

Celebrate Excellence in Teaching with 100 Things You Can Do The First Three Weeks of Class

Beginnings are important. Whether it is an introductory course or an advanced course in the major field, it makes good sense to start the term off well. Students will decide very early – some say the first day of class – whether they will like the course, its contents, the teacher, and their fellow students.

The following list of “100 Things You Can Do...” is offered in the spirit of starting off right. It is a catalog of suggestions for college teachers who are looking for fresh ways of creating the best possible environment for learning. Not just the first day, but the first three weeks of a course are especially important, studies say, in retaining capable students. Even if they syllabus is printed and lecture notes are ready to go, most of us can usually make adjustments in teaching methods as the course unfolds and the characteristics of students become known.

These suggestions have gathered from faculty members in colleges and universities. The rationale for these methods is based on the following needs: (1) to help students make the transition to your class; (2) to direct students’ attention to the immediate situation for learning the period of your classroom; (3) to spark intellectual curiosity to challenge students; (4) to support beginners and neophytes in the process of learning in the discipline; (5) to encourage the students’ active involvement in learning; and (6) to build a sense of community in the classroom.

Here, then, are some ideas to help you and your students celebrate teaching and learning in your classes every term:

Helping Students Make Transitions

1. Hit the ground running on the first day of class with substantial content.
2. Take attendance: roll call, clipboard, sign-in, seating chart, etc.
3. Introduce yourself by slide, videotape, short presentation, or self-bio.
4. Hand out an informative, attractive, and user-friendly syllabus.
5. Give an assignment on the first day to be collected at the next meeting.
6. Start laboratory experiments and other exercises the first time lab meets.
7. Call attention (written and oral) to good learning habits: completing assignments on time, previewing scheduled topics, regularly reviewing material covered, full use of lab time with regard for safety, etc.
8. Give a learning style inventory to help students find out about themselves.
9. Direct students to the College Prep Department for the Writing or Math Labs for help on basic skills.
10. Tell students how much time they will need to study for this course.

11. Hand out supplemental study aids: library use, study tips, supplemental readings, and practice exercises.
12. Explain how to study for the kind of tests you give.
13. Put in writing a limited number of ground rules regarding absences, late work, testing procedures, grading, and general decorum. Be sure to maintain them.
14. Announce office hours frequently and hold them without fail.
15. Show students how to handle learning in large classes and impersonal situations.
16. Give sample test questions; provide answers.
17. Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty; be clear when collaboration is wanted and when it is forbidden.
18. Seek out a different student each day and get to know something about him/her.
19. Find out about students' jobs. If they are working, how many hours and what kind of jobs they hold.

Directing Student Attention

20. Greet students at the door when they enter the classroom.
21. Start the class on time.
22. Make a grand stage entrance to hush a large class and gain attention.
23. Give pretest on the day's topic.
24. Start the lecture with a puzzle, question, paradox, picture, or cartoon on slide or transparency to focus on the day's topic.
25. Elicit student questions and concerns at the beginning of the class and list these on the chalkboard to be answered during the hour.
26. Have students write down what they think the important issues or key points of the day's lecture will be.
27. Ask the person who is reading the student newspaper what is in the news today.

Challenging Students

28. Have students write out their expectations for the course and their own goals for learning.
29. Use a variety of methods of presentation at every class meeting.
30. Stage a figurative "coffee break" about 20 minutes into the hour: tell an anecdote, invite students to put down pens and pencils, refer to a current event, shift media.
31. Incorporate community resources: plays, concerts, the state fair, government agencies, businesses, and the outdoors.
32. Show a film in a novel way: stop it for discussion, show a few frames only, anticipate the ending, hand out a viewing or critique sheet, play and replay parts.
33. Share your philosophy of teaching with your students.
34. Form a student panel to present alternative views of the same concept.
35. Stage a change-your-mind debate with students moving to different parts of the classroom to signal change in opinion during discussion.
36. Conduct a "living" democratic survey by having students move to different parts of the classroom; size of high school, rural vs. urban, consumer preferences.
37. Tell about your current professional interests and how you got there from your own beginnings in the discipline.
38. Conduct a role play to make a point or to lay out issues.
39. Let your students assume the role of a professional in the discipline: biologist, philosopher, literary critic, engineer, political scientist.

40. Conduct idea generating or brainstorming sessions to expand horizons.
41. Give students two passages of material containing alternative views to compare and contrast.
42. Distribute a list of the unsolved problems, dilemmas, or great questions in your discipline and invite students to claim one as their own to investigate.
43. Ask students what books they have read during the last six months.
44. Ask students what is going on in the state legislature on a subject which may affect their future.
45. Let your students see the enthusiasm you have for your subject and your love of learning.
46. Take students with you to hear guest speakers of special programs on campus.
47. Plan a “scholar-gypsy” lesson or unit which shows students the excitement of discovery in your discipline.

Providing Support

48. Collect student’s current telephone numbers and addresses and let them know that you may need to reach them.
49. Check out absentees. Call or write a personal note.
50. Diagnose the student’s prerequisite learning by questionnaire or pretest and give them the feedback as soon as possible.
51. Hand out study questions/study guides.
52. Be redundant. Students should see, read, or hear key material at least three times.
53. Allow students to demonstrate progress in learning: summary quiz over the day’s work, a written reaction to the day’s material.
54. Use non-graded feedback to let students know how they are doing; post answers to ungraded quizzes and problem sets; do exercises in class; give oral feedback.
55. Reward behavior you want: praise, stars, honor roll, personal note.
56. Use a light touch: smile, tell a good joke, break test anxiety with a sympathetic comment.
57. Organize – give visible structure by posting the day’s menu on chalkboard or overhead.
58. Use multiple media: overhead, slides, film, videotape, audiotape, models, sample materials.
59. Make appointments with all students individually or in a small group.
60. Use multiple examples in multiple media to illustrate key points and important concepts.
61. Hand out wallet-sized telephone cards with all important telephone numbers listed: office, department, resource centers, etc.
62. Bring all important course dates on a card that can be handed out and taped to a mirror.
63. Eavesdrop on students before or after class and join their conversation about course topics.
64. Maintain an open grade book, with grades kept current so that students can check their own progress.
65. Check to see if any students are having problems with any academic or campus matters and direct those who are to appropriate offices or resources.
66. Tell students what they need to do to receive an “A” in your course.
67. Stop the world to find out what your students are thinking, feeling, and doing in their everyday lives.

Encouraging Active Learning

68. Have students write something regularly: journal entries, course commentaries, content reports.

69. Invite students to critique each other's essays or short answers on tests for readability or content.
70. Invite students to ask questions frequently.
71. Probe students' responses to questions and their comments.
72. Put students into pairs or "learning cells" to quiz each other over material for the day.
73. Give students an opportunity to voice opinions about the subject matter.
74. Have students apply subject matter to solve real problems.
75. Give students red, yellow, and green cards (made or poster board) and periodically call for a vote on an issue by asking for simultaneous show of cards.
76. Roam the aisles of your classroom and carry on running conversations with students as they work on course problems.
77. Gather student feedback in the first three weeks to improve teaching and learning.
78. Ask a question directed to one student and wait for an answer.
79. Place a suggestion box in the rear of the room and encourage students to contribute written comments every time the class meets.
80. Do oral, show-of-hands, multiple choice test for summary, review, and instant feedback.
81. Use task groups to accomplish specific objectives.
82. Grade quizzes and exercises in class as a learning tool.
83. Give students plenty of opportunity for practice before a major test.
84. Give a test early in the term and return it graded at the next class meeting.
85. Have students write questions on index cards to be collected and answered the next class period.
86. Make collaborative assignments for several students to work on together.
87. Assign written paraphrases and summaries of difficult reading.
88. Appoint a student volunteer weekly to as a "dumb question" for other class members.
89. Give students a take-home problem relating to the day's lecture.
90. Encourage students to bring current news items to class which relate to the subject matter and post these on a bulletin board nearby.
91. Practice allowing sufficient "wait time" when posing questions.

Building Community

92. Use special techniques to help you learn names.
93. Set up a buddy system or helping trios so students can contact each other about assignments and course work.
94. Find out about your students via questions on an index card.
95. Take pictures of students (snapshots in small groups/mug shots) and post in classroom, office, or lab.
96. Form small groups for getting acquainted; mix and for new groups several time.
97. Assign a team project early in the term and provide time to assemble the team.
98. Solicit suggestions from students for outside resources and guest speakers on course topics.
99. Exchange a tip for successful teaching with a colleague.
100. Contact your CT&D Campus Coordinator for assistance in developing innovative instructional strategies.