Advice for the First Day of Class: Today We Will

By: Jennifer Garrett in Effective Classroom Management

The first day of class is critical. What happens on the first day, even in the first moments, sets the tone for the entire course. The impression you make will last the entire semester, and today’s students are not shy about sharing their opinions. Most students will make up their minds about the course and the instructor during that first class period.

That is why you must use the first day, the first moments of class, to inspire confidence in your abilities and create a classroom atmosphere where the rules are clear; expectations are high; and yet students feel welcome, comfortable, and engaged.

Remember that your classroom will develop its own distinct environment and culture. If you don’t make a concerted effort to set the tone, the students will. Most everyone has been in or in front of a class with an adversarial dynamic, yet no one wants to feel at odds with students. A tense, disorganized, or, worse, hostile atmosphere interferes with your pedagogy and impedes student learning. It wastes time and disengages students. It leads to poor evaluations. Moreover, it is unnecessary and easily avoidable.

By starting the very first day of the term with clear routines and expectations, with easy procedures and on-task activities such as the focus questions and “Today We Will” list, students learn that our classes are well organized and that they can achieve success through appropriate class attendance, preparation, and participation. Instructors maximize instructional time and minimize classroom management efforts. All of this creates a classroom atmosphere that allows instructors and students to get down to the real business at hand: learning.

Today We Will
The “Today We Will” list goes up on the whiteboard or screen at the start of class and it stays there the entire time. What’s on the rest of the board or screen will change a lot during the course of the class, but the “Today We Will” list must be there for the whole period.

The “Today We Will” list is a road map. It lets students know what will be covered that day. They can glance at it to check progress or to see if they missed any big concepts. The list also keeps instructors on task. As you move around your classroom lecturing, the “Today We Will” list is a visual reminder of what you need to accomplish in that period. It ensures that you don’t
skip any concepts that you want or need to cover, and it keeps you from veering too far off on tangents.

The list also reminds students that they are accountable for the day’s material whether they are present in class or not. The reality of higher education is that students sometimes arrive late, leave early, or miss class altogether. In some courses, you will have adult students who are juggling family, jobs, and other competing responsibilities that may sometimes infringe on classroom time.

You must inform students that—from the very first day—they are responsible for everything on the “Today We Will” list. You do not, however, have to preach it. A clear, straightforward “Today We Will” list will consistently reinforce this expectation and encourage students to assume responsibility for the material presented in each class.

For example, if Number 1 on the “Today We Will” list is “Today we will go over three big questions that are on the midterm” and a student missed the first 15 minutes of class, she will want to get that material from you or another student, since the list clearly indicates it will appear on an exam. Thus, a thoughtfully crafted “Today We Will” list, as a part of classroom procedures, will motivate students to attend class, arrive on time, and compensate for any portion of class that they miss. It enables you to maximize all available instructional minutes. It also keeps the class organized, and it keeps students organized and accountable.

Keep in mind that the “Today We Will” list is not rigid. If you particularly like the discussion students are having, you can take something off the “Today We Will” list. If you feel that students have really grasped a concept more quickly than you expected, you can add items to the list.

Other times you can leave some blanks in the “Today We Will” list to allow students to direct the discussion. If students read three articles by three different scholars, take a poll to see which article you will discuss first.

However, the list is fairly standard on the first day of class. It contains the following seven things:

- Do what’s on the screen.
- Introduce yourself.
- Review syllabus completely.
- Complete interest inventory.
- Make folders.
- Have lesson on ____________________.
- Conclude with preparation expectations for next class.

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