

4: Course Preparation

At the heart of a successful course is the planning that precedes it. Good planning involves several steps:

1. Identify the content domain of the course.
2. Decide upon the goals that students are to reach at the end of the course.
3. Select subject matter, materials, learning activities, and teaching methods that are appropriate and relevant to those goals and objectives.
4. Determine how to engage students in the subject matter.
5. Design methods to measure and evaluate students' performance according to the objectives and goals that were originally selected.

Finally, the first day of class sets the tone for the rest of the course. These topics on the subject of course planning are all addressed in this chapter.

Universal Design for Course Construction

The way in which students access, process, and demonstrate information in a course can vary widely, based on their learning style, cognitive development, personality, cultural background, and abilities.

Universal Design is an approach to designing course instruction, materials, and content to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting. Universal Design provides equal access to learning, not simply equal access to information. Universal Design allows the student to control the method of accessing information while the teacher monitors the learning process and initiates any beneficial methods.

Although this design enables the student to be self-sufficient, the teacher is responsible for imparting knowledge and facilitating the learning process. It should be noted that Universal Design does *not* remove academic challenges; it removes barriers to access. Simply stated, Universal Design is just good teaching.

Principles

- ❖ Use a variety of instructional methods when presenting material (see Chapters 3 and 5 for discussions of such methods).
- ❖ Allow for multiple methods of demonstrating understanding of essential course content (see Chapter 7 on Assessment).

- ❖ Use technology to enhance learning opportunities and increase accessibility.
- ❖ Integrate natural supports for learning (i.e., using resources already found in the environment, such as fellow students for study partners).
- ❖ Invite students to contact the instructor with any questions or concerns.

Course Content

The scope of a course is a curriculum decision and as such, is broadly identified through a process of dialogue that involves not only the instructor, but the department, college, and university at large. Although the University's course approval process is the originating point for content decisions, instructors have latitude within the bounds of the final approved course description in deciding the specific content that will be part of a particular course offering. If the course is part of a sequence that builds on skills and knowledge from a previous course or is standardized across the department, the course will have to include the expected content.

The Importance of Course Goals

Among the most important course decisions is the identification of course goals. Without clear course goals, the following results are likely:

- ❖ The instructor will have difficulty selecting appropriate subject matter, materials, and teaching methods.
- ❖ The instructor will have difficulty staying on topic throughout the course and selecting appropriate topics to be tested.
- ❖ Students will complain that the course is irrelevant, that the material is not related to their personal educational goals or to any other goals they can recognize as being important.
- ❖ Students will complain that the tests are unfair; one topic is assigned, another is taught, and a third is covered on the tests.
- ❖ Students will complain that they do not know what to study since no priorities among topics are provided.
- ❖ Students will complain that the course is disorganized, that the topics do not fit together, and that there is no clear direction.

On the other hand, clear goals enhance the possibility that the following results will occur:

- ❖ Teaching will be more focused and precise. Instructors will have subjected the course to a thorough analysis and will have selected *on purpose* what they expect the students to learn in the course.
- ❖ It will be easy to identify points where learning needs to be monitored or tested.
- ❖ It will be possible to confirm that student needs are being met.
- ❖ Instructors will be aware of different teaching and learning styles. One can specify the product (which may reduce test and grade anxiety) and make an intelligent choice of the appropriate teaching and learning process.
- ❖ Students will always have a clear statement of the purpose and aims of the course to turn to when they are studying or unsure of the course's aims. They will find it easier to progress through the course in an organized manner.

In short, with well-defined course goals there is a clear communication of intent on the part of the teacher regarding what he or she is trying to teach,

what the students are going to be expected to be able to do, how their achievement will be measured, and what will be accepted as evidence that they have achieved the goals.

Instructional Objectives

Over the years, educators have approached goal setting in a variety of ways. During the decades when learning theory was characterized by a Behaviorist approach, educators urged teachers to set broad goals and then develop very precise instructional objectives for each goal. According to Robert Mager (1962), an instructional objective is “an intent communicated by a statement describing a proposed change in a learner—a statement of what the learner is to be like when he has successfully completed a learning experience.” Teachers were encouraged to state objectives very narrowly and to include measures specifying how attainment of the objective would be judged; for example, “The student will be able to draw the structures of these chemical compounds to 100% accuracy when compared with the textbook figures.”

As learning theory focused on more holistic ways of thinking about learning, educators began to think differently about objectives. Eisner (1994), for example, stressed that during inquiry or discovery learning, one wants to be open-ended about what might result. He substituted the term “instructional objectives” with the term “expressive outcomes.” Today, most educators agree that good instructional objectives should neither be so narrowly stated that they represent the intended curriculum mechanistically nor so generally stated that they lend little clarity to the intended goals. They should not discourage creativity on the part of either teacher or learner, nor should they take away the need for the teacher to communicate the “challenge” of studying and learning to her or his students. Other dangers to be aware of are objectives that insult students’ intelligence, that are restricted to lower-level cognitive skills, that seem mechanistic or dehumanizing, or that result in overconcentration on the aspects of a subject while the students miss the “big picture.”

Loosely stated objectives—such as “The students in Theatre 100 will understand what makes good theatre”—are not especially useful. It is generally better to refer to a specific realization or ability that the teacher wants his or her students to gain as a result of their course. An example of a well-stated objective might be the following: “The students in

Physics 101 will demonstrate awareness of the importance of safety in the laboratory by learning and completing six standard precautionary steps before beginning each of the experiments in the course.”

Many educators evaluate their instructional objectives using the work of Benjamin Bloom. Bloom (1956) classified various abilities and behaviors that correlate with cognitive learning objectives into a taxonomy (now commonly referred to as Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning) that represents the thinking processes required of students as a continuum moving from the simple to the complex. This hierarchy can serve as a classification scheme for constructing course objectives since it focuses on the way a student acquires and uses knowledge in any subject area. It includes the following levels, starting from the bottom:

Knowledge. The lowest level. Primarily concerns the students’ ability to memorize or recall certain specific facts. A sample knowledge objective is: “Students can define ‘osmosis.’”

Comprehension. Involves the ability to interpret, paraphrase, and extrapolate, thus demonstrating the students’ basic understanding of ideas that they did not originate. A sample comprehension objective is: “Students can give examples of loosely coupled systems.”

Application. Includes activities in which the student applies concepts and principles to new and/or practical situations. A sample application objective is: “Students can use the formula to predict economic effects.”

Analysis. Concerns breaking down a piece of information into its constituent parts, differentiating and discriminating. A sample analysis objective is: “Students can diagram musical variations in a given composition.”

Synthesis. Involves the blending of elements and parts in order to form a whole. Students should be able to create a structural pattern that was not previously present. A sample synthesis objective is: “Students can summarize the research literature on genetic engineering.”

Evaluation. The highest level. Students might judge the value of a work, the logical consistency of written data, or the adequacy of someone else’s conclusions. A sample evaluation objective is:

“Students can judge the adequacy of research claims according to the supporting data.”

If the above are used when formulating objectives, it should be possible to analyze which of the course objectives require higher-order student behavior (application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) and which center around lower-order objectives (knowledge and comprehension). Most instructional specialists argue that effective objectives (and well-designed courses) will almost always include some higher order objectives and not center exclusively around retention and understanding. Likewise, in most curricula there are foundational knowledge and comprehension requirements that must be achieved before higher-order objectives can be addressed.

Structuring an Effective Course

In *Teaching Assistance: A Handbook of Teaching Ideas* (1982), John Andrews suggests that a teacher should use the following questions as a means of planning an effective course. These points should enable the instructor to see how goals can shape planning for other aspects of the class. Note that the questions focus at the end point first and then work backward in time to the first action the teacher will take:

1. How does the teacher want students to be changed as a result of this class? What should they be able to do that they cannot do now?
2. How are these changes to be measured? What sort of performances (exams, papers, etc.) will be used?
3. What subject matter will be covered to help students meet the expectations in (1) and (2)?
4. What about the “how” of teaching? What sorts of formats or activities will be used to help students practice the abilities needed to meet (1) and (2)?
5. How are expectations communicated to the students? What is their picture of the objectives they will need to meet?

Mary Minter of the University of Michigan (1986) has suggested a more detailed planning analysis for an instructor faced with a new course

if such an expectation exists. She suggests that on accepting the course assignment, well-prepared instructors first set out to acquire as much information as possible about the students they will be teaching (see the first section of this handbook) and the content they will be expected to cover in the course, if such an expectation exists. Resources to consult include the college catalog, previous syllabi, the official department course description, and the assigned textbook. Instructors can also solicit help from anyone who has previously taught the course.

Minter regards the next step as the setting of general goals and specific instructional objectives for the course. Instructors might be able to use a general purpose statement given on a previous syllabus, and/or they might want to include different or additional goals. The next step is to provide the student with even more specific instructional objectives, which should relate to the overall goals and be specific to the major content sections/topics. “Action verbs” that are specific, such as: “list, write, report, do” are highly recommended. The final step is to conduct another level of task analysis. Students’ basic learning needs in the subject area should be identified. (This can be based, for example, on past experience with similar groups of students or on a personal questionnaire that students complete on the first day.) From all this analysis an effective course structure will evolve.

Grunert (1997) stresses the importance of a “learning-centered” approach to course planning. She suggests that students should be involved in course planning through clarifying their own goals for the course, helping choose learning activities, monitoring and assessing their progress, and assisting in establishing the criteria on which performance will be judged. Some instructors use portions of the first class to modify or build upon their own plans for the course by asking for student participation and suggestions.

Selecting Learning Activities

Much of this section has assumed the use of traditional classroom formats such as the lecture/discussion mix or lectures coupled with laboratory demonstrations. There are, nonetheless, a variety of other possible methods for the delivery of instruction. These are discussed in the following chapters on modes of teaching and assessment. In selecting and planning classroom instructional strategies to

match course goals and objectives, it is important to consider the following:

- ❖ Will the strategy accomplish the objective? It is unlikely, for example, that straight lecturing in a course designed to increase problem-solving skills would be an appropriate strategy for all class sessions. Group work would be a poor choice if rapid transfer of information is the goal.
- ❖ Will the strategy be accessible to all students? If only hands-on work is used, those who learn best by listening, reading, or writing will be at a disadvantage. It is best to establish a rhythm of strategies, varying the approach and introducing redundancy so that all can learn.
- ❖ Will the strategy be feasible, given the context? Is the classroom structured to preclude certain activities? Is the class too large or too small for certain activities? Are the class periods long enough to accommodate the use of certain activities?
- ❖ Will students need preparation to respond to the strategy? Since students are so used to being passive in class, instructors cannot automatically assume that their students will be able or want to respond to group work, independent work, or other activities. It is often important to build in some time for helping students get the most from a given instructional approach before it is used.
- ❖ Is the instructor comfortable with the approach? Often, even when a given approach seems most appropriate, an instructor will not be at ease with it. Although instructors should continually try to expand their repertoire, it is important to choose strategies that are within one’s personal range.

Teachers choosing to use these important alternative methods need to be clear about specifying the learning task and breaking it up into manageable units if it is complex. Students will need monitoring through the exercise, and an external resource person who can offer students help should always be available. It is a good idea to test new material on a sample group so that it can be revised before it reaches the intended audience. Finally, it is vital to ensure that easy access is available to all the materials and that sufficient opportunities for student feedback are built into the course design.

The key, of course, is to begin with good goals and objectives. Helping students more easily attain the goals set for the course should be the main criteria for selecting instructional approaches.

Culturally Inclusive Content

Shulman and Hutchings (1994) advise instructors to think about underlying assumptions throughout the process of planning a course. For example, they suggest that instructors should think about whether their content is inclusive (of varying approaches and viewpoints) or concentrates on only a very narrow perspective, whether their approach takes new developments in the field into consideration, and how their course will complement other courses in the department.

In their approach to curriculum reform, Banks and Banks (1995) suggest that instructors be inclusive in their choice of content. They distinguish among increasingly more complex levels of infusing diversity into the curriculum:

Level 1: The Contributions Approach

Heroes, heroines, holidays, foods, and discrete cultural elements are celebrated occasionally. For example, African American historical figures are only celebrated in February during Black History Month.

Level 2: The Additive Approach

Course content, concepts, lessons, and units are added to the curriculum without changing the structure of the course. For example, instructors might add the book *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker to a unit without changing its structure.

Level 3: The Transformation Approach

The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, and themes from multiple perspectives. For example, a lecture on World War II might address the meaning of the war to African Americans, or a lecture on standard medical practices might be examined in light of eastern or Native American theories of healing.

Level 4: The Action Approach

Students make decisions on important personal, social, and civic problems and take actions to help solve them. For example, a class might study the effects of institutional discrimination practices in higher education and develop an action plan to improve these practices at their institution.

In addition, instructors are expected to make content decisions with a sense of balance, striving to broaden student perspectives and prepare them for subsequent learning experiences. Banks (1997), Adams et al. (1991), and Friedman et al. (1996), just to name a few, have suggested and recommended strategies to integrate content from an interdisciplinary perspective. These and other resources are available through Faculty and TA Development.

Team Teaching and Interdisciplinary Course Planning

As problems become more complex and require multidisciplinary perspectives, collaborations among instructors within and across departments is leading to more cases of interdisciplinary and team teaching. In the special cases of team teaching and interdisciplinary courses, the course planning process follows a similar pattern, but there are added considerations. James Davis (1995) deals with these at length in *Interdisciplinary Courses and Team Teaching*, arguing for the advantages of such arrangements, both for their holistic approach and for their developmental potential and intellectual excitement for both instructors and students. In the case of interdisciplinary courses, he points out, a prior step to the others involved in the usual planning process is what he terms, “Inventing the Subject,” a period of dialogue and exploration during which the instructors and others decide on the principal issues and perspectives that the course will encompass.

Most interdisciplinary courses involve team teaching, but team teaching can also be the strategy of choice in single discipline courses. The strengths of team teaching rest on the belief that multiple perspectives, energy, and talents can enrich a course tremendously. Davis lists eight characteristics of effective teams found in the literature: clear, elevating goal; results-driven structure; competent members; unified commitment; collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. To plan together well takes more coordination, and Davis and others emphasize that clear communication among team members is the key to success. Delegation of responsibilities and frequent checks of results of tasks are important during the planning process.

Although a high level of dialogue is involved, Davis recommends that teams truly work together and avoid the “tag team” syndrome of assigning each a topic or topics and taking charge of the course in serial fashion.

The Syllabus

The Importance of the Syllabus

Following course planning, a syllabus becomes the next vehicle for communicating the structure of the course and operating procedures. It will help students know what is expected from the start of the course and will allow them to plan their quarter efficiently. The opportunity for capricious grading charges will be diminished and a positive image will be presented to the students (a well-prepared syllabus is evidence that the instructor takes teaching seriously). A syllabus also provides the departmental office, supervisor, and/or colleagues with pertinent information about the course. Most university departments require some type of syllabus.

A large number of academic misconduct cases and student complaints have at their root a lack of understanding of the requirements and expectations for performance in a course. A syllabus can consolidate into a single document all of the routine matters that surround teaching a course—reading schedules, grading, due dates, class topics, etc.—that would otherwise have to be communicated in individual conversations with each member of the class.

Simply put, the syllabus is a formal statement of what the course is about, what students will be asked to do, and how their performance will be evaluated. Unlike the comments an instructor makes in class, it is a lasting statement to which students can refer again and again. Careful construction of the syllabus reduces ambiguity and is the first step toward producing an environment in which student learning can flourish.

Preparing an Effective Course Syllabus

One can begin by studying syllabi from other instructors or those that have been used previously in the course being taught. Instructors might also check with their departments for specific guidelines they may have about a syllabus format. The

following are generally included in the syllabus:

1. *Relevant information about the course and instructor.* The information should include the current year and quarter, the name and number of the course and the meeting time (with days of the week), and location. It should also include the instructor’s name, phone number, the location of the instructor’s office, and the times of his or her office hours. The same information should be included for any teaching associates or course assistants. These facts are normally placed at the beginning of the document.
2. *A clear statement of course goals.* The course goals should be as clear as possible and should describe what the students will be expected to know at the end of the quarter, rather than what the instructor plans to do.
3. *A description of the means (or activities) for approaching the course goals.* Possible items include field trips, guest lecturers, discussions with active participation, problem-solving groups, assignments, use of audiovisual materials, etc. The amount of student time required for each activity may be estimated.
4. *A list of the resources to be obtained by the students.* Most important here are the required text(s), course packs, and reading assignments. Their prices and where they are available for purchase or loan should be included. (It is important to check that the bookstore or library will have the text on the shelves before students are sent to find it!) It might also be explained if materials other than text(s) are required of students. Any supplemental materials such as lecture tapes, sample projects, or past tests that are available can be mentioned.
5. *A statement of grading criteria.* This will explain the grading criteria, the components of the final grade, the weighting of various grades, the relationship of class participation and attendance to the final grade, and other relevant information. The number of tests each quarter might be included, along with a description of each test. The numerical equivalent of letter grades can be provided, or the “ranges” of each grade. A fuller explanation of the concept of grading can be found in Chapter 7 on Assessment in this handbook.

6. *A statement of course policies.* This is best expressed in a clear, nonthreatening form. Policies should be set for events such as missing an exam, turning in a late assignment, missing class, requesting an extension, and reporting illness. It is a good idea to go on record with a fairly stringent policy that can be informally tempered at a later date, if and where circumstances so warrant. Absolutes are always more trouble than they are worth. There can also be a short statement defining academic misconduct in one's individual subject. Instructors should indicate that they will follow University Rule 3335-31-02, which requires that "Each instructor shall report to the committee on academic misconduct all instances of what he or she believes may be academic misconduct."
7. *Disability statement.* An important part of the syllabus is a statement that informs students with disabilities that materials are available in alternate form and that accommodations will be made. The Office for Disability Services proposes the following as a good example statement:
- "Any student who feels he/she may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss your specific needs. Please contact the Office for Disability Services at 614-292-3307 in 150 Pomerene Hall to coordinate reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities."
8. *A schedule.* If each class hour is mapped out in detail, this will doubtless be the longest and most time-consuming segment of the syllabus to prepare, although it will be a good investment in a well-organized class. The syllabus should, as a minimum, contain dates with the corresponding sequence of class or lab topics, the preparations that are required or suggested, and the assignment that will be due. The instructor should note holidays and the date and time of any midterms, as well as the final examination. It is up to the instructor to weigh student need for structure and expectations against instructor need for freedom and flexibility.

The Disability Statement

As outlined by the OSU Partnership Grant, a syllabus should include a disability statement,

which indicates the instructor's willingness to provide reasonable accommodations to a student with a disability. The statement should be an invitation to students who have disabilities to meet with the instructor—in a confidential environment—to review course requirements and to discuss his or her need for accommodation. Establishing reasonable accommodations should be considered on a case-by-case basis because of the functional limitations of each individual and because the specific demands of the course will vary. An example of a disability statement is given in the previous section on Preparing an Effective Course Syllabus.

The Office for Disability Services (ODS) is the office responsible for determining appropriate accommodations based on the documentation. The accommodation process should be one of collaboration between student, instructor and the Office for Disability Services. Students already working with ODS have provided that office with documentation of their disability. Instructors should not ask the student for documentation; however, they can request that a letter from ODS be sent to verify the disability. A statement on the syllabus and an announcement in class normalizes the accommodation process by treating it as just another part of the course. However, discussion of these issues with individual students must be handled with sensitivity and awareness of the student's right to privacy.

The Syllabus Has a Personality

Beyond the content of the syllabus is its tone, which can give welcoming or hostile messages. A brief syllabus with strong warnings about policy infringements and no encouraging words about the excitement of the course content may be off-putting. Syllabi that contain humor and enthusiasm can create good first impressions. For example, one syllabus at Ohio State proclaims that the course is "the most exciting calculus course on this or any planet."

One professor at the University of North Dakota (Harris, 1993) posits 10 rules for syllabus construction that take motivation, as well as clarity, into consideration. In a good syllabus, the instructor should:

- ❖ convey enthusiasm for the subject
- ❖ convey the intellectual challenge of the course
- ❖ provide opportunities for students to personalize the content

- ❖ convey respect for the ability of students
- ❖ state course goals positively so that they appear attainable
- ❖ convey the possibility of success in stating grading policy
- ❖ adequately specify assignments
- ❖ vary assignments according to the type of expertise required
- ❖ make provisions for frequent assessment of student learning
- ❖ convey the teacher's desire to help students individually

Similarly, spatial layout can make a difference. Syllabi that are well-designed will certainly be more effective than those that are cramped or typed on poor quality machines.

Several experts recommend going beyond the bare basics of syllabus content. Howard Gabennesch, a sociologist at the University of Southern Indiana, speaks of the “enriched syllabus,” a syllabus that “is a teaching instrument. It highlights those aspects of pedagogy—goals, means, rationale—that might encourage and enable students to cooperate more effectively with the instructor’s efforts” (1992, p. 4). Instructors at Ohio State, meeting as members of a teaching interest group called the Teachers’ Round Table, came up with a document in 1994 containing what they called “Course Guidelines.” The document provides a template for instructors to use in creating a document that is a supplement to the standard syllabus. Course Guidelines would help students know how to be successful in a specific course by offering the instructor’s personal advice on such things as how to manage time well in the course, how to get the most from textbook readings, how to prepare for tests, and the like. The Course Guidelines template is available from Faculty and TA Development. For more detailed information, a step-by-step guide for preparing a “learner-centered” course syllabus is in Grunert (1997).

Using the Syllabus in Class

It is important to check over the final typed copy for mistakes and typos. If the instructor does not spot them, it is certain that the students will. It is good policy to hand out the syllabus on the first day of class, unless the instructor wants to engage students in participating in course planning. Having a syllabus available early in the course lets the students know that their teacher is well-prepared and it provides an easy way to begin the

interaction with students and to reduce some of the uncertainty and anxiety that exists at the beginning of the course.

The instructor will need to review and discuss the syllabus with the students, answering any questions that they may have and providing appropriate amplification where necessary. The instructor will probably find that most student feedback will be generated by the section on grading.

It is vital to have enough copies of the syllabus, and one should allow for the need to replace lost copies and to accommodate students who have registered for the class but do not appear on the initial roster.

If changes are subsequently made in the syllabus, it is a good idea to give them to students in writing. Much ambiguity and confusion can result from half-remembered spoken promises. One way of ensuring an up-to-date and accessible syllabus is to post it on a course web site (with a mention of the most recent update at the top or bottom). See sections in Chapter 6 for more information on using a course web page.

Introducing the Course: The First Day of Class

Meeting a class for the first time often produces a certain amount of anxiety in new, and even experienced, college teachers. Because the first day of class is so important in setting the tone for what is to come, it is crucial to think carefully about how to get the course established.

First Impressions

The first impression students have of instructors is their appearance. While there is no university dress code, departments may have explicit or implicit expectations for how instructors should dress when teaching. Even when there is complete freedom in this matter, it is a good idea to think about it carefully. Casual clothing emphasizes accessibility to students while more formal clothing emphasizes professionalism. If new instructors lack confidence about their ability to command the attention of the class, professional dress may provide an ego boost. Many teachers start with more formal dress and go to more informal clothing as the term progresses.

It is important to remember that initial impressions tend to be lasting and that the way instructors

choose to spend the first day of class will set the tone for the entire quarter. Although traditional first-day practice has often meant merely handing out the syllabus, answering questions about the course, and dismissing the students early, it is better to use the time to establish rapport with students, clarify expectations about the course, gather useful information concerning the students, and generate excitement about the anticipated learning experiences in the course.

Establishing Rapport

A light touch is golden at the first class and interjecting one's own brand of humor will help get things started. However, instructors should be careful of jokes, cartoons, or comments that could be interpreted as racist, sexist, or homophobic. Students who are offended—even if the instructor did not intend to hurt anyone's feelings—will most likely not feel free to voice their objections because of the power distribution in the classroom. It is very difficult to establish a positive teacher-student relationship with students who feel that they are not welcome.

Before the class begins, instructors can help students to know that they are in the correct place by writing the name of the course on the chalkboard. Time before class might be spent by asking students with enrollment problems (wanting to add or drop the course, not sure if they are on the list) to come forward while the others are assembling so that these individual issues can be cleared up. It is important to know in advance the department's policy for approaching these issues. At the start of class, the instructor should state the name and number of the course (and/or the recitation or lab section). It is then important to go through the roster and note which students are present. It is a good idea for instructors to spend a little time introducing themselves. Students are interested in their personal and professional background and interests and will also wonder how they will approach students and the course itself. How much (and what) instructors care to reveal about themselves will depend on individual preferences and style, but the willingness to be personable will help break down some of the forced formality that tends to hinder classroom communication. Students need to know that instructors want to be here teaching them, that they care about the course, and that they will do their best to ensure that each individual makes the best possible progress.

Instructors should make every attempt to learn their students' names as soon as possible. They should familiarize themselves with the names on their rosters before the first day of class. Ice-breakers, name tags or name tents, seating charts, deliberate name use, and games can all help instructors and students learn names. Even in large classes, many instructors are able to learn a majority of student names with a little bit of effort. Several articles on learning names are available through FTAD. Instructors should also let students know what they want to be called. As with clothing, the less formal instructors are, the more accessible they will seem. However, a certain amount of formality can help keep students focused on the material that needs to be covered. At some time during the first class—perhaps when they are calling roll—instructors should give students a chance to let them know how they would like to be addressed.

Clarifying Expectations

After all the informalities, most instructors will hand out their syllabus and verbally go over it, clearly stating such matters as the style and frequency of tests, grading criteria, required materials, and the nature of the assignments. It is also important to offer a summary of the goals for the course and to explain some of the background of the materials that the course will cover and its importance to the students. Time should be allocated for questions. If there are any questions, they should be answered as fully—and as undefensively—as possible. Instructors should try to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking questions about the course. If an instructor wants the class to engage in active learning during the quarter, doing an activity on day one can help set the expectation of participation.

Gathering Information

The more information instructors can glean from their students, the better they will be able to tailor the course to their needs and interests and incorporate relevant examples. Spending some time gathering student information will also help with learning students' names. There are a variety of methods to getting to know students. Some instructors ask the students to talk about themselves for a couple of minutes to the rest of the group. This allows other students, as well as the instructor, to get to know class members. It is often

helpful in promoting a sense of camaraderie and increasing rapport among students in the class, which facilitates class discussions in the long run.

Other instructors suggest handing out index cards and asking the students to answer questions about themselves on the cards (perhaps including their hometown, major, telephone number, why they took the course, their expectations for the quarter, what worries them about the subject, or similar ideas and personal information). They review these cards later and use them to trigger discussions during the quarter as well as to help learn the students' names. Some instructors even ask students to attach a photo to the card or record their students on videotape or still photographs. When ordered in advance, video equipment for this purpose can be delivered to the classroom by Classroom Services (292-3131; see Appendix).

Another option is to ask the students to write a short biographical essay about themselves. (These pieces can be very revealing about the level of their writing skills!) Instructors can even give an anonymous, not-for-grade test that will reveal the level of students' preparation if they are warned that its purpose is only to help in tailoring the course to their needs. Instructors might also try to discover misconceptions held by their students which might impede learning or cause confusion (see the section on misconception and preconception checks in *Classroom Assessment Techniques* by Angelo and Cross, 1993). In addition, instructors might ask students how they prefer to learn (reading, discussion, lecture, etc.) to assist in planning instructional strategies.

As with opening remarks and personal revelations, instructor comments can make the classroom seem welcoming or threatening. If some students seem uncomfortable talking about themselves, they should not be forced to speak. Through reactions to their remarks, instructors can encourage students to treat each other with respect and as equals.

Creating Excitement

At least a few minutes of the first class should be reserved for generating some interest in the course material. It is unproductive if the first meeting is entirely consumed by administrative details. There are many ways to create excitement. Instructors might begin the day with a provocative scenario or activity, or close the day with a burning question to be answered at the start of the next class. Some

instructors show a short film or slides that introduce the subject area in a lighthearted manner. Another option is for instructors to ask students what they want the course to answer, and then explain at what point in the quarter they can look forward to their interest area coming up for debate. Samples of course content can be provided in various other ways—instructors can speak with excitement about a topic that always generates controversy, praise a film that will be shown halfway through the quarter, preview a guest speaker, outline details of a fun field trip, suggest how revealing a given reading assignment can be, or tell the students how much they will enjoy (and learn from) completing some of the assignments that are to follow. Some instructors also conduct a brainstorming session about things that might be added to the course, place a suggestion box in the back of the room, or have students arrange study groups to help them learn collectively. The possibilities are endless.

It is never too soon for feedback. Instructors might ask students to take a few minutes at the end of class to write their reactions to the first day of class or their expectations for the course as a whole. This not only provides early feedback but indicates an interest in learning. It can help in building a learning climate in which students assume more responsibility for, and feel more actively involved in, the teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom.

Creating the Desired Atmosphere

All of the aspects mentioned above can be orchestrated by the teacher to produce a first impression of the atmosphere for the course. Research shows that the tone set on the first day of class (sometimes within the first few minutes) can determine student attitudes for the rest of the quarter. If the instructor is formal (in dress, speech, humor) from the beginning, students will expect this for the remainder. If students are let out early on the first day, they may expect early dismissal as an option for future class sessions. Instructors should also establish ground rules on the first day (eating in class, speaking in turn, respecting others). Teachers who want active participation from their students in the course of the quarter (in discussions, group work, debates) should include such an activity in the first meeting. They may also choose to create an inclusive, supportive environment by arranging chairs in a circle or by using an ice-breaker activity. Instructors often find it a good first impression to

begin with such activities, with administrative concerns following.

Recommended Readings on Course Preparation

Items preceded with an asterisk (*) can be found in the FTAD resource suite.

*Diamond, R. (1998). *Designing and improving courses and curricula: A practical guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Grunert, J. (1997). *The course syllabus: A learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker.

*Kalish, A., & Middendorf, J. (n.d.) Course planning guide. Ohio State Faculty and TA Development.

*McKeachie, W. J. (1999). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (10th ed.). Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin.