

It's in the cards

This tip is primarily intended for my colleagues in foreign languages, although those in other disciplines may find it useful as well. As a graduate teaching assistant in a large state school, I regularly taught two full introductory French or Italian courses every semester. Due to the size of the program, from one semester to the next, I rarely had more than a few students that had studied with me previously. Consequently, I struggled to learn all the new names and engage my students from the very first day, which is paramount in languages. I tried different techniques with varying degrees of success but still I often forgot names or called students the wrong name. Not only was this awkward, but I also found myself not calling on those students whose names I did not know or felt some doubt about. The students quickly separated into two groups, those who participated actively and those who sat in the back row unengaged. That is until a new coordinator, Dr. Caroline Nash, arrived and showed me the note card technique, the effectiveness of which is matched only by its simplicity. Accordingly, on the first day of class, students fill out a note card with their name, major, and an interesting fact about themselves. The interesting fact can be anything but often involves hobbies, travel, past accomplishments, or future ambitions. The instructor then uses the cards to call on all students in random order when doing warm up drills, class exercises, or homework corrections. If a student is absent, the instructor sets his or her card aside. This system eliminates the stress of learning many new names quickly and gives the instructor a point of departure to get to know the students personally based on their majors and interests. It also levels the playing field for the students. When the instructor picks up the cards, all the students know that they will be called on to participate in class. This counteracts any unconscious partiality on the part of the instructor. And when class is over, the stack of cards of absent students is handy for keeping roll. To sum up, the note card technique allows instructors to:

- Learn student names quickly and easily
- Get to know students based on majors/interests
- Divide class time fairly and engage all students
- Keep roll while doing “real” work

This tip I picked up as a graduate student has served me well over the last ten years. I also believe it gave me an edge in job interviews because I could engage students more directly than other candidates during teaching demonstrations.

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