



Critical Connections for the First Day of Class

By Joe Kreizinger,
Northwest Missouri State University
jkreiz@nwmissouri.edu

If you typically use most of each opening class session reviewing your course syllabus but seek a more engaging alternative, let me suggest focusing your first lesson on “making connections” rather than “giving directions.” The three “critical connections” I emphasize on opening day are (1) connecting students to instructor, (2) connecting instructor to content, and (3) connecting content to students. By focusing on these connections (and saving the syllabus for the second day of class), I aim to create a positive and productive working relationship with my students right from the start and, perhaps most important, to awaken in them early on the benefits of engaging with the subject matter.

After brief welcomes and opening remarks, I draw three circles on the board and connect them with arrows that suggest a continuous cycle. I write one of the three “critical connectors” (“me,” “you,” and “content”) in each of the circles. After a brief explanation and preview of the three critical connections, I make an initial personal connection with the class by sharing a bit about myself.

When class size allows, I use a variety of icebreaker activities to connect individual students with one another and with me. I also establish an initial personal connection by collecting information on each student. I distribute a sheet near the end of the first class and ask students to return it next class. It requests basic demographic information but also gives students the opportunity to share more personal information if they choose (e.g., “favorites,”

hobbies, etc.). Using bits of that information later in the course can enhance the personal connections first made during the opening session.

Once I have established this first “critical connection” (students to instructor), I segue into the second—connecting myself to the content. My primary objectives here are to build credibility, demonstrate interest in and enthusiasm for the content area, and show how the content has been significant to me. I may discuss my research in the area (building credibility) and highlight conferences I’ve recently attended (showing enthusiasm). I talk about how the content has aided my growth as an educator. I extend beyond my professional life and discuss how this content is useful in my personal life. As an example, in a basic communication course that I teach, I show students how the content may enhance interpersonal relationships, group interactions, and perhaps even self-understanding. I know that most instructors have deep passion for their content areas, but sometimes they fail to communicate that passion in a tangible way. Of the three critical connections I suggest, this one seems to be most often neglected.

By describing how this content connects with you, it may be easier for students to start to develop similar connections themselves. I don’t expect that all my students will find personal relevance on the first day, but you can’t expect the connection to develop if it isn’t even explored. If students understand how they can make use of the content, they may become better engaged, and hopefully, they will develop a greater sense of ownership of their education. In my basic communication course, for instance, I share statistics that illustrate how greatly potential

employers value the very communication skills students will be developing in class, and I discuss in very simple terms some of the specific skills we will address, and when and where they might be applied in students’ personal lives.

I end my opening day by asking students to brainstorm potential benefits that may come from study in the discipline. Following that discussion, I ask each student to write on the back of the “student information sheet” (discussed above) three or more specific ways the content of this course may benefit him/her personally. At the second session, I review some of those benefits.

Even though it takes a bit of time, I have found that placing some emphasis on “making connections” rather than “giving directions” on the opening day of class changes student attitudes. They are more positive toward the subject matter and often toward the class in general. Their overall experiences seem to be more productive as well. ♥

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**Editor**

Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.

Penn State Berks Campus
P.O. Box 7009, Reading, PA 19610-7009

Phone: 610-396-6170

E-mail: grg@psu.edu

Magna EditorRob Kelly
robkelly@magnapubs.com**President**William Haight
whaight@magnapubs.com**Publisher**David Burns
dburns@magnapubs.com**Editorial Content Director**Bob Bogda
bbogda@magnapubs.com**Creative Services Manager**

Mark Manghera

Customer Service Manager

Mark Beyer

For subscription information, contact:

Customer Service: 800-433-0499

E-mail: custserv@magnapubs.com

Website: www.magnapubs.com

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Characteristics of Good Undergraduate Mentors

Interested in a good example of how teaching, scholarship, and service can be integrated into a single activity? Cecilia Shore suggests that mentorship of undergraduates doing scholarship (be it research in labs or bibliographic searches) may just be that example. Despite its potential, she observes that few resources exist to support efforts to assess this important professional role or to assist those who would like to improve how they work with undergraduates on scholarly projects.

This well-referenced article surveys research (most of it descriptive) on the topic, discusses the unique aspects of this particular kind of teaching, and offers advice on how these professional activities might be reported and assessed. The teaching that this kind of mentorship requires is differentiated from regular classroom instruction in several important ways. For example, the research process gives students an opportunity to be involved at every level, from mundane data collection details (like counting questionnaires) to the abstract, conceptual context of the research. Regular classrooms deal with one end or the other of this continuum. In lab courses, students deal with details, but the focus is on practicing a technique that produces a predetermined outcome. In content courses, students integrate and synthesize data, but they do this with the findings of others.

What makes this reference especially valuable is Shore's description of the characteristics of good faculty mentors for students doing scholarly work. Her set of characteristics derives from the research of others as well as several educational theorists. She groups these characteristics into two main categories. Listed below.

Managing student work

- Recruit talented students by offering a unique training experience.
- Select projects that are feasible and yet make unique contributions to the discipline.

- Nurture self-sufficiency; don't dictate answers—provide choices.
- Teach students about safety and ethical considerations.
- Encourage students to do presentations/publications.

Building interpersonal respect/trust

- Treat students as junior colleagues; provide an open environment where undergraduate opinions are welcome; listen patiently.
- Be approachable and available.
- Be frank and direct; give timely feedback.
- Be sensitive to how much guidance/structure different students need at different points in the project.
- Show your enthusiasm; practice what you profess.
- Resist the temptations of power.

The chance to do research or scholarship can contribute much to a student's learning experiences, and given the amount of faculty time and effort it requires to make these contributions, this service to the profession ought to be evaluated. Shore includes some potential survey items that might be used to solicit student assessments of their experiences working with a particular faculty mentor. She notes that little previously tested instrumentation exists but that as scholars of teaching, we have an obligation to assess objectively the impact of these experiences. For anyone who mentors students engaged in scholarly projects, this pragmatic piece is a valuable resource.

Reference: Shore, C. (2005). Toward recognizing high-quality faculty mentoring of undergraduate scholars. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 16 (2), 111-136. 🍓

What Will Happen to My Ratings?

At a recent workshop on learner-centered teaching, a participant told us that philosophically she couldn't agree more with the need to make students more responsible for their own learning. She knew it was right, but she couldn't go there because her ratings would take a hit. I assumed this meant she was a new faculty member and under scrutiny for tenure. I was amazed when she told me after the session that she was a full professor with years of tenure under her belt. With all that security, the chance of bad ratings was still preventing her from doing what she thought was right. She couldn't incorporate changes that might improve learning outcomes because she would lose at the ratings game. At the time, I didn't know how to answer. Now I've thought of several responses.

A policy answer—Most institutions overuse summative evaluation. Research on student ratings has shown that for mid-career faculty, ratings—from semester to semester, across a number of courses—are stable. They don't vary all that much, so why must every class, every semester, be assessed for administrative review? Tenured faculty, through appropriate governance structures, ought to lobby institutions for policies that release a course from summative evaluation when a series of innovations are being implemented in it. Obviously, instructors need formative feedback about the changes, but for the sake of change and refreshment, couldn't institutions let a faculty member in good standing not evaluate a particular course for a semester or two?

An answer that challenges—Is the assumption that ratings go down when changes are incorporated valid? I can't find much research that substantiates it. A bit of case study research reports that for major course revisions (not the addition of one, two, or a few techniques), ratings dipped but then recovered. Unless you've experienced a drop in ratings when you've

incorporated a series of changes, I would not assume that change leads automatically to lower ratings. Besides, you can avoid the problem if changes are added gradually, which is probably a more effective way to implement new strategies and techniques.

An answer that suggests an alternative—There is a good deal of research documenting the fact that if you have students do midcourse evaluations and then discuss the results with them, end-of-course ratings increase at statistically significant levels. So, if you anticipate that ratings might decline because of new approaches, test that assumption midcourse. Find out what's going well and not so well for students. Ask them to suggest ways the new approaches might be refined so that they'll work better. Discuss the feedback; respond to the suggestions. That doesn't mean **do** everything students suggest, but value their input by providing them with a response. If you opt not to do what they suggest, explain the educational rationale behind the approach you've chosen.

A straightforward answer—The ratings research gives students more credit than most faculty do when it comes to students understanding what is really going on in a course. Explain up front that you've planned some changes for this course. Explain why you need to change—you think they might grasp the material better this new way; you're tired of the old way; your instructional objectives have changed; whatever. Tell them honestly that you need their feedback, that you'll solicit it regularly, that you'll respond to what they suggest and make changes when something is clearly not working well. Invite them to be part of the experiment. Don't forget, it is ultimately in students' best interests to have their teachers working on more and better approaches. Give students credit for being able to give you credit for what you're trying to accomplish.

An answer that suggests another alternative—Stop thinking of global, end-of-course assessments as the only possible feedback mechanism. Students can be asked to provide feedback on any aspect of instruction, including a new assignment, a different text, an alternative approach to grading, group activities, whatever. And feedback can be collected in a variety of ways beyond the machine-scorable short form. Send out an e-mail with a couple of carefully worded queries. Have students meet in groups to briefly discuss an activity and as a group generate feedback. Speak privately to students whose opinions you value. You don't have to rely solely on the end-of-course ratings for feedback and to document the nature of that experience for students.

An answer that protects you—For tenured faculty members with lots of security, what's the problem with a set of low ratings? A smaller merit raise? Most are already so small, would you even notice the difference? I think the problem is more about the personal anguish that results when students negatively respond to a well-intentioned, carefully prepared, thoughtfully designed, and generally well-executed innovation. Protecting yourself begins with recognizing your vulnerability. Don't ask students whether or not they "liked" the innovation. Opt for questions that explore the impact of that policy, practice, behavior, assignment, or activity on their learning. Keep the focus on the change—don't ask how it compares with all other changes in the universe. You want to know if and how it did or didn't help students learn. That's all that matters, so keep the focus there. Also adopt the golden rule of feedback: Give unto others feedback in the form you'd like to receive it. That doesn't mean give only positive feedback, but it does mean deliver feedback constructively. Here's an opportunity for you to help students develop this impor-

Using Student Lecture Reviews as an Extra Credit Option

By Eva Jackson Hester,
Towson University, MD
ehester@towson.edu

If you've taught undergraduate courses, you've probably been confronted with requests for extra credit by students who have received low grades on some assignment or test. I have colleagues who regularly offer this option—on the syllabus or in response to requests from students. During my more than 15 years of teaching, extra credit has not struck me as an appealing teaching or learning technique, although every semester students make the request. Occasionally, I've offered extra points in the syllabus to encourage students to attend some type of prescheduled, out-of-class activity that I thought would be beneficial. But even in those cases, I felt, somehow, that it was not an equal opportunity experience for all students, as the activity perhaps could not fit into some students' work schedules. So the value of extra credit has eluded me.

My objections settle around three reasons. First, all students in the class do not need extra credit, and I felt that I was shortchanging those students who performed at high levels without extra credit. Second, I have never reconciled the actual learning value that results from extra credit and feared that extra credit equated to busy work. Third, I could not figure out at what point in the class extra credit options should be offered. At the beginning of the course, the option of extra credit seemed to undermine students' motivation to perform well in the class—it would cover what they didn't do from the beginning. Presented after a test or assignment due to

low grades, extra credit seemed to challenge the validity of the test or assignment—it was too hard, so let's make it easier. Even though extra credit causes me some philosophic discomfort, I must admit that I have been in basically an approach-avoidance conflict regarding this teaching option. However, this past school year, I came up with an approach that ends my extra-credit psychic conflict.

I offered five extra-credit points for summarizing the previous lecture. Usually, I begin class with a brief review of the past lecture before introducing new material. As an extra-credit option, the lecture review could be presented by one to five students. My hope was that having the students do this review summary would serve several purposes. First, students would be encouraged to look over notes before coming to class. In class, they presented the lecture summary without notes and discussed 10 informational points. Second, the class as a whole would benefit from this extra-credit option. Third, the extra-credit points were available to all students, with no restrictions on the number of times a student could present the lecture review. However, I invited student reviews in only one or two classes per week, and I did not announce beforehand the days they would be presented. Most students did only one lecture review.

Their feedback confirmed the potential merits of this extra-credit option. Specifically, from a five-question survey, I learned the following about students' experiences with this activity.

1. One-hundred percent of students strongly agreed that the lecture review encouraged them to consistently review

- their notes and readings before class.
2. Ninety-five percent strongly agreed that lecture reviews prepared them to learn/connect additional information.
3. One-hundred percent strongly agreed that students adequately covered information from the previous lecture.
4. One-hundred percent strongly agreed that the lecture review should continue as an extra-credit option.
5. Eighty-five percent strongly agreed that the lecture summary provided an opportunity for all students to obtain extra-credit points.

Despite this favorable response, only about 25 percent of the students took advantage of this extra-credit option. On the evaluation form, I asked them why. The most frequently noted response was "I did not need extra credit." A few students wrote that they did not like standing before the class. However, several students commented that the activity was "a great motivator for students to study more."

Who were the 25 percent who took advantage of this extra-credit option? Most were students who had received low grades on the midterm exam and wanted extra points to go toward their final exam grade. I presented this extra-credit option after the midterm. Three of the students who participated received very high grades on the midterm test. They used the option as a bit of extra security going into the final exam.

It will be interesting to see what student participation will be like in future classes, when this extra-credit option is incorporated into my syllabus! 🍀

MY RATINGS FROM PAGE 3

tant skill.

The answer I'd like to give but probably shouldn't—Grow up! If the chance of a dip in ratings prevents you from doing what

you think will positively impact student learning, you are ascribing far more importance to ratings than they deserve. If lower ratings have that much influence at your institution, work with like-minded faculty (I'm sure there are plenty) to change these counterproductive policies. Summative

rating data from students offers one view of your teaching. To imagine that it is the whole view, the best view, the correct view, and the only view is to trivialize the complicated way teaching affects learning. 🍀

Brain-based Learning Meets PowerPoint

By *Elayne Shapiro*,
University of Portland, OR
shapiro@up.edu

To PowerPoint or not, that is the question. For some, PowerPoint is the antithesis of active learning; for some, PowerPoint is the frame that helps students stay focused; and for some, PowerPoint is a tool to encourage active participation. Ever since my first exposure to Zull's work on "brain-based learning," I have looked for ways to use PowerPoint to help students foster connections that "change data into knowledge."

Zull maintains that three functions of the cerebral cortex are necessary for learning to take place: Sensing→ Integrating→ Acting. Sensing involves receiving signals from the outside world. Integration means that these individual signals become ideas, thoughts, and plans. Acting means a physical execution: writing, speaking, performing.

With the Sensing→ Integrating→ Acting (SIA) model in mind, I developed an exercise that uses PowerPoint to accomplish these ends. This exercise is adaptable to any body of material that involves a collection of concepts, ideas, or relationships. In my case, the course is on conflict and negotiation, and the topic is "power." The text I use for this course is as

rich and dense as chocolate mousse, leaving many students "full" before they have had a chance to really digest the material. To facilitate their learning of the concepts in the chapter on power, I developed a handout that contains an outline of the most important points in the chapter. I started the exercise by asking students to read through the handout (sensing)—an excellent approach for auditory learners.

Next, I had students form groups. I told them I was going to show them a series of pictures. Their task was to find illustrations of the concepts described in the handout—an excellent approach for visual learners. Before turning to the illustrations, however, they needed to make sure that everyone in the group understood the concept on the handout.

PowerPoint made the pictures accessible. To prepare for the lesson, I scoured the Internet for pictures that appropriately illustrated the concepts. Some of the pictures I selected illustrated more than one concept; some of the concepts took more than one picture to illustrate. For example, I found that in a picture of one of the basketball players in the class, there was also a referee. Students might match that picture with power resources: legitimate power, expert power, or normative power. Students matched the concept that "power must be endorsed" with a picture of a

protest that had the crowd waving fists in the air.

I provided students with a PowerPoint handout so that they could make notes about the examples and their connection to the concept. Whenever students had ideas about why a given picture illustrated a concept, they explained those connections to their groups. If participants had different pictures to offer as illustrations, students heard the concepts repeated and had to make the connections with the written descriptions again.

When debriefing the activity, this process went through another iteration. The conversation and note taking became the "acting" part of the SIA model. Throughout this activity my students were highly engaged, and by the end they were quite articulate about the concepts. With the experience under their belts, students might, in a subsequent lesson, seek illustrations themselves and reenact the process with themselves in the "power" position. From the success of this activity, I learned the value of PowerPoint that makes use of what we know about how the brain learns.

Author's note: The references to brain-based learning can be found in J. E. Zull's book, *The Art of Changing the Brain*, which I highly recommend to faculty. 🍀

Help! Students Who Need It; Students Who Seek It

When defined broadly, academic advising covers a lot of ground. It can help students with course content or with study strategies. It can help students understand financial aid or take advantage of various support services. It can help students choose and navigate through its many requirements to degree completion. It can help students become better decision makers—setting realistic goals, being honest with oneself and making good decision on one's own. It can help launch a career—offering advice on interviewing

and assessing job offers.

Academic advisers, be they professionals who do advising full-time or faculty, can do much to enhance a student's experience in college. But students never benefit unless they seek out advisers. In surveys, students acknowledge the importance of receiving advice, but many do not receive it—34 percent in one survey reported that never during their academic careers had they met with an adviser. As seniors, only 19 percent reported that they had met three or more times with an adviser.

What factors influence a student's decision to seek advice from advisers? The answers are not surprising. Students seek help when they get positive information about help opportunities—for example, how attending a review session will benefit their performance on an exam. First experiences getting help are predictive of follow-up requests for help. Sometimes cultural background and gender are factors—for example, students not part of a

Assessment: Options and Opportunities

As interest in scholarly work on teaching and learning continues to grow and more faculty are trying their hands at work in this arena, materials are needed that summarize the available methods and approaches used in systematic analyses of classroom practices and learning outcomes. Just such a resource appeared last year in the *Journal of Engineering Education*.

The authors of this piece write about assessment, which they define along with other relevant terms. *Assessment* is “the act of collecting data or evidence that can be used to answer classroom, curricular, or research questions.” (p. 13) *Assessment methods* are “the procedures used to support the data collection process and are an important consideration in any educational research design.” (p. 13) *Evaluation*, which is often used interchangeably with assessment, these authors see as being different. It refers to the “interpretations that

are made of the evidence collected about a given question.” (p. 13)

To highlight what might be considered “good practices,” the authors looked for examples published in this journal. They organized assessment methods used by engineering faculty authors into two categories: (1) descriptive designs including surveys, interviews and focus groups, conversation analysis, observation, ethnographies, and meta analyses and (2) experimental designs including randomized controlled trials, matching, baseline data, posttest-only design, and longitudinal design. Each method is defined, its benefits and drawbacks both identified, and then examples from the journal are cited. The article also includes a useful glossary of key terms.

Even though the focus is on research and scholarship in engineering education, others will find the article valuable for two reasons. First, most of the methods used to

assess learning in engineering derive from educational research and can be used to study learning outcomes in other fields.

Second, the article offers a great model for other fields. How valuable for other disciplines to offer would-be pedagogical scholars this kind of overview of how learning is being assessed in their fields. What a great way to support and advance scholarship within a discipline! These authors recommend that those doing research in engineering education consider collaborating with colleagues in education. That’s a great suggestion.

Reference: Olds, B. M., Moskal, B. M., and Miller, R. L. (2005). Assessment in engineering education: Evolution, approaches and future collaborations. *Journal of Engineering Education*, January, 13–25. 🍀

HELP!

FROM PAGE 5

majority group may be less likely to seek help, especially if they feel isolated and “different.” Men sometimes find it more difficult than women do to admit needing help. And as we reported previously in the newsletter, sometimes the students most in need of help are the least likely to request it. They fear what others will think of them, that they are “bothering” a busy faculty member, and what seeking help will say about their abilities and likelihood of success.

For some kinds of advice, students are more likely to turn to their peers. One study found that students preferred peers when they needed developmental advice (such as how to study), long-term career planning, and careers options. They preferred faculty for advice on institutional policies and personal issues (such as health).

What can faculty do to encourage students to take advantage of all the academ-

ic advice institutions make available to them? Here’s a quick list for ready reference and to get you started:

- Talk in class about help services available to students.
- Present getting help as an important, expected part of the learning process.
- Create a supportive, positive classroom environment.
- Emphasize collaboration more and competition less. Competitive learning environments that pit student against student in the quest for grades have been shown to adversely impact decisions about getting help.
- When poorly performing students seek help, focus on the skills that with practice and effort can modify subsequent performance.

This overview of advising issues summarizes material that appears in a chapter on academic advising in higher education. The original material is a great resource and ready reminder that some of the most

important lessons we teach students may not have anything to do with content. The chapter appears in an anthology edited by Stuart Karabenick and Richard Newman. We have highlighted Karabenick’s work on help-seeking in previous issues. And although not all the chapters in this new book are about higher education, the book is still relevant and useful to college educators. Most of us grouse about those students who won’t come for help and those advisees we never meet. Most of us have thought very little about the reasons why and are surprised to learn that this area has been the subject of considerable research—all with implications for practice in the classroom.

Reference: Karabenick, S. A., and Newman, R. S. (eds.). *Help Seeking in Academic Settings: Goals, Groups and Contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006.

The book may be ordered online at www.erlbaum.com. 🍀