bernadette – Calculator quiz on the syllabus | | | |
| 3. Margaret - Learning icebreaker | | | |
Reflection – Purposeful Planning
Think about a course you will teach in the future.

1. Ideally, at the end of the first day what would your students write in the table about that class meeting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>What will the students normally do during class?</th>
<th>How will the students and instructor normally interact during class?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You – Your first day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What messages do you want to send on the first day about how the course will be run?

3. What kind of activities could you engage students in that would send the desired messages?

4. What might you ask a more experienced college instructor about to get information about achieving your goals in your local institutional context? And (if it applies), what are some questions to ask a course leader/coordinator to address how to get to your goals?
Extension
1. What do you call people? In your department, what is appropriate for undergrads to call instructors? What is appropriate when grad students refer to instructors in class? When talking with faculty outside of class?

2. What is the level of structured social interaction in your department? Is there a “welcome picnic” for grad students? A weekly tea? Are there events where faculty and undergraduates get together? How similar/different are the activities for undergraduate and instructor interaction from what is in place for faculty and grad students?

3. What’s the Central Theme?
In his book, What the Best College Teachers Do, Ken Bain reports that well-regarded teachers tend to frame their courses around a central theme or a few key questions. The tersest example of this may be the introduction to a Differential Equations textbook: “This book is about predicting the future.”

   a) Think back to a course you’ve taken in which the instructor did a good job of framing the course. What was the central theme of the course? How did the clear articulation of that theme affect your learning as a student?

   b) In Eric’s Calculus class (Activity 2, Clip 1), the central theme is that Calculus is the mathematical study of change. How does the flag raising activity provide Eric with a reference point that he might use throughout the semester to reinforce this theme?

   c) What are the central themes of some of the courses you have taught? The ones you will teach?

   d) Design a first day activity that will communicate the central theme, in a way that will motivate students’ desire to learn more. Be careful to avoid technical terms which will be explained later in the course.
FIRST DAY

Clip 1 – Kitty [00:00:11.01]
2 Well, a little bit about me, I guess. I am from the South, in case you can't tell by
3 my accent, um. I grew up in Oklahoma. I lived in Louisiana for quite some time and I
4 moved here when I got married. And, I have two children. My son just started
5 kindergarten this fall and I still get a little upset when I think about that
6 (chuckle). And I have a two-year-old daughter also. I have a master's degree in
7 mathematics from the University of Arkansas and an undergraduate degree in math from
8 Southeastern Oklahoma State University, so, I'm sure all of you know that (school)
9 right off the bat (laugh). Um. If there's anything you want to know, just talk to me,
10 um. One of the things I really like for you all to do is tell me what's working and
11 tell me what's not working. So, if, for example [sorry, thanks], these are something
12 that somebody suggested to me. They're synthesis questions. And so, when you read a
13 section, it kind of helps guide you. If things like this help you, tell me. So that I
14 can try to keep doing it. If it's not working, tell me that too. So that, you know, I
15 don't try to mislead you or something. Does that make sense? Okay. All right! So. Do
16 you have questions for me? Or. What questions do you have for me? Anything?

Clip 2 – Joe [00:01:32.01]
17 So, I'm going to give a little speech and then we're going to do some
18 activities, and we'll look at the syllabus and all of that stuff, um. And then,
19 towards the end, I'll give you homework.
20 So, what should I tell you. I'm your instructor, Joe Champion. You can call me Joe,
21 or Champion, or Mr. Champion. Not Dr. Champion. I'm actually, that's why I'm here, is
22 because I am a doctoral student working on a PhD, so, someday, maybe. Yes, a question?
23 Student: No, don't worry about it.
24 Joe: Ah, go ahead.
25 S: Well, I mean, is your last name really Champion? (students laugh/giggle)
26 J: No. (inaudible)
27 S: I mean, not-- 'cause that's, that's, that's pretty cool if it is.
28 J: Oh. No. It's all part of this whole, like, double mirror thing (gestures to mirrored window
29 at back of room) and— (students laugh) No, no. I really am. It's actually Joseph. Oh, and
30 by the way, if you ever email me, it's joseph dot champion at
31 Yeah, but I go by Joe mostly. And, yes, it is my real name and I wasn't always a champion.

Clip 3 – Stacy [00:02:42.18]
34 On here, first thing on your syllabus: my name, my email. Email is the preferred
35 method of contact. Now, my office hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Friday
36 from 1:30 to 3:30. On Mondays, from 1:30 to 2:30 I will be downstairs in Ross 1250.
37 There will always be a note on my door, that says "I'm in Ross 1250," so that, in
38 case you forget. I also have office hours on Thursday, from 12:30 to 3:30 pm. On
39 Tuesdays I am not on campus. Which is why the phone is a fifty-fifty shot. However,
40 that does not mean I can't be here. I live in Greeley. It's ten minutes. And I've got
41 ten minutes to come to school and meet with you, if that's what you need. You need to
42 find time. You need to let me know, I can't read your mind, you have to tell me. But,
43 I will make myself available. We will find a time that works for you. I have no
44 issues with that. It's just, in general, I'm not here on Tuesdays.
Clip 4 – Eric [00:03:54.18]
49 Well, I think it's time we did some math. So the way that this-- this
50 is going to be very similar to what class looks like, um. How many people are there
51 here? Looks like about, five, ten, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40. This is a very civilized
52 sized class. This is great. Okay. So let's try to split up into ten groups and I will
53 tell you how. I will ask you to count up to ten, and then go back to one, and then
54 you will remember your number, and then I'm going to tell you where you all go, okay?
55 Now where you're going to end up going, is you're going to go to one of these big
56 surfaces, which I'll tell you in a second, including those back surfaces. I'll show
57 you how we do that in a sec, um. And, you will write your names down and introduce
58 yourselves and get to know someone else in the class, and then I'm going to give you
59 a math problem to do. And then I will give you more math problems to do. And then,
60 after that, there will be more math problems (students laugh). Okay! So, let's start counting.
61 Students: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. One.
62 Eric: Great.
63 Students: two, three...
64 E: You all remember your number? Hoh (sigh). Ones go here. Twos go here. Threes go
65 here, negotiate the border yourselves. Fours go here. Fives (gestures to side board),
66 sixes. I'm going to point at the wall, but just don't be scared. Seven (gestures to
67 back wall), eight, nine, ten. Seven, eight, nine, ten, come and talk to me. I'm going
68 to show you how it works.

70 Look at this (places static cling white plastic sheet on wall)! It is now a white
71 board, okay?
73 It is now time to talk about flags. Flags. You all know what a flag is, right?
74 (Students talking). Have you ever seen a flag pole? You've seen flag poles, big
75 poles, and flags flying at the top of the flag pole, right? Glorious in the breeze.
76 How do the flags get up there?
77 Several students at once: Hoist. There's a string. Someone pulls a string—
78 E: Hoist? (gestures with hand over hand motion). Someone hoists them up. All right.
79 You all know that you basically have to hoist that flag up there? All right. Now,
80 imagine every morning a small child comes out and, uh, hoists a flag. And, uh, I'd like
81 to see a graph of, uh, that describes the relationship between the height of the flag and time.
82 Okay. So think about height of the flag as a function of time. Draw me a graph and be
83 prepared to tell me why your graph has the look that it does. Okay?
Clip 5 – Bernadette [00:06:28.10]
86 So, in front of you is a folder and it's going to be your table folder
87 (gestures holding folder). Everybody has one, open it up. This is how we're going to
88 communicate with each other. When you need to turn something in, it goes in the "In"
89 and when I need to pass out paperwork, it goes in the "Out." Okay? And it looks like
90 a lot of you have found the pretty papers I put in there for you.

92 So the technology in this class is going to be pretty intense, but at the same time
93 I'm going to baby step everybody through it. We're going to be learning a little bit
94 more about technology every day that we're here.

96 Let's get started. We're going to start with a quiz. And that-- you should have
97 already found that. And, we're going to use the TI-Navigator (holds up calculator) to
98 do the quiz. But first, we're going to do it on paper. So, the quiz that you have is
99 on the white piece of paper and to answer the quiz questions you need the blue and
100 yellow pieces of paper. And you're definitely allowed to talk with your group members
101 to find the answers. And, as soon as you're done, we'll put them into the calculator.
102 Is everybody okay with that?
103 S: Yeah. B: Okay.

104 So, everybody make sure that your calculators are plugged into the hub, please. And,
105 then, your calculators are on. If you need help with that, ask your neighbor or me.
106 [15 minutes later, after all troubleshooting complete and all student answers entered
107 into system] Let's talk about the answers to the quiz. Contact the instructor. How do
108 I prefer to be contacted? (several students refer to email). And it looks like 23 of
109 you, 23 people said "Email" and one person said "Email and office hours."

111 B: How about the late homework policy? (students say "C"). C. No late homework.
112 Great, 21. Five people either—
113 S: Six.
114 B: Or, six people answered either incorrectly or didn't answer at all. Which is fine.
Clip 6 – Margaret [00:08:38.01]

So, um, I want to ask you a question, and um after I pose the question,
I'm going to give you a couple of minutes to brainstorm. Okay, so, think about, like,
the answer to the question. And, then I am going to give you, um, a couple more
minutes to discuss with your partner. So, um, we are an even number, so that should
work. So, the question is, the question I want you to think is, "When you are stuck,
when you are doing math and you are stuck, what helps you get unstuck?" Or, when you
are learning new math and hard math, like, what do you do? Say you bump into a
roadblock. How do you deal with it? Is the question okay? (students nod) All right.
So let's take a few minutes, okay, to think, and then please brainstorm with your
partner and might come up with some suggestions. Okay? (students discuss)

Okay, so what are some of the ways you get your-- you help yourself get unstuck? So
what did you guys come up with? I'll just write them on the board. Ellie?

Ellie: Stare at it for a couple minutes. (students laugh)

Margaret: Hmm?

E: Stare at the problem for a couple of minutes.

N: Set the problem?

Students: Stare.

N (writing on board): Stare at the problem for a couple minutes. Sometimes longer in
my case (students chuckle). What else?

Bill: Ask the teacher.

N: Ask the teacher. Great. (writes on board)

[List:
  Stare at the problem for a couple minutes.  Try a different method.
  Ask the teacher.  Walk away and come back and work.
  Read the book.  Go to the help center.
  Work it out for myself.  Talk to a friend.
  Google it!  Explain to a friend.
]

Great. Anything else that we are missing? No? I think it's a good list, no?

So, um, I mean, look at the list. The one thing that's not on the list is
that I sit and watch other people do math. Right? Did you find that in your classes,
like, when the teacher does something, you feel like, "oh, I totally got it" but until
you sat in front if it it's never really, yours, right? So, um, the point is that math
is not a spectator sport. So you have to be actively involved in, like, learning, right?
Involved in learning and creating the information. So, um, that is the big picture.
And, this summer we want you be actively involved, right? And, um, so, uh, hopefully,
uh, we'll have a great time together.