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عمادة تطوير المهارات

# THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

JEFFREY L. HELMS AND G. WILLIAM HILL IV
KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

BOOKLET
4

عمادة تطوير المهارات
إنجاز متميز .. والتزام بالتطوير

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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Jeffrey L. Helms and G. William Hill IV

Kennesaw State University

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جميع حقوق الطبع محفوظة

عمادة تطوير المهارات
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# The First Day of Class

It is not a surprise that first impressions are both important and lasting. As a result, the initial interactions with a new set of students are critical to the level of success of a new course. Although we do not suggest that the first interactions will doom a course if they do not go well, your life, the students' experiences, and the course itself will go much more smoothly when you carefully plan the beginning of a course. This care, in part, takes the form of a plethora of planning on the part of the instructor.

In this booklet, we offer suggestions based on the research about increasing the likelihood of having a successful start to a course. We fill in the gaps that exist in the research on the topic with our experience, keeping in mind that research findings guide this experience. We focus on completion of tasks prior to the first day of class or the start of the new semester or term. Having these pieces firmly in mind, we then turn our attention to the conduct of the first official interactions after the term begins (e.g., the first class meeting). We conclude with a review of what should occur after the initial exchanges with students, an often overlooked aspect of beginning a new course. As you review our suggestions, we encourage you to view it as a process. As a process, we do not offer it as the ultimate or last word on the subject. Rather, we offer it with the hope that it will be viewed as an opportunity for instructors to learn what works best for them, their students, and the particular courses they teach. With that in mind, we turn our attention to important issues to consider before the initial official student-instructor interactions.

## Before the Course Starts

It is certainly an understatement to say that we have a lot to develop and prepare before meeting a class for the first time at the beginning of a semester. However, we also know that careful preparation and attention to the issues covered here will pave the way for a smooth course at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. As a result, we address the preliminary activities that, although time-consuming, will make our jobs easier and more rewarding later in the course. As we review these activities (and throughout the booklet), these rewards will become clear.

### Organizing the Course

Organization of a new course, whether it is a subject we have taught a hundred times or no times, will go a long way in reducing the anxiety associated with the “newness”. Importantly, we do not differentiate between instructor and student in this regard. Both have anxiety about a new term and course. However, it is our responsibility as the instructor to provide an organized course of study for our students. Thoughtful organization will decrease the anxiety associated with the unknown and increase the amount of time spent on course material. In fact, students report that instructor anxiety is one of the bigger negatives that they have experienced at the beginning of a course (Perlman & McCann, 1999). As a result, an instructor’s organization through preparation and practice for those first interactions can go a long way in addressing and even eliminating this negative experience.

Undoubtedly, the central organizing framework for a course is the syllabus. Although beyond it is the scope of this booklet to address the construction of these elements in detail, we strongly encourage you to review the booklet in the King Saud University Deanship of Skills Development series devoted to syllabus construction. In that booklet, we address the major and minor elements of exemplary syllabi, including the course schedule. The major elements addressed include basic information, course information, required materials, policies, course requirements, and the course schedule. The clarity with which the course syllabus is constructed will result in less uncertainty for you and the students. It will clearly inform them about the what, where, when, and how of the course. In fact, research supports the importance of the syllabus in students’ early impressions of the course (Henslee, Burgess, & Buskist, 2006; Perlman & McCann, 1999).

## Interactions with Students Prior to the First Meeting

Recent research suggests that contacting students prior to the beginning of the course can have important retention and motivation effects on the students (Legg & Wilson, 2009). As such, we recommend engaging students via e-mail prior to the beginning of the course. Legg and Wilson recommended sending the e-mail approximately 1 week prior to the initiation of the course. In their research, they sent a welcome e-mail to students and found that it positively impacted student retention when compared to another group of students who did not receive the e-mail. Although they recommended a positive tone to the welcome e-mail, they also encouraged that the e-mail remain professional in tone. In addition, you can use this e-mail to encourage attendance on the first day of class. Many students believe that the first day is “not important”. You can use this e-mail to dissuade them of this notion.

One way to maintain the professional, yet positive, tone in the -mail is to include a copy of the syllabus (another reason to construct your syllabus early and carefully). Given that the syllabus rates very high in terms of student interest, it will provide students with the opportunity to peruse the document prior to the first class meeting. We have also found that providing the syllabus gives students an accurate account of what the course will be like, the pace of the course via the schedule, and the required workload (including assignments). This information will help correct misconceptions about the course that some students may have that often times hover at the extremes (i.e., “This is the easiest/hardest course ever”). Correcting misconceptions early allows a few of those with some misconceptions to drop the course. For example, course names sometimes do not match intuitive course objectives—students often misunderstand our undergraduate psychological testing course. When informed that the course focuses on psychometrics and statistics and not learning how to administer and interpret psychological tests, a few students tend to drop the course, which frees space for other students to join the course before it even “officially” starts. The clarification also relieves other students, and the information provided in the welcome e-mail and accompanying syllabus strengthens their excitement about the upcoming course. We also send the welcome e-mail and syllabus to those students who add the course, which ensures that everyone has an equal footing at the start of the academic term.

We also suggest sending a beginning survey to the registered students in the course. Although we routinely send it with the welcome e-mail, you can send it separately if necessary. (As an aside, we try to limit the communication prior to the course to this one e-mail because multiple e-mails may incorrectly give the impression of a larger and necessary student investment in the course than is actually required. Some may find with too many communications that the instructor and course require more attention than is the case.) In terms of the survey, we use an online survey service that will allow collection of information anonymously (see Survey Monkey at http:\\www.surveymonkey.com). Even at this early stage, we want students to be able to communicate honestly with us. The anonymity shows that we are more interested in the feedback than the source since it is the feedback that can help us improve!

For the survey, we ask some general demographic-type questions so that we can understand the students a little better. Some of these questions include age, how far they are in their degree program, prior experience with the subject area, ultimate goal in terms of their education, etc. We also typically ask a limited number of open-ended questions. Example questions might include: What do you hope to get out of this course? After looking at the topics in the course schedule, which one arouses your interest the most? and What is the one thing you want to make sure I cover in our first meeting? We also ask students far enough in advance so that we can alter (if necessary) the first “official” interaction with them (e.g., the first class meeting, the first online real-time chat). All of this information helps us learn about our students prior to the first meeting.

## Logistics

Although not an issue with online courses, Davis (2009) suggested visiting the classroom in which you will be teaching prior to the first meeting. Give yourself the opportunity to experience the feel of the classroom including the layout (e.g., the position of chairs and tables). This piece of information is important because lecture and seminar formats may warrant different formations. You will also want to check the technology for compatibility with your lectures and other in class resources (e.g., video clips).

In addition, get to your first class early. You want to make sure the technology is working and that writing instruments available (e.g., chalk or marker). Students may interpret a technology failure or the instructor’s lack of chalk or marker as a sign of incompetence or poor planning. Although inaccurate, the impression might be difficult to change.

## During the First Class Meeting

One of the complaints we hear sometimes from students about the first meeting of a course is that it was not necessary (i.e., a waste of time). As a result, it is important that the first meetings (whether online or face-to-face) be as productive as possible… but not too productive. Yes, it is a balancing act. Regardless, Wilson and Wilson (2007) found that a positive first-meeting experience improved student motivation in the course. In addition, final grades of those who had a positive experience were significantly better than those with a more negative first-day experience. With this in mind, two research studies (Henslee et al., 2006; Perlman & McCann, 1999) will guide coverage of this area.

Notably as we cover this information, it is important to be mindful that your course's enrollment is likely still changing. Depending on the course, some students attend the first meeting or hang around at the beginning of a course without committing to taking the course. It is probably not until a few weeks into the course that the instructor has a good idea about the "final" students enrolled in the course. Until then, there may be much transition in student enrollment as well as repetition of information. We discourage instructors from allowing this fact to mandate the comportment of the course. We do not delay engagement with students in the course simply because we think they may not stay. Instead, we earnestly and diligently seek engagement in the hope that students will stay and be motivated by our excitement in the course!

When considering what to cover during the first "official" interaction in the course, practicality, as defined primarily from the students' perspective, should be an instructor's primary focus. The following provides some of these practical pieces.

### Coverage of the Syllabus

Although provided in advance via the course delivery system online or via the welcome e-mail, it will be important to spend time reviewing the document. In fact, coverage of the syllabus and related information was at the top of the list of categories of what works well for first-day-of-class topics (Perlman & McCann, 1999). Sixty-eight percent of the respondents to Perlman and McCann's survey desired a general overview of the course and syllabus along with requirements and expectations in the course. When separated out as just coverage of the syllabus, Henslee et al. (2006) found that 45.9% of their students desired its inclusion in the first meeting. However, Perlmann and McCann also discovered that 31% felt that merely reading the syllabus during class time on the first day was negative. Apparently (and probably correctly), students viewed that activity as a poor use of time. Although important, we caution against coverage of all course policies. Coverage of the most important policies as well as indication of where all policies are located along encouragement to read them seems sufficient for a first meeting. In terms of the "important" policies and although idiosyncratic to the instructor potentially, we certainly believe that verbalizing your expectations for student performance in the class is near the top.

## Icebreakers

As is customary in many courses, icebreakers, openings, and introductions occur at the beginning. Some well-respected people in pedagogy support the use of icebreakers (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). However, the research possibly suggests differently. Henslee et al. (2006) found that only 5.5% wanted an icebreaker during the first class. Even less wanted to trade personal information (2.7%). Interestingly and somewhat counter intuitively, Henslee et al. found that nearly 75% of students had a favorite icebreaker. Regardless of how interpreted, we suggest treading lightly into this area because it may alienate some of the students.

Many authors cite icebreakers and introductions on the first day as helping to build a sense of a shared learning community among the students and between you and the students (e.g., Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). However, one problem in breaking the ice on the first day of class is that many students fail to attend the first day of class or there are substantial numbers who drop and/or add the course during the first week of classes. Therefore, we suggest waiting a week or so before incorporating community building activities so that the community you build has the members who will be in it for the semester.

## Coverage of Course Material

The quandary for quite a few instructors, including us, is whether to cover course material during the first contact with students, particularly the very first day of a face-to-face course. This decision can be even more complicated for courses that have longer meeting times or longer gaps between meetings. This issue is, of course, less problematic in an online course environment. Henslee and colleagues (2006) found that students were generally indifferent to the coverage or non-coverage of material. However, Perlman and McCann (1999) found that 29% of their student participants negatively viewed covering course content (i.e., lecture) on the first day of class. To err on the side of caution and remembering the realities of low attendance at the beginning of a new term, we encourage instructors to avoid communication of any significant substance but rather share a few highlights of what they can expect in the course through a mini-lecture on an interesting topic. One technique used by some faculty is to develop a mini-lecture around common misconceptions students have about the course content and discuss how the course will explore those misconceptions.

### Coverage of Pre-course Survey

If we ask for feedback from students, we should be willing to share the results with them. Within reason and protecting anonymity, we like to share information from the pre-course survey. In particular, information on the open-ended questions seems to be helpful. Sharing the general categories of answers to questions about such things as what they hope to get out of the course lets them know that you are listening to them. It further helps to elucidate how you will be “answering” their expectations. For example, will you be spending a little more time on a topic that lots of them noted was particularly interesting? You might also highlight how you will be attempting to meet their objectives for the course. Importantly, if you see a pattern of results from the survey that suggests a misunderstanding of the “official” course objectives, then addressing it can be helpful and may decrease student dissatisfaction later in the course.

### Information on Grading

We are sure that it is no surprise that students want to know about the course examinations, assignments, and grading. Perlman and McCann (1999) found that 26% of their participants wanted this information. In the Henslee et al. (2006) study, 43.8% wanted this information. Description of course exams is usually quite welcome because students can estimate how well that style matches their particular strengths. For example, some students prefer essay tests, and others prefer short answer tests. Students will also want to know about oral presentations because many have an aversion to them and will need our reassurance of former students’ success in the presentations. Additionally, if you require the use of a particular disciplinary writing style in the course, you will want to mention this briefly.

### Emphasis on Success Strategies and Workload

Without the instructor overselling or underselling the course, students welcome an honest evaluation of the workload required in the course. In fact, Henslee and colleagues (2009) found that 40% of students in their survey were curious about this aspect of the course. Again and as noted earlier, the students present at the beginning of the course are not necessarily committed to the course yet. As such, providing this information can enhance their understanding of the course expectations and how to succeed. Success strategies given the workload will also be helpful. Students often ask about whether to purchase study guides, online materials that are available, and other services that will improve their chances of success. Being honest with them about previous students' strategies for success can be a sign that you are committed to their success. One way to communicate these strategies may be to share written suggestions from past students, using either anonymous written student comments from course evaluations or asking past students to write letters of advice to future students. However, you will want to be careful with these statements because some past students may suggest poor strategies such as "all" they need is the study guide or that the lab is "never" helpful. Emphasizing qualifiers like "some have found" can be helpful in this regard.

### General Demeanor

Last but not least, it is important to note that the instructor's demeanor is important. Perlman and McCann (1999) noted that some students reported wanting to know something about the instructor's teaching style and wanted an instructor who was "accessible, approachable, and supportive" (p. 277). Although the percentages were small, it certainly will not hurt the pedagogical endeavor to demonstrate accessibility through welcoming verbalizations and body language (e.g., genuine smiling). With this in mind, Henslee and colleagues (2006) noted that although the first day does not necessarily set the tone for the entire course, they reported that 59.6% of the student respondents to their survey indicated that it was important or very important. However and needless to say, students were quite negative about professors that they felt were trying to intimidate or scare them on the first day of the course.

## After the First Class Meeting

After we have met with the students in the course for the first time, we often, mistakenly, believe that the course is in process and revert to or proceed with our typical day-to-day business of the course. We lecture, we test, and we grade. However, proceeding immediately down this path is shortsighted. Instead, we encourage ourselves as well as other instructors to take a moment or two to reflect on the initial logistics of how the course began and where it currently stands. As mentioned previously, it is rare (very rare, in fact) for the students present at the very beginning of the course to be the exact same students at the following course meetings. Many students do not attend the first scheduled meetings or interactions. Some may not have even registered to take the course yet. As a result, we have continuing opportunities to hone our initiating-a-course skills. If we avoid blaming them for not attending earlier meetings, those stragglers are still ripe for engagement.

In addition to the potential to engage these new students, the time following these initial contacts is ripe for professional reflection too. During this reflection we tend to ask ourselves a series of questions. For example,

- Did the students appear engaged during the initial course meetings? How do I know? Was particular body language present that led to this appraisal?
- What would I change during the first course meetings?
- What can I do in the subsequent meetings to account for any shortcomings?

The answers to this series of questions can help us as we devise the midsemester course evaluation and ending course evaluation, which again, is an excellent opportunity to get feedback on what might make the course better the next time. We attempt never to pass an opportunity to improve our courses.

Because students often have unanswered questions from the first meeting or were not at the first meeting, we recommend sending an e-mail after the first few class meetings. In that e-mail we include a brief synopsis of what we have covered so far in the course, attach any handouts or materials from the initial meetings, and solicit questions from the students. For courses that are online or have a course delivery system that is online and available for face-to-face courses, we often use the discussion boards for this type of correspondence. It allows a “permanent” place to post information missed or information that students may have missed or misheard even though they attended. Again, the focus is on assisting the student with mastering the upcoming material and presently providing an atmosphere conducive to it. We also encourage continual feedback from our students. Students can submit this feedback via e-mail, discussion board, or anonymous survey. An ongoing, open, and anonymous survey allows students the opportunity to comment on an aspect or concern they may have without waiting until the midsemester evaluation or end-of-course evaluation. This strategy allows us the opportunity to make changes part way through the course if important enough.

Lastly, after the first interactions with our students, we record our thoughts about the experience. Because the length of time between the beginning of a course and the next time we teach it is typically quite long, we record notes about changes we want to make “next time,” which ensures we do not forget them. We all have ideas about improvement as we experience courses and groups of students. In fact, Perlman and McCann (1999) reported that 10 of 11 faculty members who participated in their study said they would be making changes the following semester as a result of their experiences that semester and the feedback they received from the survey.

The Appendix summarizes our suggestions for a successful course beginning in a checklist format. We believe all faculty members are continually re-invigorated by the beginnings of a new course. The opportunities seem limitless and welcoming. This excitement can be contagious for our students. Our desire to engage them in the educational process and improve our own professional selves shines through clearly, as we practice the suggestions we note. Students have almost an uncanny ability to sense the level of our commitment to their success. Fortunately, a hallmark of our profession is that commitment to their success. We only have to devise strategies for it to show and shine brighter.

## Summary

In closing, the important points to take away from this booklet include:

- Carefully attend to the myriad of preparatory issues involved in beginning a new course. This attention will focus on organizing the course, developing a syllabus, and creating a course schedule.
- Constructively interact with your students prior to the first meeting. This interaction is typically achieved electronically (e.g., emailing the syllabus along with a welcome to the course).
- Carefully prepare for the first meeting.
- Make the first meeting productive by covering the syllabus, policies, assignments, grading policies, and any other information that you and especially the student would find helpful.
- Remember that the students present at the first meeting may not be the same students at the second meeting. Some may drop or add the course.
- Do not forget to touch base with students after the first meeting in order to summarize the first meeting and garner feedback on the first meeting.

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## Appendix

## A Checklist of Pointers for Successful Course Beginnings

### Before the Course Starts

- Organize the course.
- Develop the syllabus.
- Create a course schedule.

### Interactions with Students Prior to the First Meeting

- Send a professional welcome email.
- Email the syllabus.
- Email the anonymous survey.

### During the First Class Meeting

- Make it productive…but not too productive.
- Cover the syllabus, but don’t read it.
- Review the course schedule.
- Touch on the most important policies.
- Tread lightly if you choose to do an icebreaker.
- If course material covered, make it interesting!
- Cover the general themes from the pre-course survey.
- Describe your grading.
- Review success strategies and course workload.
- Convey approachability and accessibility.

## After the First Class Meeting

- Reflect on the initial interactions.
- Engage the stragglers.
- Email students with a summary of meetings.
- Maintain an anonymous survey for ongoing feedback.
- Record notes for possible changes next time.

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King Fahd National Library Cataloging-in- Publlcation Data

**L.D. no. 1434/ 7314**

**ISBN: 978- 603- 507- 131- 4**

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Deanship of Skills Development

King Saud University - Deanship of Skills Development
P.O. Box 85500 Riyadh 11691
dsd.ksu.edu.sa