

Top-Ten Strategies for Building Student *Interest* in and *Motivation* for the First-Year Seminar

1. *Intercept* or “*short-circuit*” potential negative perceptions of the course by addressing them *in print*—in the course syllabus, and *in person*—during the first week of class.

Listed below is a series of points that could be made to serve this purpose.

- * Point out that there are many *research* studies on new-student seminars or student success courses, which demonstrate that *student retention* (persistence to college graduation) and *academic performance* (GPA) are significantly higher for students who take this course.
- * Highlight the fact that the course has emerged from an *international movement* (the “first-year experience”), which is designed to enhance the success of *all students*. So, the course is *not* “remedial;” students attending selective colleges also take courses like this.
- * Remind students that this is more than just a student-success course; it is a *life-success* course because many of the topics covered are relevant to life after college. To confirm this argument, suggest to them that if they browse through the self-improvement section of any popular bookstore they will find best-selling, up-to-date books (e.g., Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*), which deal with the very same topics as those in the freshman seminar. So, if students are able to put into practice even just a few ideas discussed in the course, they should improve their success in both college and life.
- * Point out to students that the course focuses on the development of *skills, strategies, habits, and attitudes*, which are (a) *transferable*—that have the versatility and flexibility to be applied to different academic subjects and professional careers, and (b) *durable*—that are likely to endure the test of time and be retained long after the course ends (unlike courses that emphasize memorization of factual information).
- * Inform students that this is a unique course and will probably be the only college course in which the content derives from, and centers on the *person* taking the class—the *student*—rather than on an external body of knowledge that reflects the academic interests and priorities of scholars and researchers in a particular field of study. As one former student anonymously wrote in an evaluation of the freshman seminar, “This was the only course that was about me.”
- * To counteract student complaints that the course should not be mandatory, point out that this not the only mandatory course in the college curriculum—it’s just one of many general-education requirements (and one that has *more research support* for its positive impact on student success than any of the other courses they are “forced” to take). Just as students are required to learn how to “do math” in their required math courses, it’s reasonable that they should be required to learn how to “do college” in this course.
- * To combat complaints that the course is covering material that is “simple,” “obvious,” or just “common sense”: (a) Remind them that it’s precisely because some of these ideas are so simple and basic that they are *often overlooked or ignored*. (One freshman seminar instructor with a

Ph.D. in the field of learning and memory confesses to his class that he has picked up useful tips on learning, memory, and time management as a result of teaching the course, and the course has made him aware of other ineffective habits that he still needs to correct!). (b) Give them a *pre-test* during the first week of class on concepts to be discussed in the course, and score (but do not grade) the test to demonstrate to students that they do not already know everything (or even most things) that will be explored in the course.

* Cite *quotes* taken from the *course evaluations of students in previous classes* that can serve as testimony for the course's value, and/or *bring former students to class* who you know had valued the course (e.g., an alumni panel).

* Employ teaching strategies that are known to enhance students' *intrinsic interest* in the learning process, such as the following:

- a) instructional *variety*—e.g., multi-media, guest speakers, panels, debates, self-reflection, case studies, role plays, simulations, open forums (more details provided in next section);
- b) *student-centered* learning activities that take the instructor “off stage”—e.g., self-assessment exercises, paired peer interactions, & small-group work;
- c) *personal choice* in the learning process—e.g., students self-select topics for projects/reports; students select/rank from a menu of topics those they would like for the instructor to cover in class (more details provided in next section);
- d) *personalized* learning—e.g., instructor-student and student-student ice-breakers and community-building experiences; this should be the class where everyone knows everyone else's name (more details provided in next section);
- e) *experiential* learning (e.g., opportunities for “hand on” learning experiences such as student-conducted interviews; cross-cultural encounters; service-learning projects).

2. Individualize the course—make it a class in which students have some *personal choice* about what they learn.

For example:

- > During the first week of class, have students rank *topics* in terms of their relevance or interest to them, and attempt to spend more class time on students' highly-ranked topics.
- > When course topics are encountered during the term, have students rate or rank *subtopics* they would be most interested in, and attempt to accommodate their preferences.
- > When assigning projects or papers, try to provide students with a *topic “menu”* from which they may choose the one(s) that most interest them—e.g., students who pick a similar topic could be teamed together to complete a group project on their topic of common interest.

Research strongly suggests that when students are allowed some personal choice, control, or self-determination with respect to their learning experience, they become more *intrinsically motivated*

to learn.

3. Make it a *reflective* course in which students not only acquire information, but also are encouraged to step back, take stock, react to, or reflect on what they're learning.

The "minute paper" questions included in the *Sourcebook* may be very effective for promoting student reflection at the end of a class session. (They are also a good way to take attendance without formally "calling roll" or having students "sign in.") You can convert these minute-paper sheets into transparencies and project them on a screen or wall at the end of class, thus saving yourself blackboard writing time (and possible chalk-dust inhalation).

4. Make it a *student-centered* course in which students work independent of the teacher, and assume more personal responsibility for their own learning, by occasionally "sharing the stage" with students, or allowing students to move to "center stage."

When college faculty in a wide variety of academic disciplines were interviewed about their course planning strategies, it was found that they "barely mentioned making choices among instructional strategies" (Stark et al., 1990, p. 145). This habit should not be repeated in the freshman-seminar course planning process. As much forethought should be given to *how* instruction will be delivered as to what material will be covered; the *process* of teaching is as important to student learning as its content.

When planning your selection of instructional methods for the freshman seminar, it may be useful to conceive of classroom teaching techniques as ranging along a continuum from *instructor-centered* to *student-centered*. Extreme, instructor-centered teaching is best illustrated by the uninterrupted, formal lecture whereby the instructor does all the talking and is in complete control of the class agenda. In contrast, student-centered classroom instruction involves less instructor domination and shifts more communication, control, and responsibility to the students. While, I acknowledge that lecturing may be the method of teaching that we are most familiar with, and most comfortable with, because it gives a sense of class control (monologue is less risky than dialogue), I think we need to deviate from tradition and take some risks in the first-year seminar, because its class size and course objectives are different than those of discipline-centered, content-driven courses. Probably the best general rule to follow when planning the teaching process for the seminar is to use *active, student-centered* learning strategies as much as possible. For example:

- (a) Have students engage in *small-group work* (e.g., after reading a powerful passage or case study) and have individual groups report back their work products to the whole class.
- (b) Let your students *come "up front"* and do some teaching—by making individual or group presentations to the class—particularly on topics that are familiar to them (e.g., college stressors, dating/romance, substance use/abuse).
- (c) Instead of relying exclusively on the "*straight lecture*," use what I call the "*shared lecture*," whereby students first share what they know (or think they know) about the topic. Students often have some familiarity or experience with many topics covered in the freshman seminar; this can be capitalized on to draw them into

the learning process and to draw out their prior knowledge (and misconceptions—e.g., about how to learn, remember, or manage time). After students have contributed their ideas, then your prepared material, identifying ideas that students have already anticipated by underlining (and validating) them, then adding your ideas (from lecture notes) to create a jointly produced composite or “master list,” which reflects the *shared* efforts of both students and instructor.

5. Make it an *experiential* course, whereby students get the opportunity for some direct, “hands on” learning experiences.

For example, build-in *course assignments* that promote experiential learning, such as: conducting interviews with faculty, staff, or students from different cultural backgrounds; shadowing someone in an intended career profession; and service learning projects.

6. Bring *variety* to the course.

(a) Use *multiple* methods of *teaching/learning*—e.g., mini-lectures, whole-class discussions, small-group discussions, paired peer interactions, self-reflection exercises, role plays, case studies, guest speakers, panel presentations, open forums. Such variety not only contributes to improved student interest and motivation, it also more serves to accommodate their different learning styles.

(b) Use *multiple* methods of *student evaluation and grading*—e.g., quizzes and exams involving different test-question formats (multiple-choice, essays, etc.) and drawn from different sources (class lectures, discussions, assigned readings, etc.); in-class exercises and out-of-class assignments; individual and group projects/presentations. Such variety and balance serves not only to increase the comprehensiveness of assessment, it also serves to increase its validity—because it incorporates multiple measures and indices of student learning.

(c) Use *multimedia*—e.g., overhead transparencies, power point, educational videos, relevant TV or movie segments, artifacts, audiotapes or CDs. Such variations provide changes of routine and shifts in postural position which tend to capture student attention, keeping the learner more awake, alert, and motivated.

In particular, timely use of *visual* aids, images and illustrations may be an extremely effective teaching tool because it can provide concrete illustrations of abstract concepts—giving them a tangible presence. It also allows the concept to be processed in a dual code (semantically and visually), resulting in storage of double memory traces in the brain. Moreover, there is evidence that alternating information presentation between aural (semantic) and visual modalities tends to increase human attention to the information being presented.

Pictures culled from books, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, and the Internet that may be used to illustrate textbook topics (e.g., a “map” of the brain to illustrate the concept of multiple intelligences). As instructors, perhaps one element of our class preparation might be the identification and collection of an arsenal of poignant pictures or images that may be used to reinforce, extend, and enrich our class presentations.

Another way to capitalize on the educative power of vision is through the use of “concept maps” designed to graphically organize or summarize multifaceted concepts, and to depict the relationships among them in diagrammatic form. For example, the holistic development/wellness

wheel can effectively integrate the curricular and co-curricular components of the college experience and depict how they contribute to the development of the “whole person.” I realize that we are not graphic designers, but we are capable of conceptualizing or visualizing basic concept maps (e.g., flow charts, spider-web diagrams) that could effectively depict some of our more important and complex course concepts. Once conceived and roughly sketched out, we could then turn to our desktop publishing department on campus to help us transform these sketches into bona fide concept maps.

(d) Incorporate *periodic* presentations from different *guest speakers*. New faces can provide some instructional variety, introduce students to key support-and-development professionals, and take some of the teaching load off you—particularly on topics that are far from your area of expertise. To prepare students for the speaker, ask them to construct at least one question in advance of the presentation. Also, you can keep track of spontaneous questions or concerns that students have raised in class that relate to the speaker’s topic, and submit these to the speaker as additional agenda items. These questions could be given to the speaker as topics to be covered during the presentation, or time could be reserved for students to ask their questions during their presentation. Possible guest speakers and topics they could address include the following:

- * Library Professional (Academic Services)
- * Learning Center Professional (Academic Services or Cognitive Development)
- * Director of Student Development Services or Student Activities (Co-Curriculum)
- * Honors Students (Academic Success Strategies)
- * Personal Counseling Services (Social or Emotional Development)
- * Career Counseling/Vocational Development
- * Psychology Department (Improving Attention/Concentration/Memory)
- * Philosophy Department (Moral Reasoning & Ethical Development)
- * Academic Dean (Meaning & Value of Liberal Arts/General Education)
- * Campus Ministry (Spiritual Development)
- * Health Services (Physical Development/Wellness)

If you do use a guest speaker, consider having that person videotaped by an A-V worker or student if your class. This may enable other class sections to “see” your guest speaker without burdening that same person with the redundant task of making multiple visits to different classes. Also, you can use the video as a vehicle for assessing your students’ listening and note-taking skills by playing it back and identifying segments of the presentation when key information was delivered that should have appeared in their notes.

(e) Use a variety of *student-assessment methods*.

The following practices are recommended for providing multiple and varied assessments of student performance in the first-year seminar.

- * Devise assignments that require students to express or communicate knowledge in different modes (e.g., written reports, oral reports, slide or video presentations).
- * Construct assignments that require students to work both individually (e.g., personal journals) and in groups or teams (e.g., group projects or group presentations). Research

indicates that students vary appreciably in terms of what evaluation procedures they feel most comfortable with (Lowman, 1984; McKeachie, 1986) so, by not using one method exclusively, you are sure to include at least something that appeals to everyone.

- * Construct exams that are comprised of different types of test questions, including essays and “objective” test items (e.g., multiple choice). Using both types of questions will result in a more balanced assessment of different cognitive skills. Essays will require students to recall information and produce or supply answers on their own, while multiple-choice items will require students to recognize information and select discriminately from already-supplied alternatives.

The point is, there is no absolute or clear-cut advantage associated with choosing one or the other of these basic types of test questions, so test construction in the freshman seminar should not involve an either-or decision between these two testing formats. Instead, a combination of them will enable students to exercise different academic skills. Multiple-choice questions typically place more emphasis on critical reading and analytical reasoning skills, while essay questions place more emphasis on writing and the cognitive skills of integration or synthesis. Such balance will result in more reliable assessment—by offsetting the testing disadvantages of one format with the advantages of the other, and more equitable assessment—by not exposing students to a testing format that focuses heavily on only one type of academic or cognitive skill—one that may not coincide with the student's personal strength, aptitude, or learning style. (For example, a student whose writing skills are not yet well developed may be unduly penalized by a course in which all exams are comprised entirely of essay questions.)

7. Do not using the *lecture method* on topics that relate to the need for students to *make changes in their attitude or behavior* (e.g., self-discipline, personal responsibility, character development.)

Being “lectured” to by an authority figure on topics such as these can often lead to student resistance and defensiveness. Instead, attempt to cover (or uncover) these topics via self-assessment exercises and small-group discussions. Research has repeatedly shown that students do not change their attitudes, modify their behavior, or develop their “character” by listening to lectures. These educational objectives are more effectively achieved when students actively engage in personal reflection and interpersonal interaction.

8. Maintain *flexibility*.

For instance, if an animated class discussion happens to emerge on an unplanned topic that still relates to the goals of the course, then “go with the flow” rather than “short-circuit” it in order to stick rigidly to the scheduled lesson for the day. It might even be useful to schedule one or two class sessions as “open forums,” which allow students to set their own agenda by raising any questions or concerns they have about their first experiences in college. (Naturally, parameters or ground rules may have to be set for such sessions—e.g., no citing names of particular individuals; each complaint cited must be followed by suggested solutions or remedies before another complaint is raised).

9. Share your personal experiences.

Concepts covered in the first-year seminar lends themselves naturally to sharing of our college personal experiences, both as former first-year students and as current professionals working with first-year students. Our sharing of relevant personal experiences in class serves to humanize the classroom experience and capitalize on the attention-grabbing power of self-disclosure. Furthermore, by sharing our experiences, we are modeling the very behavior that we hope students will engage in during the course, and increasing the likelihood that students will emulate and reciprocate the personal authenticity we display. Lastly, personal anecdotes effectively promote *learning*, because they provide students with real, “human” examples that concretely illustrate course concepts. The late Kenneth Eble, a well-regarded scholar on the process of teaching, eloquently captures the educational value of the anecdote:

The personal anecdote that illuminates an idea or clarifies a concept is neither ego-indulgence nor more wandering from truth. The personal is a way of gaining the kind of interest absolutely necessary to learning. Moreover, an anecdotal account of how some aspect of the subject matter itself came to have value for the teacher exerts a powerful force upon the student to grant that subject matter personal worth (Eble, 1976, *The Craft of Teaching*, p. 13).

10. Maintain and display your sense of humor.

Incorporation of *humor* into the first-year seminar teaching and learning process is highly recommended. Fear of being perceived as “unprofessional” or “losing control” of the class may inhibit some instructors from incorporating content-relevant and socially appropriate humor in the classroom. Remember, something funny is not necessarily something frivolous. If you have a humorous *personal anecdote* that is related to, or illustrative of, the concept under discussion, don’t hesitate to share it. Since humor is so rarely found in the “serious” realm of academic textbooks and lectures, the sheer element of incongruity or surprise alone is often enough to ensure student laughter.

Also, use of concept-relevant *cartoons* can command immediate student attention to the concept being taught, as well as provide an effective (and affective) visual illustration of the concept that should serve to enhance its retention (memory). Numerous cartoons about the college experience in general, and the first-year experience in particular, can be found in newspapers, periodicals, journals, books, and Internet sites. They can be easily transformed into very visible overhead projections by cutting them out, enlarging them, and then photocopying them onto a transparency sheet. Cartoons may be used in the following educationally effective ways:

- (a) To “punctuate” lectures class presentations with concept-relevant humor that maintains or regains student attention;
- (b) By having a cartoon already projected before class begins to serve as an attention-grabbing prompt for students while they mill into the classroom, thereby creating a positive first impression of the class lesson, as well as inducing a jovial mood (by elevating brain chemicals known as endorphins) and a sense of anticipatory excitement (by elevating adrenaline);
- (c) As tension cutters on *exams*;

(d) As *office-door decorations* to reduce student trepidation and increase student motivation to seek contact with you outside the classroom. (Note: student-faculty contact outside the classroom is a factor that has been strongly linked to students' retention, academic achievement, and educational aspirations).

So, be sure to cut-out your favorites out and use them as overhead transparencies in class, as tension-cutters on quizzes or exams, to adorn class handouts, the syllabus, or your office door. These small gestures serve to build rapport with the class, promote retention of course concepts illustrated by the cartoon and, most importantly, show students that you are human.

References

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