Making the Most of the First Day of Class

The first day of class for a new course tends to go one of two ways: an overview of the syllabus and course requirements, and an early exit, or a dive head first into course content. Neither of these approaches sets the stage for an inviting learning experience in which students feel engaged and a part of the course. However, with some minor adjustments, the first day of class can prove to be one of the most meaningful of the semester.

Make a Connection by “Hooking” Students

By making some changes in the structure of the first day of class, faculty can “hook” their students and get them excited about the class. Medina (2009) suggests that particularly meaningful hooks are ones that trigger an emotion. One way to hook students is to begin creating an environment of sharing and openness, which fosters calm and even relieves feelings. Prensky (2010), who wrote Teaching Digital Natives, said that we cannot really teach students until we make a connection with them, and to do that, we have to know them.

One way for the community of learners to get to know each other is by having them share one thing they are passionate about, and it cannot be nursing! It is important to allow plenty of time for this activity and not rush through it. This activity seems to relax students, who smile and laugh when hearing some of their classmates’ passions, which can range from baking cheesecakes, to doing yoga, or to saving sea turtles. I remind students that their passions can get overlooked or to saving sea turtles. I remind students that their passions can get overlooked during a busy semester, but that it is important they make time for their passions so they do not get lost.

When making a connection, it is also important to share something about yourself, especially as it relates to your nursing career. Sharing your own passion, information about your interests, and what it was like for you when you were a nursing student helps convey empathy. It is also helpful to share your teaching philosophy and your beliefs about learning. When I do this, I choose to show a family picture, and I share my son’s struggle with dyslexia because his educational journey has shaped my teaching philosophy.

I let students know that I value different types of learners, and that I will try to incorporate different methods, such as written assignments and projects in addition to examinations, for them to demonstrate their knowledge. According to Clark (2017), demonstrating your own preparedness, sharing your teaching philosophy, and being clear about your values and beliefs ultimately can prevent incivility in the classroom throughout the course. If the course uses an online component, such as discussion boards, this is also a good time discuss the school’s social media policy. Shatto and Erwin (2016) suggested using social media with students, particularly as a way to engage Generation Z students, and to remind students of netiquette rules, including confidentiality and appropriate postings.

Share the Responsibility

A final activity for the first day is designed to impress on students that for the semester to be successful, everyone has a role to play. One way to do this is with the “Best Class Ever/Worst Class Ever” activity. Students are asked to share characteristics of the best and worst classes they have ever taken, without identifying the classes. Then, discuss students’ comments with them, identifying which tasks you are willing to do to make the class successful and which ones they are willing to do to make the class successful.

There usually is one faculty behavior that is a “deal breaker,” such as changing assignment due dates without notice, and I can usually honor their request not to do that. Another common complaint is faculty taking too long to grade assignments. Because of this, I let students know which days I grade for that particular course and when they can expect feedback. It is helpful for students to hear that you are willing to be flexible and negotiate some things with them during the course and that you value their input. Students seem grateful that their input was sought. It also ends the time together with a shared sense of responsibility, as they are given a reminder that in a learning community, each person has a role in making it successful.

Conclusion

The first day of class is a time to establish expectations, as well as to create an environment for learning. These strategies have worked successfully with prelicensure and RN-to-baccalaureate nursing students, as well as graduate students, particularly those in a Master of Science in Nursing Education concentration. Spending time up front engaging with students and getting to know them will start the semester off in the right direction.

References


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