# Small Changes in Teaching: The First 5 Minutes of Class

*By James M. Lang* JANUARY 11, 2016

"Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."

In a conversation I had with Ken Bain, my longtime mentor and favorite education writer, he cited that quote — the first sentence of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* — as one of the great openings in literary history. It's hard to disagree: The sentence plunges us immediately into a drama, acquaints us with a character on the brink of death, and yet intrigues us with the reference to his long-forgotten (and curiosity-inducing) memory. That sentence makes us want to keep reading.

When I teach my writing course on creative nonfiction, we spend a lot of time analyzing the opening lines of great writers. I work frequently with students on their opening words, sentences, and paragraphs. In that very short space, I explain to them, most readers will decide whether or not to continue reading the rest of your essay. If you can't grab and hold their attention with your opening, you are likely to lose them before they get to your hard-won insights 10 paragraphs later.

The same principle, I would argue, holds true in teaching a college course. The opening five minutes offer us a rich opportunity to capture the attention of students and prepare them for learning. They walk into our classes trailing all of the distractions of their complex lives — the many wonders of their smartphones, the arguments with roommates, the question of what to have for lunch. Their bodies may be stuck in a room with us for the required time period, but their minds may be somewhere else entirely.

It seems clear, then, that we should start class with a deliberate effort to bring students' focus to the subject at hand. Unfortunately, based on my many observations of faculty members in action, the first five minutes of a college class often get frittered away with logistical tasks (taking attendance or setting up our technology), gathering our thoughts as we discuss homework or upcoming tests, or writing on the board.

Logistics and organization certainly matter, and may be unavoidable on some days. But on most days, we should be able to do better. In this column, the second in a series on small changes we can make to improve teaching and learning in higher education, I offer four quick suggestions for the first few minutes of class to focus the attention of students and prepare their brains for learning.

**Open with a question or two.**

Another favorite education writer of mine, the cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham, argues that teachers should focus more on the use of questions. "The material I want students to learn," he writes in his book *Why Don't Students Like School?,* "is actually the answer to a question. *On its own, the answer is almost never interesting.* But if you know the question, the answer may be quite interesting."

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My colleague Greg Weiner, an associate professor of political science, puts those ideas into practice. At the beginning of class, he shows four or five questions on a slide for students to consider. Class then proceeds in the usual fashion. At the end, he returns to the questions so that students can both see some potential answers and understand that they have learned something that day.

For example, in a session of his "American Government" course that focused on the separation of powers, the first question of the day might be: "What problem is the separation of powers designed to address?" And the last: "What forces have eroded the separation of powers?" Those questions are also available to the students in advance of class, to help guide their reading and homework. But having the questions visible at the start of class, and returning to them at the end, reminds students that each session has a clear purpose.

So consider opening class with one or more questions that qualify as important and fascinating. You might even let students give preliminary answers for a few moments, and then again in the closing minutes, to help them recognize how their understanding has deepened over the course period.

**What did we learn last time?** A favorite activity of many instructors is to spend a few minutes at the opening of class reviewing what happened in the previous session. That makes perfect sense, and is supported by the idea that we don't learn from single exposure to material — we need to return frequently to whatever we are attempting to master. But instead of offering a capsule review to students, why not ask *them* to offer one back to you?

In the teaching-and-learning world, the phenomenon known as the "testing effect" has received much ink. Put very simply, if we want to remember something, we have to practice remembering it. To that end, learning researchers have demonstrated over and over again that quizzes and tests not only measure student learning, but can actually help promote it. The more times that students have to draw information, ideas, or skills from memory, the better they learn it.

Instead of "testing effect," I prefer to use the more technical term, "retrieval practice," because testing is not required to help students practice retrieving material from their memories. Any effort they make to remember course content — without the help of notes or texts — will benefit their learning.
Take advantage of that fact in the opening few minutes of class by asking students to "remind" you of the key points from the last session. Write them on the board — editing as you go and providing feedback to ensure the responses are accurate — to set up the day's new material. Five minutes of that at the start of every class will prepare students to succeed on the memory retrieval they will need on quizzes and exams throughout the semester.

One important caveat: Students should do all of this without notebooks, texts, or laptops. Retrieval practice only works when they are retrieving the material from memory — not when they are retrieving it from their screens or pages.

Reactivate what they learned in previous courses. Plenty of excellent evidence suggests that whatever knowledge students bring into a course has a major influence on what they take away from it. So a sure-fire technique to improve student learning is to begin class by revisiting, not just what they learned in the previous session, but what they already knew about the subject matter.

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"The accuracy of students' prior content knowledge is critical to teaching and learning," write Susan A. Ambrose and Marsha C. Lovett in an essay on the subject in a free ebook,because "it is the foundation on which new knowledge is built. If students' prior knowledge is faulty (e.g., inaccurate facts, ideas, models, or theories), subsequent learning tends to be hindered because they ignore, discount, or resist important new evidence that conflicts with existing knowledge."

Asking students to tell you what they already know (or think they know) has two important benefits. First, it lights up the parts of their brains that connect to your course material, so when they encounter new material, they will process it in a richer knowledge context. Second, it lets you know what preconceptions students have about your course material. That way, your lecture, discussion, or whatever you plan for class that day can specifically deal with and improve upon the knowledge actually in the room, rather than the knowledge you imagine to be in the room.

Here, too, try posing simple questions at the beginning of class followed by a few minutes of discussion: "Today we are going to focus on X. What do you know about X already? What have you heard about it in the media, or learned in a previous class?" You might be surprised at the misconceptions you hear, or heartened by the state of knowledge in the room. Either way, you'll be better prepared to shape what follows in a productive way.

**Write it down.** All three of the previous activities would benefit from having students spend a few minutes writing down their responses. That way, every student has the opportunity to answer the question, practice memory retrieval from the previous session, or surface their prior knowledge — and not just the students most likely to raise their hands in class.

Frequent, low-stakes writing assignments constitute one of the best methods you can use to solicit engagement and thinking in class. You don't have to grade the responses very carefully — or at all. Count them for participation, or make them worth a tiny fraction of a student's grade. If you don't want to collect the papers, have students write in their notebooks or on laptops and walk around the classroom just to keep everyone honest and ensure they are doing the work. Limit writing time to three to five minutes and ask everyone to write until you call time — at which point discussion begins.

In my 15 years of full-time teaching, the only thing I have done consistently in every class is use the first few minutes for writing exercises, and I will continue to do that for as long as I am teaching. I love them not only for the learning benefits they offer, but because they have both a symbolic value and a focusing function. Starting with five minutes of writing helps students make the transition from the outside world to the classroom.

So don't limit student-writing time to papers or exams. Let a writing exercise help you bring focus and engagement to the opening of every class session. Build it into your routine. Class has begun: time to write, time to think. In writing, as in learning, openings matter. Don't fritter them away.

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