Ep. 001: The Successful First Day of Class

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Read the syllabus, get out early… right? Wrong!

We challenge common assumptions (made by both faculty and students) about what should happen on the first day of class. Discover how to set expectations, establish the culture of your class, and lay the groundwork for an enthusiastic and productive semester. CTLT Director Claire Lamonica and Jim Gee discuss how to plan for a successful first day of class... which should be much, much more than "Syllabus Day."

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.**JIM:** Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee And joining me today is Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director here at CTLT. Hi, Claire.**CLAIRE:** Hi, Jim.

JIM: So, welcome. This is our first official podcast.

CLAIRE: I know I'm excited.

JIM: It's a little frightening

CLAIRE: and nervous.

JIM: I know, I was... one of our colleagues was in here and I'm like, we've gotten the feed figured out. We've made some progress today.

CLAIRE: We've procrastinated all can we're gonna actually have to do this.

JIM: Well, and that's. And speaking of procrastinating great segue coming up here. Speaking of procrastinating, we are going to be talking today about getting ready for that first day of class, which I as someone who still occasionally teaches, I have to kind of get my courage built up and get my wherewithal in place so that I can do that. So, as we begin to talk about what makes us successful first day of class, let me just ask you, What, in your experience makes a successful first day of class? And then we'll talk about how do you get there?

CLAIRE: Okay. Well, in my experience, what makes the first successful day of class, a successful first day of class is that the students come back for the second day of class. So I always actually start the second day of class by saying, Oh, thank you so much for coming back. Because I, I feel like that means I sort of succeeded on the first day of class, because actually, there are students who kind of shop, you know, they they go to maybe some extra first days of class, and then they finalize their schedule. I don't know

if they can still do that so much. It used to be maybe more prevalent, but yeah, and maybe now, you know.

JIM: Well, it's certainly it's certainly easier for them to change classes, probably if they're not classes that require an over override to get

CLAIRE: or a pre req.

JIM: or something like that. So there may still happen. And of course, there's word of mouth to get around to, but that's a whole that's another podcast there.

CLAIRE: That's another podcast. Yeah. Right. So I want to actually want to start with a story.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: So, I am genetically, an infamous eavesdropper. I can't help it. It's built into my jeans. My mother was also an infamous eavesdropper. And I was walking across the quad one day last fall on a surprise, the first day of class. And there were two young men walking in front of me having a conversation and I was eavesdropping. And one of the said to the other, so how's your first day of classes going? And the other one said, oh, you know, go over the syllabus get out early, same old, same old. And I thought, well, that's distressing. Ya know, here, they come back to school, especially in the fall. And they've, most of them had a good chunk of the summer off. Maybe they've been working, they've been doing other things. And they I think that really, the majority of our students do come to the school on the first day of class, kind of jazzed up there. You know, we're kind of jazzed up if we're not petrified. I'd note some people are just, you know, they're just, I have a friend who said after she'd been teaching for 20 years that I still throw up on the first day of every semester. So, you know, I don't personally have that response to it, but I get it, some people do. But I think that a lot of that energy and excitement gets wasted when we spend our first day of class, going over the syllabus and letting people out early

JIM: In in your story. Okay, that reminds me of the experience I had last fall, teaching incoming freshmen to the to the basic speech course Com 110 here on campus, and it was 8am. Monday, you remember we talked about this first class, first class and I wanted to do I was so thrilled that I was doing your first class for college. And I and a couple weeks later one of them had said to me Oh, yeah, I guess we did talk about that on Syllabus day. Ah, and I and then I had looked in and some of the social media coming from students on campus on things like Twitter and what is the Yik Yak yak yak the one I you know, yeah.

CLAIRE: And that is where you eavesdrop?

JIM: That's where I eavesdrop. That's exactly right. I was eavesdropping on Yik Yak and they were talking about Yeah, yeah, man. You do nothing. This week. It's syllabus week. And I was a little guest, but I was especially that freshmen were so quickly. So quick to pick up on...

CLAIRE: They learn that really fast. Yeah. So it's part of the lore of the university. So I think that we need to take advantage of some opportunities to that same old, same old, and I think we need to think strategically about what am I trying to accomplish the first day of class. So, for example, one thing we might want to accomplish on the first day of class, is to start building a community of learners, especially for those of us who view learning as a social process. Um, so that might mean, giving students an opportunity to get to know us. So telling them something about ourselves. And I don't mean, listing where we went to school and what our degrees are, I mean, telling them something about why we became experts in this field, what was there that fascinated us?

JIM: Yeah Okay.

CLAIRE: Maybe what was our first experience with this discipline that got us so excited that we went on to spend a huge chunk of our lives studying this discipline, and learning as much as we could about it, or at least about some very teeny tiny part of it. So that's important, I think getting them to know us as, as people who are excited about this, this subject. Getting to know them. And not, you know, I'm terrible with names. I mean, I'm so terrible with names, it takes me three weeks to learn the students names and a 23 person class. And then, you know, two weeks after the end of the semester, they're just gone. And I see them and I can't remember. So I'm just really bad with names. But finding ways to get to know something about them, I think is important. And there are a lot of ways to do that. Some people hand out little surveys, some people give out index cards, some people have students interview each other and then introduce each other to the class. So, but it, I find that it helps me learn names, when I know something sort of different about each student. And that's, that's helpful. And giving them a chance to get to know each other. And this is really important. If we do subscribe to a theory of social constructivism, or, you know, student learning being a social process. So, um, maybe having them interview each other, whatever, whatever it takes, I'm always kind of sad, when I get to the end of the semester, and a student says, you know, that guy that sits in the corner, and they don't know that student's name. And they've been in class together for 16 weeks. And so I feel like help giving them a chance to get to know each other, which I might have said twice. So I don't know

JIM: Let me ask you, do you do you have suggestions, if I'm teaching, say, a large lecture format course? Because you and I both, for the most part, I think, have taught more seminar sized courses in the past. And the the size of the class always seems to be kind of the caveat whenever we talked about best teaching practices around CTLT. So what would you would you have any suggestions on ways that you could scale up some of these ideas?

CLAIRE: I think I would, I would, first of all, take that index card idea, and hand each student an index card as they come in, and then have maybe four or five questions up on a PowerPoint at the front of the room, and ask them just to address those questions. And they might be something like, you know, What's your preferred name? What do you want to be called? Or they might be things like, Have you ever taken a course in this in this subject before? What's your what? What's your burning question about this course? Or about? What do you think we're going to be learning in this course, just

some things to sort of, and they can, and they can hand those in, you can collect, you know, 300 index cards pretty quickly, they can drop them in boxes as they leave nothing else. So that's one thing. I also think in a large lecture class, having them get to know the students on either side of them, and maybe front and back. So you know, rather than thinking of the community of learners as those 300 students in that class, maybe it's those three or four students that sit in close proximity to each other, right, and they get to know each other and some instructors ask them to exchange information. So what's your ULID? You know, can I eat if I miss class? Can I email you and ask for the notes

JIM: Kind of a learning version of a swimming buddy? Yeah, or something? Yeah, yeah.

CLAIRE: So. So those are, those are some ways that you can sort of scale it up for a large lecture. I also think an important thing to do on the first class is to engage students in ongoing processes and procedures. So if there are certain things that you're going to expect students to do, maybe every class or at least with some regularity, engage them in those the first day of class. So for example, I often teach writing classes, right. And it is an expectation in my writing class that when you get to class, you will open up a document and you'll start writing. And I usually provide a prompt, and it's usually online. So in this day and age, it would be in ReggieNet. And so on the first day of class, before students do anything else, I may say, Hey, open up a document, here's where you're going to find a prompt, let's spend a few minutes writing, because this is a writing class. And that writing might, it might be an introduction of themselves, it might also be a sort of prior knowledge assessment. So my favorite first day writing assignment for a long time, maybe still is, tell me what you already know about good writing. And that's very revealing. When I read thoses

JIM: I bet it is. And that's something that can be applied across the disciplines to it doesn't have to be you can tell me what you know about chemistry or, you know, tell me what you know about communication theory, or something like that. And then and they don't have to, you don't have to be in a computer lab to do that. Now, hopefully, they're bringing a notebook pad and paper the first day. at least on the first day.

CLAIRE: On the first day Send me a text.

JIM: Yeah, they may not want

CLAIRE: Or an email?

JIM: Well, you could, you could have them tweet to a certain place, you could have them you know, if you want to open up the Pandora's box, that is bring out your smartphone or class, which again, is another episode so...

CLAIRE: Well, and that and and that's a that's a nice thing to think about is introducing them to the culture of the class. So what are your expectations about technology and about smartphone use if you're going to use smartphones for for learning, hey, pull them out the first day, and let's use them and let's get them thinking about that piece of technology as a learning tool rather than a texting home to mom tool. This class is boring. Help get me out.

JIM: Right?

CLAIRE: You don't really want that going on.

JIM: So, so quickly along those lines when you're talking about? Or, you know, oftentimes I teach an evening course, that's that's three hours long. Yeah. And so having a portion of that first day, be kind of first week, the first week it well, it is the first week. So there's a lot to accomplish. But I try to avoid having it, you know, at least part of it come across like the 10 commandments, like I'm up there, and then giving them the thou shalt and thou shalt nots. But you also, don't you feel like you need to verbalize what's in the syllabus at least once?

CLAIRE: No. Well, I don't.

JIM: Okay, that's good.

CLAIRE: I personally don't. Most people 99% of people do. And, and I get that. But I think about I think you have to think about why you're doing that and what you're actually accomplishing. So reading your policies out loud to them, is not. It's not an effective learning experience for them. And especially if everybody's doing it, they're not going to remember who said they could have, you know, three absences, and who said they could have two absences. And who said they could have no absences. I mean, it's just, it's just, you know, especially if they're thinking it's syllabus day, they're going to sit there, yeah, it's going in one ear, it's going out the other.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, I think there are more effective ways to get the information into students actually get it into their heads. And a lot of people do this much more effectively than I so my standard procedure is to email the syllabus out before the first day of class. And to have the first assignment be read the syllabus and send me an email telling me that you've read the syllabus, asking any questions you have about the syllabus, and agreeing to the policies described in the syllabus. Other people put them online and ReggieNet, and they have a syllabus quiz, or they have a syllabus, scavenger hunt, you can do some really creative things that actually get people interacting with the syllabus, which is much more effective than sort of delivering the syllabus to them. Because we talk all the time about how just standing in front of people being a talking head isn't the best, the most effective method of teaching. So I think we want to get them engaged with the syllabus rather than just essentially reading it to them. Does that work for you?

JIM: No, it does work for me. And I think you're right. I think a lot of us, myself included, always kind of feel like this is probably the only time they're ever going to hear this stuff or consume this information. They're not going to read the syllabus in depth. Yeah. And

CLAIRE: just like any other assignment, they probably won't if you just assign it and don't follow up right? But if you assign it and have them do something with it. If they do take a syllabus quiz or do a syllabus, scavenger hunt or whatever, then fill out a syllabus

crossword I don't know what that would look like. But I think that would be interesting to do,

JIM: You could try that.

CLAIRE: You could try that. Anything to really get them digging through the syllabus and looking at it.

JIM: So obviously, that's going to require making some changes to the boilerplate syllabus that you've been using for the last 10 years, perhaps. So so we can talk about that at some other time. But let's get back to the first day and making that first day, a successful one, what else would you suggest?

CLAIRE: So, we've talked about establishing a community of learners or starting to do that, that takes some time, engaging students in ongoing processes and procedures. So if there's something they need to do first, every time if there's something they're going to do last, so a one minute paper, a muddiest point, some kind of reflection at the end of class, do that the first day as well. If your class is largely discussion based, I would suggest having a discussion the first day of class, if students are going to be doing a lot of problem solving, I'd suggest doing some problem solving on the first day of class. So get them to know what it is they're going to be doing during class. If they're just going to be listening during class, you might as well read them yourself as the first day because whatever.

JIM: Right. Right, yeah, exactly.

CLAIRE: Right. Exactly. Um, okay, then I also think that we, it's, it's important and exciting to engage students with the content of the class on the first day. And some of these things can be combined, right? These aren't like three separate things that you're doing, you can build a community as learners of learners as you're engaging them with the content, or you can engage with the content through the processes and procedures of the class. So that's, that's okay. But you can also use the first day of class to identify or assess prior knowledge or assumptions. Okay, like I was talking about, tell me what you already know about good writing, tell me what you already know about X, whatever. Chemistry, I know, they changed the atom after I graduated from high school, I'm just saying, I'm not bitter about it, but they did. I think that you can maybe have a demonstration of what they'll be able to do by the conclusion of the course. So especially if there's something that is really hard that they can't imagine that they would ever be able to do. Maybe some really hard equation solving, you know, solving some hard kind of equation or something like that, just sort of doing it for them, or having examples of things that students did in prior semesters that are pretty sharp, you know, maybe students created podcasts or posters or whatever, showing those off. Just jumpstarting their learning, and some engaging ways to you know, getting them involved on the first day with what's what's going to happen. And I think your goal, as I sort of said at the beginning, is to make them eager to return for the second day of class, right, in part by distinguishing yourself and your course, and proving that you're not the same old, same old.

JIM: Right. Right. That sounds like some great advice. And it probably is something I would imagine it takes a little bit of practice. Oh, so So what advice to kind of wrap this up? What advice would you give to someone who comes in for consultation here at CTLT? are someone who just stops you and says, I had such high hopes for that first day, but boy, it was a dud. How do you how do you get back on the horse? What do you do to salvage that sort of thing? If you don't have a good first day?

CLAIRE: Yeah, I think you might just go in the second day and admit that, say, You know what, thanks for coming back. Last time, didn't go as I had hoped, um, here's what I think might have gone wrong, or here's what we're gonna do differently moving forward. And then just, you know, have your first day of class again.

JIM: And I like that, it doesn't have to be, you don't have to bare your soul. It doesn't have to be a huge dramatic moment. In fact, I don't think students would really tolerate that that much. They expect you to be a professional facilitator of learning. But I like that is saying, hey, you know, we all in other words, kind of acknowledging what everyone already knows, is a way of moving past it. Right?

CLAIRE: You know, sometimes our first day of classes don't meet our hopes or dreams or expectations. So somebody who'd just earned their PhD sort of, you know, last Thursday, and this Monday, they're teaching their first college class, and oh, my gosh, it meets for three hours on Monday night, right? And that class is probably not going to live up to their expectations either. So I think going back and saying on the second time and saying, Wow, you know what, by the end of that first class, I had lost my voice. My throat was sore the whole next day. We're gonna try to do something different moving forward.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And here's what we're going to try tonight. Let's see how this works. Okay,

JIM: That's great. So what what was your best final question? What was your best first day of class? And I would say, either as a teacher, or as a student, do you do have a particularly memorable? First day of class or is it or is it more along the lines of the the good classes? You we presume you they had it they started off? Well?

CLAIRE: Yes. I mean, I think my first, my first my favorite thing to do on the first day of classes this whole. Oh, I do have I do have one.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: I have one. So my most, my craziest first day of class, or maybe my favorite first day of class was 1985. And I've just been hired as a part time instructor in the Department of English. And I got a letter inviting me to come to New writing instructor orientation. And I, that was the week before classes started. And I went, and I found out that starting that year, or the year before, all writing classes were being taught in computer labs. And I hand to heart had never touched a personal computer before. I had no idea. I they I walked into this computer lab and I thought I'm gonna have to quit this job. I don't know how to operate these machines.

JIM: So there are a lot of if a lot of students heard you say that they just couldn't fathom it. But I bet there are probably a lot of faculty members right now who can't imagine not having

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Being in that position.

CLAIRE: Yeah. So, so that year 1985, I think it was my first day of class was teaching the students how to use the computers, because the students didn't know either. And so I so I had the, I had the assignment, tell me, tell me 10 things that you already know about good writing. And I phrased it that way, because I had to teach them really basic things like, there, you don't have to hit return when you get to the end of the line. Seriously,

JIM: Yeah. Yeah.

CLAIRE: We're all looking around for the return button.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: I said, you just keep writing and it automatically goes back over to the left. It's so cool. We were all so excited. It was just crazy. But I also had to show them how to save Ctrl K, you know, and how to turn on the computer, how to turn it off how to how to save how to print, we had these printers, you know, with the round holes on the edges. And they all went awry in the students papers like came in all crooked and everything. So yeah, that was probably my most memorable first day of class and and I loved it. I mean, by the time I'd been working on a personal computer for a day, I thought it was the best invention ever. I didn't want to go home that night. I called my husband Hi, can you fix dinner for the kids? Because yeah, I'm real busy learning how to use this thing. So, it was I thought it was awesome. And I think the fact that I was really excited about it, I probably helped make that a pretty exciting first day of class for all of us.

JIM: Well, Claire, thank you so much. Thank you so much for talking to us about making that successful first day of class. I guess maybe our next podcast will have to be the successful second day of class for a while, for 16 weeks. So that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology on our website that CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Until next time, for all of us here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. I'm Jim Gee. Thanks for listening.