

Teaching Methods Especially Effective for First-Year Students

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The role of the teacher of first-year students is often a juggling act. On the one hand, we need to be supportive, open, and friendly toward new students especially. However, the skills and values we teach must encourage student independence and self-sufficiency, not dependency. Our central goal is to enhance our students' efforts to learn how to be successful college students. We must find a viable balance between essential skills, knowledge, and the kinds of involving activities that best will convey what students must learn. In short, we are proponents of experiential learning. My favorite metaphor for teaching first-year students is that of "The Journey." We, as educators, are the guides. Our role is to help our students develop responsibility, self-sufficient, and competence. Consequently, the visibility of our role should decrease as the semester/course progresses.

To be an effective guide, we must get to know our students and continue to be aware of student needs and student changes throughout the academic semester. Ice breakers are particularly effective if they subtly convey information about students both to each other and to the faculty or staff member. Various means of feedback give/require students the opportunity to share information/reactions to you, your course, your college or university, and their experiences as first-year college students. The favorite ice breakers we use are: the name chain, the personal scavenger hunt, the lifeline, the newspaper headline exercise, and student one-to-one interviews/introductions.

The key strategy is to use the first week, or even the first two weeks, to build a sense of class openness, interest in learning, interest in each other, and interest in the instructor. The intention is to personalize the instruction. We must ensure that every student speaks out in class several times in the very first class session. This will help to build the community of co-learners. It also is essential to give the students a sense of ownership in determining some of the class activities. If the students feel it is their class, they will work harder both for themselves and for their fellow group/team partners.

One of the best means to being about this idealized class transformation is for each of us as instructors to become the model student. Of course at first we will become the team leader, but that role should change as the semester progresses to one more of a team player who occasionally will lead.

We must structure activities so our students can put their own personality/values on our class letterhead. Every class should develop a unique personality. *Every class will be different.* Our role is to help our students develop that positive group identity within the context of structures learning/skills experience.

A major outcome we seek to achieve is that of higher retention rates. Consequently, we must encourage our students to pursue learning actively and with a sense of pleasure.

Also, we must personalize our institutions. We must show our students how they fit in comfortably with the values/traditions of our college or university. If students experience a sense of success and feel that they belong at our institutions of higher education, they will perform better and tend to remain longer with us. The bottom line then is to enhance retention through enhanced student performance.