IT'S A START[*]

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Although the first few days of a course may not completely determine how well the rest of the course works, they are vital. A good start can carry the instructor through several weeks of early shakiness, and a bad one can take several weeks of damage control to overcome.

Getting off to a good start in a class is a real challenge, however. A source of the difficulty is identified by Peter Elbow, who in his superb collection of essays on teaching, *Embracing Contraries* (1986), observes that we have two primary and conflicting roles as professors—*gatekeeper* and *coach*. As gatekeepers, we must set standards high enough to certify that our students who graduate are qualified to enter their intended professions and the broader community of scholars. But as coaches, we must help our students surpass the hurdles we set for them as gatekeepers. Being a professor means walking a tightrope between these two roles. The key to success is to maintain a good balance.

As Elbow observes, it is hard enough to fulfill these contrary roles over the course of a semester. The challenge we examine in this paper is that of establishing ourselves in the roles in the first week of class, when students frequently acquire (or fail to acquire) the motivation to learn that they will carry for the rest of the term.

One Way to Start a Course

"*Good Morning. I'm Professor Frobish and this is Chemistry 102. Last semester you learned about atomic structure, the periodic table and various properties of atomic species, some combining rules for chemical reactions, and different ways to look at acids and bases and how they react. This semester we'll do some more quantitative stoichiometric analysis and examine the thermodynamics and kinetics of reactions. Now, suppose we want to neutralize 4.4 liters of a 2-molar calcium hydroxide solution with a 3.5-molar sodium hydroxide solution. The stoichiometric equation is….*"

We teachers have devised many ways to get courses started—some effective, others not. Professor Frobish has come up with what may be the worst: stride into class, announce your name and the course, and launch into the course content. Functioning as neither gatekeeper nor coach, in the first minute of the course he has probably thrown a substantial fraction of his students into the early stages of catatonia and gotten others scouring their course catalogs looking for alternatives.

There are better ways to get started, some of which we suggest here. These activities are designed to help instructors become both gatekeepers and coaches in the first week—by establishing ground rules and expectations; setting up mechanisms for communication with and among the students; finding out what the students know, want to know, fear, and expect; and motivating interest in the course material. The idea is not to attempt everything on the list (although we recommend doing everything in the first category)—there isn't enough time and

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the attempt would probably produce chaos and a hasty retreat to more traditional and less effective methods. Rather, the list should be treated as a Chinese restaurant menu, with at least one activity being chosen from each category after the first one.

Pre-Class Preparation

Completing several tasks before the first class will help smooth the way for the opening week.

- **Write instructional objectives for the course**.

  We strongly recommend that you write detailed instructional objectives stating what you want students to be able to do with the material you are teaching them (Bloom, 1956; Felder & Brent, 1997; Gronlund, 1991; Krathwohl, 1964). Be as specific as possible with instructional objectives, avoiding words like "*know*," "*understand*," and "*appreciate*." Although these may be our ultimate goals, we have no direct way of observing whether or not they have been achieved.

  The instructional objectives should instead be statements of what you will ask the students to *do* to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and appreciation. Use action words like list, identify, explain, paraphrase, calculate, estimate, predict, compare and contrast, derive, model, design, create, select, and justify. The objectives might be simple and limited ("The students will be able to *list* the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Cognitive Domain") or complex and global ("When given the flow chart of a manufacturing plant, the student will be able to *identify* potentially hazardous emissions, *design* a system for reducing unacceptable emission levels, and *explain* its advantages over alternative systems and its possible flaws.")

  With a good set of objectives, you can allocate sufficient time to material with extensive associated objectives and minimize time spent on material that students can do little with but memorize and repeat. The objectives also facilitate the construction of good assignments and tests: one simply asks the students to do the things the objectives say they should be able to do. The instructor can provide students with the list of objectives on the first day, pass them out topic-by-topic, or (the method we recommend) issue them as study guides for tests.

- **Prepare a syllabus, a detailed assignment schedule, and a statement of policies and procedures**.

  There should be no mysteries about how a course will be administered: it is only when instructors make up the rules as they go that the lawyers come out of the woodwork. Your students should know the answers to the following questions from the first day of class:

  – *How will course grades be determined?* How much do quizzes, midterm exams, the final exam, homework, and project work count? Will you take improvement during the course into account in the final grade determination? How about class participation and/or effort?

  – *How will you deal with late assignments?* Accept them any time with a penalty? Accept them up to one week or one class period late with a penalty? Not accept them?

- *How will you deal with missed tests?* Average the other test grades for students with legitimate excuses and give zeroes to students without excuses? Give makeup tests only to students with legitimate excuses? Give makeup tests to all students? Give one comprehensive makeup test near the end of the course to students who miss any test, counting the result for those with legitimate excuses only if it helps them? (We have had good success with the last approach.)

- *Will you penalize unexcused absences? If so, how?*

- *Will you penalize chronic tardiness? If so, how?*

- *Is collaboration on homework forbidden, encouraged, or required* (as in collaborative or cooperative learning)*?*

- **Prepare the first few lecture periods and assignments**.

The beginning of the semester or quarter can be incredibly hectic. Being prepared in advance for the first week or two can provide a cushion and help avoid serious stress as the first day approaches.

Establish Your Expectations and Offer Suggestions for Meeting Them

Setting high standards and communicating them clearly to the students is the best way for instructors to establish themselves in Elbow's gatekeeper role. In a recent compilation of research, Jones (1996) finds that the most effective teachers start by establishing the ground rules and routines that will govern the class. The better they do this, the more smoothly the rest of the semester goes and the more energy students can devote to learning and teachers can devote to coaching.

- **In the first class session, distribute and briefly review the syllabus, assignment schedule, and statement of policies**.

Although it is generally not necessary to cover every point in these documents in class, take some time to go over the critical policies, particularly any that are nontraditional. Alternatively, assign pairs of students to go the policies, noting questions they have or points they want clarified (Kadel & Keehner, 1994). If the policies are posted on a class Web site, ask students to locate critical pieces of information as part of their first assignment.

- **Have students write goals for themselves**.

In a sense, each semester provides a fresh start for professors and students, a chance to be more successful or to complete responsibilities in a different way. Harness the optimism that exists early in the semester by having students write goals for themselves (e.g., keep up with assignments, see the instructor when you have a problem, don't miss class). Collect them and return them to the students a few weeks into the semester to help them refocus. Goal setting may be particularly beneficial to first-year students as they cope with the difficult transition from high school to college.

- **Distribute advice from previous students in the course**.

Near the end of the course, when we ask our students to write advice, they consistently suggest many of the same things we would, but the incoming students seem to hear the ideas better when they come from peers.

Establish Student-Instructor and Student-Student Communication Mechanisms

In *What Matters in College*, Astin (1993) demonstrates that interactions between instructors and students and among the students are critical determinants of student success and satisfaction in college. Establishing good communication mechanisms early in a course is a vital component of the instructor's coaching role.

- **Learn student names**.

If you can call your students by name in class and in the hall and your office, they are more motivated to learn from you than if they feel anonymous in your class.

Learning names becomes challenging in large classes. You might tell students on the first day to sit anywhere they want but stay there in subsequent periods, and then pass sign-up sheets along each row of the classroom. Prepare a seating chart and consult it as you teach, drilling yourself on names during in-class group activities, writing assignments, and tests. Alternatively, take photos of groups of students and have them label the pictures on the back, ask each student to bring you a labeled photo or a photocopy of his or her driver's license, or use tent cards. Some departments have a display of class photos, which you can use to associate names with faces.

- **Give students an early opportunity to learn the names of others in the class**.

Much of the attrition that occurs in the early years of college can be attributed to students feeling lonely and isolated from the academic community that surrounds them (Astin, 1994; Tinto, 1993). Helping students make connections with one another in your class, especially in first-year and second-year courses, can help counter these feelings. In smaller classes have students form pairs, introduce themselves, and formally introduce one another to the whole class. In large classes, have the pairs introduce each other to one or two other pairs. Many of the other activities suggested in this paper involve small group efforts, in and out of class. The first activity for a new group should be mutual introductions.

- **Set up a class e-mail alias, list server, and/or class web site**.

Instructors often find that if they encourage students to ask them questions via email, they hear from many who would never come to their offices. An added advantage is that e-mail messages may be answered at the instructor's convenience.

A class alias or list server works well for sending announcements, distributing answers to commonly asked questions, and encouraging on-line discussion of class material. Conferencing software, which can facilitate student-to-student dialogue for the whole class or for small

working groups, is particularly useful for courses with large numbers of commuting students or courses taught electronically.

A class Web site can be a valuable repository of information. It may contain the syllabus and assignment schedule, instructional objectives, lecture notes, assignments and old tests, supplementary readings, photos, charts, other visual materials, and links to other relevant Web sites.

Regardless of which communication methods are chosen, an important first step is requiring all students to use them early in the course. Many students are uncomfortable with technology and are not inclined to use it, but after they have done so once by assignment, they are likely to keep using it by choice.

- **In large classes, designate student representatives**.

When classes are too large to permit much contact between the instructor and individual students, designated representatives can serve as liaisons. Encourage or require students to relay any questions, concerns, or feedback on the class to their representatives; then meet with the representatives periodically to hear the views of their constituents.

Find out what students know, want to know, expect, and fear

If there is a single common point of agreement among pedagogical experts, it is that students are motivated to learn by a perception that the material being taught is relevant to their backgrounds, interests, and ambitions. Finding out as much as we can about what our students know and care about is a critical task associated with the coaching role.

- **Have students list (a) things they know about course content and (b) questions they have about the course topics.**

This assignment can be completed anonymously by individuals or small groups, in or out of class. Reading through the first list gives a good indication of students' prior knowledge and can signal potential misconceptions that can be addressed and cleared up early. Questions from the second list can be recalled as each new topic is introduced. The questions also provide clues about student interests that may help you choose relevant examples.

- **Address the issue of prerequisite material**.

Many courses build on material taught in prerequisite courses. The problem is that students can (and often do) pass a course without mastering important material or developing critical skills.

Some instructors use a diagnostic test to identify specific deficiencies. A more effective alternative is to distribute a list of instructional objectives that identify what the students should be able to do if they have the prerequisite knowledge and skills, and announce that the first test will cover those objectives and will count toward the final course grade. Spend as much or as little time as you choose thereafter to review the prerequisite material in class, include it on at least the first assignment, and then give the test.

- **Have students write their expectations of you**.

    Students are more likely to work to meet their instructors' expectations if they believe they are being met halfway. Usually groups or individuals come up with reasonable expectations, including things like coming to class on time and prepared, not running overtime, and being fair in grading. Identify the student expectations you feel you can commit to and state your commitment to the class. You could use those expectations as a basis for a mid-semester evaluation by listing them and asking students how successful you've been in meeting them.

- **Have students anonymously hand in rumors they've heard about the course or you**.

    The student grapevine is powerful but not necessarily accurate. Students often form preconceptions about their courses and instructors based on rumors. Getting the rumors on the table will help you uncover and address misconceptions and allay fears.   For example, if students have heard that a ridiculously high percentage of students fail the course each semester, you might calm those fears by showing a grade distribution from a previous semester. (If you know that the rumors are true, however, you may wish to use another technique.)

Motivate interest in the course material

Course material should be previewed and linked to the students' interests and personal goals.

- **Present a visual/graphic organizer**.

    Most students are visual learners and respond better to a visual overview of the course than to a simple list of topics (Felder, 1993). Bellanca (1992) and Danserau & Newbern (1997) offer good models of graphic organizers and tips on their construction.

- **Perform a demonstration**.

    A striking demonstration can spark interest in a subject and remain with students long after details of the course content have faded.   Experiments, dramatizations, field trips, simulations, and multimedia presentations can all be used effectively.

- **Outline or get students to brainstorm real-world applications of course material**.

    After presenting an overview of course content, discuss its applications to things the students know about and are likely to care about. Alternatively, put students into pairs or small groups to brainstorm possible examples or on-the-job applications of the content. Students are motivated to learn material that connects with their experience, interests, and personal goals. Previewing those connections for the students is good; getting them to make the connections for themselves is even better.

- **Bring in a practicing professional to talk about how he or she uses course material on the job**.

    Most students care about what they will be doing when they graduate and eagerly seek information about their intended careers. Many alumni and corporate recruiters are pleased to

visit classrooms and share their experiences. Talk with the visitors ahead of time and suggest points you would like them to make. For example, if you plan to use collaborative learning in the course, suggest that the visitors talk about the critical importance of teamwork and communication skills in the business world.

- **Give a realistic open-ended problem that requires course material to solve or analyze**.

    Pose a problem that will require material from the entire course to solve, and have small groups of students brainstorm what they would need to know to solve it and how they would go about determining the solution. Alternatively, ask individual students to tackle it, and then have them get together in groups to improve their responses.   For example:

    – In a course on urban sociology, psychology, or classroom management, give students a short description of a community (family, individual, classroom) riddled with problems and ask them to formulate strategies for dealing with the problems.

    – In an engineering or business management course, give students a description of a manufacturing process and ask them to develop a strategy to increase productivity.

    – In an introductory statistics or philosophy course, present a journal article or newspaper editorial or textbook that offers a sweeping unsubstantiated generalization and ask the students to devise a program for establishing its truth or falsehood.

    – In a language or literature course, present a poorly written essay or short work of fiction and ask the students to critique it.

Obviously most students taking the course won't know exactly how to approach such problems (although you may be surprised at how far some of them can go), but that's not the point.   If you choose the problem well, the students will be intrigued and motivated to master the tools you will be presenting that will equip them to solve it. As the course develops, you can relate each new topic to the opening problem to help the students understand how each part fits into the whole.

    Many instructors believe there is something unethical about asking students to do something before they have been taught how to do it. In fact, this technique—variously termed discovery learning, inquiry learning, problem-based learning, inductive learning, and just-in-time education—is an exceptionally powerful instructional method for promoting deep understanding and long-term retention of knowledge. Ethical questions arise only if the unfamiliar material appears on tests or assignments that count significantly toward the final course grade.

    An effective variation of this approach is to collect the students' initial efforts and then give them the same problem late in the course, after they have acquired the tools to analyze and solve it. If you then give back their "before" solutions for them to compare with their "after" solutions, they will have a powerful and gratifying indicator of how much they have learned.

    OK, now it's time to launch into the first course topic. Notice that they're all awake, and their course catalogs are still in their book bags.

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