

First Day of Class Student Buy-In: Advice from Unknown Mentors

(condensed from “First Day of Class (pt. 1): Specific Strategies” article by Jeff King in the April 2012 issue of *Transformative Teacher-Scholar* at <http://www.uco.edu/academic-affairs/cettl/cettl-files/newsletter-docs/2012-04/2012-04-newsletter.pdf>)

Brain research showing that novelty helps information stick (e.g., Phelps, 2004; Weierich, Wright, Negreira, Dickerson, & Barrett, 2010) may account for this phenomenon, but whatever the reason, leveraging it to your and your students’ benefit makes sense. The simple strategy described below creates novelty because it disrupts students’ expectation about the “normal routine” of a first class day, yet it is non-threatening and does not require extra work of students on the first day of class. (Not that there’s a darned thing wrong with students working during the first day of class, mind you.)

Ask your students in class this semester to write down advice they would provide to students who will take the course the next term. This is the low-tech version of “mentor in a box.” On the first class day, hand these letters out for your new students to read, then have the students pass the letters around through a few iterations so that each student has the opportunity to read several letters. Then have a class discussion to solicit common themes in the letters of advice.

Many times the mentors will have written things like, “Be sure to do the homework Dr. Jones assigns for the chapter about ____ because it really helps you understand the concepts,” or, “Get yourself into a study group to go over the material outside of class—that really helped me and all my group members make it through this class,” etc.

The fact that the advice is coming from students who have survived the course is the key thing. Your new students would be likely to value such advice if they had a chance encounter with your former students, knew those students passed the course, and had the opportunity to get pointers on how to ace the course.

The devilishly effective attribute that makes this strategy impactful is that what your students write as advice for new students is generally very positive, even if the recommendations are things like, “Because this is such a hard subject, you really have to work in this class, but following the syllabus and asking Dr. Jones for help will get you through.”

Let your exiting students be your best ambassadors for your incoming students.

The high-tech version of this strategy probably packs even more punch for having new students really take to heart the suggestions given by mentors, but it takes a bit more planning, time, and tech-savvy expertise (or arrangements made to get assistance with the technology). Whereas the low-tech version takes only a few minutes during the last class session with your prior class when students write their advice, the high-tech version requires asking students to make videos with their laptops and emailing to you or uploading those files so you can assemble them into a Powerpoint or [Prezi](#) or other presentation or load them into your course web shell for accessing to show in class, etc.

The beneficial trade-off for that bit of extra work is the impact the videos will make on the students *and* the guaranteed focus of attention that the videos will create. When you know your students are paying attention, the likelihood that the information being shared at that point will be retained is greatly enhanced.

Whether you take the low-tech or the high-tech route, spending some time the first class session discussing strategies for success in the class—and doing so in the language of peers as delivered by peers—can help your students greatly.

Phelps, E. A. (2004). Human emotions and memory: Interactions of the amygdala and hippocampal complex. *Current opinion in neurobiology*, 14, 198-202. Available: <http://languagelog ldc.upenn.edu/myl/llog/Brizendine/Phelps2004.pdf>

Weierich, M. R., Wright, C. I., Negreira, A., Dickerson, B. C., & Barrett, L. F. (2010). Novelty as a dimension in the affective brain. *Neuroimage*, 49, 2871-2878. Available: <http://www.affective-science.org/pubs/2010/weierich-et-al-2010.pdf>

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