

Meeting a Class for the First Time: Breaking the Ice

“I’ve been at this university almost four years, and this is the first time it ever occurred to me that professors have feelings,” (McKeachie, 1999, p. 35).

“ . . . teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal – or keep them from learning much at all,” (Palmer, 1998, p. 6).

Almost akin to the “first date,” the first day of class is critical both for students and for faculty. Teachers arrive at that first class ready to share the important syllabus details. Students come to class looking for how to succeed in the course and what exactly must be done to earn certain grades and more. *Both come to class with human feelings that, if acknowledged and shared, can go a long way to setting the tone for the semester.* This tip is borrowed from McKeachie’s *Teaching Tips* chapter on “Meeting a Class for the First Time – Breaking the Ice.”

Somewhere in the planning for the first day of class is the chance to ask students to **write out words and or phrases that describe their feelings on the first day of class**. I simply explain my perspective on the difference between attitudes (rooted in our belief systems) and feelings (rooted in our emotions and often triggered by sensory inputs or events recalling the past) and will even provide simple examples to get them listing their own feelings. These can include feelings based on the summer (e.g., sad to see the summer pass; excited to see good friends again), previous semesters (e.g., anxious to begin the senior year job search) or courses similar to mine, and the list goes on and on. The key is for each student to jot down a few words or phrases about their feelings that first day of class. I then have them pair up and meet a new person in the class and share some of their feelings. Then, I ask for volunteers to share and I list a few on the board. This tends to elicit responses and I encourage open “chatting” about these, as it often triggers another student’s similar response or a new or different one.

Second, based on the recommendation for ice breaking by McKeachie, I ask the students to list **how they think I feel on the first day of class**. In other words I ask them to take on my role as a faculty member at our university who is teaching this particular class. These feeling words or comments are then listed in a separate column on the board and we compare the similarities and differences between the students and what they believe a faculty feels; typically, we share more similarities than most expect! I also share my top five feelings for that class. Thus, we establish a common bond of humanity and often get a glimpse of how we each view the class or semester ahead. Typically, I’ll use some of their feelings as the class unfolds and try to adapt assignments, tests, and other activities accordingly if possible. As in the quotes from Palmer and McKeachie, I believe this simple exercise sets the tone for student engagement and contribution in my class and helps us all to recognize our shared humanity over and above the faculty/student relationship.

Resources:

McKeachie, W. J. (1999). *McKeachie’s teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Web Sites for "first day of class":

- <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/firstday.html>
- <http://teacherweb.ggc.edu/cte/node/68>
- <http://www.lcc.edu/cte/resources/teachingettes/icebreakers.aspx>

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