

Dialogue Education in the University: The First and Last Day of Class

by Jeanette Romkema and Dan Haase

NOTE: These tips were written with the undergraduate professor and students in face-to-face full-time learning environment in mind. However, they can be equally valuable in the post-graduate, virtual learning environment, distance learning, and part-time university program setting.

What we do on the first and last day of class can make or break our course. At the outset of a class we have the opportunity to cast a clear vision of learning that may foster greater engagement and stimulate curiosity. This vision of learning may determine whether a student attends or not; it can ensure clarity about assignments and course expectations; and, it can increase or decrease anxiety and excitement about the class. The last day offers a time for students to celebrate the learning that took place over the course and can encourage students to transfer their learning beyond the course. Below are a few tips for how to do this well.

THE FIRST DAY/ WEEK OF CLASS

1. **Share why your class is important.** Students need to know how your course relates to other courses in the program, how it is unique, how it can be helpful for their lives, studies, research, professional or vocational interests, and why the course exists. Students also need the opportunity to share why *they* chose it and how *they* see it as important in their lives. Sometimes these two visions overlap, but often they are unique and quite different. Hearing and/or seeing why each individual is in your class may impact decisions of learning design and also helps as you sequence the course and reinforce learning. Although it may be best to start this dialogue before the first day of class, some synthesis of what is shared before the first day, as well as further reflections, can help root the course and direct the learning. Students learn your *intent* quicker than anything else they learn.
2. **Invite students to personalize your course.** Taking time to review the course syllabus is common practice at many universities and colleges. Inviting students to *personalize* for them is not. Since students come to a course with different skills, experience, expectations, and needs, using the first day of class to invite their input demonstrates respect and can bring energy to the class environment. Some examples include creating a study group, naming which achievement-based objective they are most curious about, selecting the first book they are going to read from the options reading list, and discussing the pros and cons of oral vs. written exams. Treat the syllabus as a 'working document' and let students know their thoughts and input will be invited and honoured at different times.
3. **Invite students to create personal goals and expectation.** Everyone's interests, experiences, and lives are different. Taking time to name what we want from a course can be valuable, and informative if shared with the class and/or you. When this is completed, it is important to find a

way to collect everyone's ideas so that they can be reviewed during and at the end of the course.

4. **State your own philosophy of learning and how it informs the course.** If you want to encourage dialogue, explain how you will do this. If you believe relevance is key to learning, explain how you will ensure this. If you want to personalize the learning, name ways you will do this.
5. **Participate in a warm-up learning task and introductions.** How you start your course will set the stage/tone for how your course flows and functions. Making it purposeful yet fun, helpful yet energizing, and informative yet engaging will communicate your values and intentions about the course (i.e. use pair work early on to hear all voices, rather than simply stating names one by one in the class). Also, if the course size allows it, invite each student to meet with you individually in the first couple weeks of the course or, if you have a larger class, break them into small groups and meet with them together. We want our students excited to return to the course on Day 2!

THE LAST DAY/ WEEK OF CLASS

1. **Revisit personal goals of the course.** When we ask students to set goals and expectations, it is respectful and important to go back to check how they did. Take time for students to reflect on how well they met the achievement-based objectives for the course as well as their own expectations and share their thoughts in class, as appropriate, as well as through written feedback.
2. **Invite students to name what they will transfer from your course.** As professors, our responsibility is to respond to each and all so there is more chance of real transfer into their lives, career or education program. The more they see the relevance of their learning, the more they will want to actually use their learning outside your class (in other classes, in further studies, in work, in life). As much as possible, take time for students to reflect on what they want to transfer, how they plan to do this, with whom, and when. Planning this *before* they leave your class will help ensure it actually happens. Connecting with these students six months after the course through email is one way to offer accountability for their stated transfer desires.
3. **Offer a final tool, thought or challenge.** This can help learning transfer, offer a conversation starter with someone outside class, or be the beginning of more learning. Invite them to select a practical, tangible and specific way they will apply a meaningful part of the course. This 'next step' may be to embark on a research project or take a more advanced level course or narrow their learning focus. It may also be to start an online forum or change a personal behavior.

4. **Invite students to offer meaningful feedback.** Although it is common practice for universities to have evaluation forms, many of these are not shared with the faculty and some are not actually helpful for your course planning and facilitation. Consider asking students to answer your own *personal* feedback form. If it is short and meaningful, most students will be happy to complete this. Asking 3 questions can give you helpful information: “What did you find most helpful about this course/class? What suggestions do you have for change? What else would you like to share?” If possible, consider getting a bit more feedback by including such questions in your sixth month email mentioned in point two above.

5. **Celebrate the journey shared.** You have shared months of tough questions, challenging tasks, exciting discoveries, complex analyses, personal stories, and important learning. This journey is important to recognize. Then, share next steps!

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