HOW TO START TEACHING A TOUGH COURSE

DRY ORGANIZATION VERSUS EXCITEMENT ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

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Teachers usually enjoy the first day of class, regardless of students’ perceptions coming into the course. I have found a technique that makes even difficult courses exciting for both teachers and students. For the past several years, I have included a celebration exercise on the first day. It works great across disciplines and is especially effective for more challenging and demanding courses.

In psychology, for example, courses such as statistics and research methods are notoriously difficult. In statistics, I demonstrate the birthday paradox, a fun activity that serves as a glimpse of things to come and involves every student. The birthday paradox states that once there are thirty people in a room, the probability that two people have the same birthday is more than 75 percent. I go around the room and have people state their birthdays until we find a match. Suddenly, students are interested in math and are trying to figure out why the birthday paradox works (it has not failed yet). This is just one example from psychology, but every field has examples that would be effective.

Many students expect the first day to be a less-than-sensational day of reviewing the syllabus and course objectives line by line, but your class can be so much more. Before I employed this technique, student comments after the first day ranged from apathy to frustration: “I don’t know what to think of this course”; “This is boring”; or “This is going to be too hard.” I moved my typical first day organization duties (discussion of the syllabus and course procedures) to the end of the class period. Now, I start class by introducing myself and launching into an interactive and energizing discussion of research examples that will draw them into the course material. In fact, I do not even distribute the syllabus until I get through this demonstration.

Over the course of two semesters teaching statistics, I conducted an informal survey after the first day that read: “I am looking forward to the material in the class.” In the first semester (without the technique), only 43 percent of students strongly agreed with this statement. In the second semester (with the technique), this number shot up to 82 percent. The end of the year evaluations also were higher for the second class, and I believe this partly is because of the way the course was initiated.

By giving students an interesting and inviting introduction, I was able to reduce anxiety about the course and help students view the class as a collaborative learning process. Every field has its own exciting research or striking examples, and it is a good idea to present a few of these up front. The teaching challenge is to find special ideas within your own field. Your class will thank you.

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