

## Ideas for “Successful Beginnings” in Your Classrooms

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As a new semester begins, most faculty share a common goal. We’d like to start the semester off right with classrooms full of students who really want to be there. It helps if they are engaged and complete the semester. A common frustration for many of us is having a full class that first day—and possibly turning away students interested in adding your class—only to have empty seats later in the term.

So how do we keep the students who attend class on day one engaged throughout the semester? One key component is to have a successful beginning in each and every one of your classes. We’ve all heard stories and maybe even have personal experience with bad beginnings.

This past spring, I was at a professional development workshop on my campus about learning communities. The facilitator spent time discussing classroom activities for the first day of class, activities designed to increase the sense of community and to engage your students from day one. At first I thought, “great, I already do that” but then I realized I could learn about some new, fresh activities. I took the facilitator’s advice and got my hands on Angela Provitera McGlynn’s, “Successful Beginnings for College Teaching.” I’d love to tell you more about her ideas.

McGlynn writes that “the early part of the semester is crucial for setting a tone that motivates your students to persist in your course. If students drop a course, they’re most likely to drop it in the first six weeks of the term. So to improve our retention rates—and thus give ourselves a chance to teach students what we want them to learn—we must be effective from Day 1.” (p. 12)

While there are many exercises you can do to actively engage your students from day one, I’ll focus on a few classroom activities that are designed to increase a sense of community and belonging. And, hopefully lead to student engagement. In addition, I strongly encourage you to read McGlynn’s book and share it with your colleagues.

Some of these activities are taken directly from McGlynn’s book, some are one’s I have learned about at conferences or workshops, and some are ones I have already used effectively in my classes. You’ll find additional activities in McGlynn’s book, as well.

- Scavenger Hunt/Commonalities:
  - Give the students a list of questions to answer about themselves and then ask them to circulate around the room to find other students who have similar answers to theirs. Topics might include: color of car they drive; their major; their astrological sign; and their favorite food. Tell them to try to meet as many of their classmates

as possible and encourage them to get names as well as email addresses and/or phone numbers when they find others who are similar to them.

- After a set period of time, such as 15 minutes, reconvene the whole class and ask a student (student A) to begin a chain of introductions by introducing one person (student B) they have met and share what they have learned. For example, "My name is Anthony and I met Sue who is a Child Development major like me." Sue will then introduce someone on her list and the chain of introductions will continue until all students have been introduced by a fellow student.

- The Birthday Game:

- This is a really fun activity that we did at a Basic Skills Initiative CTE event. Instruct the class that they are to line up around the room by their birthdays. It sounds really easy, but there is just one catch: they are not allowed to speak or write in order to communicate with each other.
- After everyone has found their place in line, start with the first January birthday and have each student tell the class their birthday. If they're in the wrong order, have them shift over to their correct place in line. You'll see how effectively they communicated given the rules.
- This activity is really great at building teamwork skills. You can also use this as an energizing activity around mid-semester.

- Introduction by Identities:

- Our classrooms are very diverse. Start off the semester by celebrating this diversity. Ask students to share a little bit about themselves. For example, if I were to start the activity out, I would say that my name is Lisa Ledebor, that my maiden name is Amos and that I am half English and half German. My father's side is English (Amos) and my mother's side is German (Fritz). My husband is part Dutch, hence the name Ledebor. I would tell them that I was born in upstate New York and was raised mostly in Iowa before moving to Southern California 12 years ago.
- By sharing our uniqueness, we can also find commonalities.

- Student Disclosure Cards:

- Have your students arrange their chairs so that the whole class is sitting in a circle. Give each student a brightly colored piece of construction paper and ask them to fold it into a table tent. Have them write their name in the middle of the table tent so everyone will be able to read it when it is sitting on their desk.
- Ask them to write something about themselves on each of the four corners of the table tent. Some ideas might include:

- Your major
    - Your favorite activity or hobby
    - Your favorite food
    - If you could be any animal, what would you be
    - Where you were born
    - What you would do if you had 24 hours of completely free time
    - The name of someone who has had the most positive influence on your life
    - Your biggest accomplishment in life
  - After everyone has written on their cards, go around the circle and have each student introduce themselves with the information they wrote on their cards.
  - If the layout of your classroom doesn't allow for a circle of desks, have them write at their desks and then get up and stand in a circle holding their cards for the introductions.
- Why are You Taking This Class?
    - Ask students to take a moment and write down why they are taking your class. What is it that they want to gain over the course of the semester?
    - After a few minutes, have them pair up and exchange information with their partner. Tell them to take notes while they are talking to their partner. Once they have shared, have them change partners and meet other classmates.
    - After a set period of time, reconvene the whole class and have them introduce each other as in the "Scavenger Hunt" activity above. Example of introductions might be: "I met Joe and he's taking the class to learn how to develop better eating habits."
  - Last but not least: Introduce Yourself!
    - I remember back in graduate school how my classmates and I spent a good part of one semester trying to figure out more about one of our professors. What was his background? Was he single or married? What were his interests? I'm sure I'm not the only one who has done that. Why the mystery? Let your students know a bit about you.
    - As faculty, we want to know who our students are. The first class meeting is the perfect setting to let your class know who you are. Tell them about your professional background. Why do you teach this course? How long have you been teaching this course? Did you take a similar course when you were in college? How did you feel about it? Were you a good student? (If you weren't that's okay. It makes you more human!) What are your hobbies? Obviously the information you share with your students will vary from course to course, but showing your students that you are a real person and

not just a professor can make you more approachable. In addition, this will reinforce to your class that you are indeed qualified to teach the course.

- One way you can do this is by inviting the class to ask you questions. McGlynn suggests that you tell your students that they can ask anything they want, but you may choose to answer only those questions you feel comfortable with.

Another thing you might do is have students complete a “student information profile” or “personal reference inventory” as McGlynn calls hers. I pass out a “student information profile” at the first class meeting and ask them to provide me with some information about themselves including their preferred contact information, what classes they are currently taking, their feelings on college this semester, if they are working and how many hours, course expectations and goals, as well as any thing else that may help me to better understand them and help them succeed. In addition, I ask them for a small photo of themselves so I can learn their names more quickly. At the end of the semester I return their profiles to them. After reading McGlynn’s book, I now plan to use these student information profiles for a class discussion at the end of the term. This way, students can share how they have grown as individuals over the course of the term while reflecting on their earlier expectations.

McGlynn stresses in the Introduction of her book that becoming an effective teacher is not a destination, rather it is a journey. “It is about continually evolving, constantly trying new strategies, and always striving to do better.” (p. 11) I couldn’t agree more. I encourage you to read her book and get new ideas as you continue on your own ‘journey’.

### **References**

McGlynn, Angela Provitera. Successful Beginnings for College Teaching: Engaging Your Students from the First Day. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing, 2001.

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