

On First Impressions: Making the Most of the First Day of Class

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Making first impressions is always important, always tricky, and for many people, always extremely nerve-wracking. As the saying goes, you only have one chance to make a first impression! In the classroom, the first day of class is the time when an instructor makes his or her first impression on the class and in the best of worlds, gets the course off to a good start on that day. We typically engage students in some discussion of course goals and requirements, going over the syllabus and reading lists, and such, but I often think that there should be more, with at least a hint as well of why the class is worth taking, of how it ties in with the real world, and of the fun and excitement that I as instructor feel for the subject matter; all of that should be conveyed in some way too.

I confess to always being a bit nervous the first day of class. Over the years, I have told myself that this is a good thing, in that it keeps me on my toes and provides a bit of an edge going into that initial encounter with my students, but saying that and believing that are two different things!

Nonetheless, in this piece, I would like to present a way in which I have managed to break the ice the first day that I consider to be reasonably successful. It comes with some caveats: first, whether the students consider it successful may be a different story; still, I would argue that it is important first and foremost for the instructor to feel good about what he or she does in the classroom, as that sense may well carry over into how students feel and how they perceive your efforts.

It is clear, I would say, that the converse is true, i.e. that if we don't feel good about what we do, the students will surely pick up on that. Second, it may well be that what I have done will not be directly applicable to other classes for other instructors; indeed, I can't and don't necessarily use it in all of my own courses. But for the most part, it has been a reasonably successful ploy, and my hope is that readers will be able to

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take it and apply it in their own way to their own situations.

The technique I have in mind is simply to provide some sort of tangible "hook" that links the instructor, the course, and the students in a concrete way to the abstract material that forms the basis of the content for the term lying ahead. This "hook" is simply a way of showing the students in the class that there is some extension of the material beyond the classroom and the textbook, and it is designed to provide a basis for starting a

conversation about the course, thus allowing the term to get off on a comfortable and relaxed, but (hopefully) intellectually stimulating note.

Here are some examples of what I have done in this regard on day one, from three different courses I have taught in recent years.

In some instances, I have used props, and in particular t-shirts that I wear to class that have a theme that is appropriate for the class. For example, for my introductory class on Sanskrit (Sanskrit 621), the ancient sacred language of India, the past few times I have taught it, I have worn on day one a t-shirt from India that has the symbol of "om", the sacred syllable that is associated with Hindu ritual (and meditation and such). Drawing attention to the shirt (and it is a very striking deep blue with the "om" prominently displayed on the front in gold stitching) enables me to mention a number of topics that the students will be exposed to throughout the quarter: the writing system (different from English and for the most part unlike anything they will have encountered), the ways in which sounds combine in Sanskrit (since "om" is said to be made up of the vowel "a" plus the vowel "u" plus "m"), the meanings and interpretations that Hindus attach to Sanskrit words and utterances as opposed to the sorts of meanings that linguists and lexicographers give (since "om" is usually glossed in dictionaries as 'a word of solemn affirmation and respectful assent' but said by more popular interpreters

to be the union of three key gods, Vishnu, represented by "a", Shiva, represented by "u", and Brahma, represented by "m"), and finally the spirituality that is attached to so much of Sanskrit (allowing for comments about how the study of Sanskrit grammar arose out of the need to preserve the pronunciation and meaning of Hinduism's sacred text, the Rig Veda). Thus the t-shirt offers an excuse to foreshadow some of the content to come in later classes.

Here's another example: I teach a class on language endangerment and language death, and approach it from the perspective of the experience of minorities with their languages, since in the usual case, endangered languages are spoken by a restricted minority embedded in a larger and considerably different societal context. On the first day, by way of introducing this key aspect to the study of language endangerment, I have worn a t-shirt that had a number of words on it in Basque, a minority language of Spain and France. That shirt allows me to introduce the idea that there were many languages spoken by a relatively small number of people who formed a minority subculture within a larger society. It also gives me the opportunity to discuss a topic that came up repeatedly in the course by way of dispelling the widespread belief in the isomorphism of language with nation, namely that many endangered languages are transnational, spread out across a few different national borders, as Basque is across a contiguous portion of northern Spain and southwestern France, and thus often times without a political center of gravity.

But it is not the case that props are necessary. Sometimes the classroom setting itself provides all that is needed. I also teach a general graduate-level introduction to historical linguistics, studying the way languages change over time. Once on the first day, I found myself in a horrible room, in that it was narrow, did not have enough chairs, and sported a dysfunctional blackboard. Without really thinking, after I put my books down on my desk, I said "Boy, this room really sucks". The students laughed, of course, but I turned my utterance into an object lesson about language change, since it allowed me to remark that the now-common use of "sucks" in the meaning "is bad" is a change in American English that has happened within my lifetime, with the more obscene connotations for the word now largely a thing of the past.

Similarly, I have held that same class sometimes in Mendenhall Laboratories here on the OSU campus, and have drawn on our being

in Mendenhall in two ways of relevance for historical linguistics and language change.

First, I tell the class about a student of mine 25 years ago, who, being new to campus, told me once that she couldn't stay to ask me about the homework since she had to run off to a class in "Menden". A bit puzzled by that, I soon realized that she had analyzed the building name "Mendenhall" as if it were "Menden Hall"; this anecdote allows me to give the class a graphic illustration of the process of reanalysis, by which a word or phrase is analyzed by a speaker in a way that is different from its etymological, i.e. historical, analysis, and at the same time to discuss the mechanism of change known as "analogy", since that student's new analysis of "Mendenhall" as "Menden Hall" was surely modeled on - or, as linguists would say, "analogized to" - such building names on campus as Oxley Hall or University Hall.

Second, Mendenhall Laboratories is the home of the Department of Geology, and the building has display cabinets with geological artifacts and even a geological motif to its walls and floors. Geology is relevant to historical linguistics since it was a geologist, Charles Lyell, who popularized the notion of "uniformitarianism", the belief that what we can observe and infer about the present can be used to guide our understanding of past events. This principle has achieved great currency in linguistics, with many linguists now being quite comfortable to use observations about the present and about on-going changes evident today (like with "sucks") to inform our interpretations of how language change took place in the past.

As a last example, there was the small freshman seminar on "language in the news" that I taught recently, and on the first day of that class, I went around the room and by way of introducing the students to one another and to the analytic study of language (i.e. linguistics), I aimed to find something linguistically interesting to say about each one of them. With "Molly", for instance, we discussed naming practices, inasmuch as that was her given name and not a nickname; with a student from Hilliard (a suburb of Columbus), I noted that some time ago, it had a slightly different name, Hilliards (from its original name "Hilliard's Junction"), and thus discussed etymology and also variation (since some older speakers, including the student's grandfather, use the older form); and so on.

My hope was that the students would come away from the class with a sense of excitement about the subject matter to be introduced in the weeks to come.

There are undoubtedly other ways of engaging a class on the first day, and I don't pretend to think that these modest attempts on my part begin to exhaust the possibilities. Moreover, as noted above, the fact that I felt good about how the first day went, as a result of my use of these various "hooks", does not mean that the students felt likewise. But I trust that the point is clear, namely that there is a real benefit to getting a class started right, and what better way than to be lively, timely, interesting, and even a bit off-beat on that first day.

By way of concluding, I would be remiss in talking about starting a class right if I did not in addition talk about ending a class right.

That is, the last day of class is, by some accounts, just as important, if not more so, than the first day. We are not talking here about first impressions, obviously, but in a sense, perhaps rather lasting impressions. It has been observed (e.g. by Vianne Timmons and Brian D. Wagner in their piece, entitled "The Last Class: A Critical Course Component", in the January 2007 edition of *The Teaching Professor*) that the typical last class session is a frantic attempt to squeeze in material that could not get a suitable airing earlier in the quarter or to cover one last segment that will figure on the final exam, or some similar probably ill-fated exercise. It has been suggested that the last class would be more appropriately spent assessing how far the class has come, determining whether course goals (typically announced and discussed on the first day) have been met, and so on.

I have taken this observation to heart, and now routinely spend the last class taking stock of where the course has been. I start by referring to the literary device (familiar to me from various ancient Indo-European literary traditions, such as Homeric epic) of "ring composition", in which the end of a work or section of a work reflects the beginning; the Wizard of Oz, with Dorothy in Kansas at the beginning and returned to Kansas at the end and with the same characters, in different guises, surrounding her at the outset and at the finish, is an easily recognized case in point from American popular culture. I then draw attention to how we can employ ring composition in the class, namely by using the last day to revisit claims and promises that were made the first day. Again, I find it to be a

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very useful and instructive device and has the benefit of providing a sort of closure to the class, rather than just letting it peter out or end in a mad frenzy to cover more material.

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