

## Establishing a Positive Atmosphere

Faculty can maximize their first-day impact by planning an engaging activity that demonstrates their interest in students' learning and well-being using an activity that encourages reflection on creating a supportive classroom environment. Borrowing from Brookfield's (2012) "chalk talk" exercise, I pose a series of introductory questions on different white boards around the room:

What aspects of this class most excite (or worry) you?

What topics in this class most interest you?

What can I do to facilitate your learning?

What classroom ground rules would encourage your engagement in this class?

Armed with plenty of markers, I ask students to write responses to the questions or to other students' responses. I encourage them to draw arrows or lines between similar responses, to circle or add asterisks to statements with which they strongly agree, or to draw question marks next to statements about which they're uncertain. With many students writing simultaneously, anonymity is more or less assured.

I review responses to at least some items and prompt students for greater specificity in their responses, e.g., Can you help me understand what 'respectful' means? What behaviors would you consider 'rude'? I make notes on the board with these added details, occasionally adding my own thoughts, e.g., my belief that classroom "engagement" comes in many forms – not only through making comments but also in actively listening, talking to other students or me after class, asking questions, or contributing to online discussion (a perspective that sometimes surprises students). I conclude by taking pictures of all the boards.

Prior to the second class meeting, I translate comments into a coherent document and add this to our course management page. I show the document to students, encouraging feedback. For the classroom atmosphere question, I ask for agreement with the behaviors spelled out in the document. I then make an effort to refer back to the document over the course of the semester, both privately (to ensure I'm doing what students asked of me!) and in class (to remind students of our agreed-upon norms).

### References/Resources

Brookfield, S. D. (2012). *Teaching for critical thinking: Tools and techniques to help students question their assumptions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hermann, A. D., Foster, D. A., & Hardin, E. E. (2010). Does the first week of class matter? A quasi-experimental investigation of student satisfaction. *Teaching of Psychology, 37*, 79–84.

McGinley, J. J., & Jones, B. D. (2014). A brief instructional intervention to increase students' motivation on the first day of class. *Teaching of Psychology, 41*, 158-162.

### Abridged from a teaching tip submitted by

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