



Engaging Students on the First Day of Class: Student-Generated Questions Promote Positive Course Expectations

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Two studies analyze a first day of class activity in general psychology as a method to promote early class interaction, introduce course content, and increase students' expectations for the upcoming course. After a brief introduction emphasizing the scope of psychology, students write an anonymous, psychology-related question, some of which are read aloud to the class. In the first study, students discuss and attempt to answer the question before the instructor gives a psychological explanation. Students in two sections ($n = 68$) completed the activity and a survey about their impressions of the upcoming course, while two other sections ($n = 72$) received the same survey with no activity. Analysis shows more favorable course impressions for the activity group. The second study examines (1) if the students writing their own questions or just a discussion of the content leads to positive course expectations and (2) if those expectations continue to the next class period. Students across multiple semesters either completed an activity where they generated their own questions ($n = 142$) or received the same content and discussion that was only introduced by the instructor ($n = 139$). Students who generate their own question show more favorable course impressions that extend to the next class period. Examples of students' questions and procedural variations are discussed.

Keywords: first day of class, class activity, general psychology, student-generated questions

The first class meeting of a college course is historically a time for reviewing the course syllabus while also giving a brief introduction of course content. As instructors present their academic expectations, students concurrently develop their own course expectations (Gross Davis, 2009). The first day experience is vital for establishing course tone (Henslee, Burgess, & Buskist, 2006) and can either positively or negatively affect the entire term (Laws, Apperson, Buchert, & Bregman, 2010; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Establishing factors like instructor knowledge and approachability are key (Henslee et al., 2006) and instructor enthusiasm mo-

tivates student learning efforts (Wolcowitz, 1984). However, approaches to the first day are very mixed. deLuse (2018) identified four major categories of first day approaches: an instructor can focus on content, relationship building, increasing student self-efficacy, and setting expectations.

In addition to outlining course expectations, students and faculty alike typically desire a class that is both engaging and provides an informal content introduction and downplays many relationship building activities. For example, an early study on first day student preferences reports that students desire the first class meeting to include the requirements and expectations for the course and dislike using class time poorly, meeting the entire class period, and beginning with formal lectures (Perlman & McCann, 1999). Nearly 2 decades later, Eskine, Hammer, Gramlich, Cohen, and Schulte-Gipson (2017) confirmed that students still maintain the majority of these first day preferences, with the exception that more students prefer a fun course tone and are much less en-

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thused about icebreakers and instructors that appear to be poor teachers. A separate study on first day preferences suggested that students actually prefer content introduction over the other get-to-know-you activities, and one third spontaneously mentioned that they wanted an overview of the course content on their ideal first day. (Henslee et al., 2006).

Although student desires are certainly important, instructors have their own motivations for setting the appropriate academic tone. Handelsman (2011) stresses the importance of student engagement from the very first period as well as covering some major themes and setting a proper climate. Despite student desire to have a shortened class period, introducing some content is crucial for establishing the academic tone (e.g., Goss Lucas, 2006). In a review of approaches to the first day of class, Hammer (2015) compiles several different ideas for first day activities and acknowledges there is no clear answer, but there is a direction toward students wanting, after discussing the course requirements, something that sets a proper tone, overviews the course, introduces content informally, and does not appear unorganized or a waste of time. However, many first day activities are not designed with that goal in mind. For example, in a book dedicated to the first day of class, McGlynn (2001) provides many tips on preparing for the first class period and outlines several first-day activities, none of which address course content.

If an instructor chooses to introduce content, there are some creative methods that also promote engagement. Some suggestions include challenging student misconceptions or asking students true/false questions about psychology (Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005). Another suggestion is having small student groups about potential content (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006). Although students favor these techniques over the interpersonal icebreakers, there is still opportunity to maximize class involvement and effort.

Presented here is a simple activity created for general psychology that provides a brief overview of course content and strives to promote early class interaction. The activity addresses the need for an engaging, content-related activity that avoids a formal lecture but still provides an introductory course overview. The design attempts to increase students' excitement about

psychology and encourage each student to take an active role in identifying and discussing their own psychological questions. Study 1 examines if simply performing the activity affects students' perceptions for the upcoming course. Study 2 controls for time and content presentation and explores if the positive course perceptions continue to the next class period.

Study 1

Method

Study 1 examined if performing the activity promoted positive course impressions versus not doing the activity. When students in four sections of general psychology arrived to the first class meeting at a large, diverse, urban North Texas community college, class began with a syllabus review followed by a brief overview of psychology as a scientific discipline, emphasizing subject breadth and application to all aspects of life. The course overview and introductory comments lasted approximately 25 min and attempted to follow what students believe is most important on the first day (e.g., Henslee et al., 2006; Perlman & McCann, 1999).

After the general introduction, the instructor asked students in two randomly selected sections (activity group, $n = 68$) to take out a piece of paper. To minimize potential bias, the instructor waited until after the preliminary course overview to discretely use a random number generator on a mobile device to determine if a class was activity or nonactivity. The instructor then asked the class to write down a question with the following guidelines:

Take a moment and think if there is anything you have ever wondered that might be related to psychology. Maybe it is something you have always wanted to know the answer to and did not know who to ask, or maybe it is something you can relate to what we have discussed about psychology. Ask anything, as long as it has something to do with psychology.

If students appeared to be struggling with identifying a question, the instructor gave a follow-up prompt reminding them of the breadth of the field and suggesting that they ask a question they hope will be answered during the course.

The instructor told students to leave their names off the papers and gave them approximately 3 min to complete their questions. The

instructor then collected the papers face down and spent approximately one minute quickly reviewing the submissions, selecting five to seven interesting questions that address different areas of psychology. To fill the silence during this time, the instructor commented on the high quality of questions or the breadth of topics. Table 1 provides a small, yet representative sample of questions students ask on the first day of class.

After reading one selection aloud, the instructor asked students to give their opinions or possible answers. Depending on student response, the instructor asked a few related follow-up questions to encourage further participation and critical thought. To promote full participation, the instructor sometimes conducted an informal poll, asking for a show of hands of some contrasting opinions. While many student explanations were typical misconceptions, all responses were treated positively. After the brief class discussion, the instructor gave a short psychological explanation, often referring to course topics and chapters where the question would be explored deeper. The instructor did not typically provide detailed explanations or cite specific research, but rather stated a general overview or a basic principle.

Table 1
Sample Student Questions Submitted During the Activity

Student-generated questions
What do dreams mean?
Are depressed people really crazy?
Why do people become addicted to drugs?
Is extrasensory perception real?
Why can't I stay faithful in a relationship?
What causes autism?
Why do people do what they are told rather than what they want?
Why am I so much like my mother even though I don't want to be?
Why do girls go back to their jerk boyfriends and forgive them?
Why do we only use 10% of our brain?
Is bipolar genetic?
Do babies develop personalities before birth?
Why does racism exist?
What is the purpose of learning psychology?
Why do I procrastinate?
Why do we make decisions off emotions?
How does our brain have the ability to remember?

For example, when a student asked about the seriousness of depression (a common question; see Table 1), the instructor followed up with a question to the class asking if anyone knew a possible cause of depression. Invariably, a few students responded with "a chemical imbalance." Then the instructor asked if anyone knew what chemical was thought to be imbalanced, which led to a few students answering "serotonin." The instructor then responded, "Don't worry, if you don't know that word, you will by the end of chapter 2," and led a discussion on the importance of neuroscience in the course, along with the changing understanding of serotonin, the many other contributing factors, and the seriousness of the disorder. The instructor also referenced topics in the chapters on stress and disorders to highlight the interconnectivity of course material. After the short explanation, the instructor proceeded to the next question from the subset selected and repeated the process, typically getting more interaction as more questions were asked. The entire activity took approximately 30 min and five to six questions were discussed and answered. After the activity, students received an anonymous survey about their initial course impressions and the class activity.

The two sections of the nonactivity group ($n = 72$) received the same 25-min introduction to the course as the activity group, but the instructor administered the first-day impression survey prior to doing the class activity. Once the nonactivity students completed the initial course impression survey, the instructor proceeded with the question-generating activity as described above so all students were still exposed to the discussion. The instructor gave an additional survey at the end of class asking the impressions of the class activity only.

The 11 first-day impression survey questions were on an 11-point bipolar Likert-type scale ranging from -5 (*strongly disagree*) to $+5$ (*strongly agree*), with a neutral zero midpoint. The additional five subjective questions about the class activity used the same scale. Since multiple survey questions potentially tapped into the same dimensions, an aggregated engagement score combined the questions asking if the course will be fun, their excitement for the upcoming course, if they thought it was a very good first day, if they thought the course will be stimulating, if they will learn a lot, and if they

were more excited about the course than when they first entered ($\alpha = .83$). An additional aggregate score combined questions on perceived instructor knowledge and if the instructor appeared to be a good teacher ($\alpha = .71$). Finally, two additional questions that did not relate to any other questions asked about anticipated course performance and if psychology was a much broader field than they previously realized.

Results

The mean aggregate engagement score showed a difference between the activity group ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .93$) and nonactivity group ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(138) = 3.50$, $p = .001$, $d = .61$). The second aggregate on instructor knowledge and if they appeared to be a good teacher showed no difference between the groups. Questions asking if psychology was a much broader field than they realized and the perceived course difficulty showed no differences. Students subjectively rated the activity positively with the two highest responses stating it was a good introduction to the field and that they enjoyed the activity, respectively (see Table 2).

Study 2

Study 1 identified an activity that appears to increase immediate positive expectations for the course while also introducing content in a manner that students find worthwhile. Study 1 focused on factors such as class-time utilization, activity enjoyment, and engagement, but did not attempt to account for the extra time it takes to do the activity and the mere introduction of content as possible factors in increasing student expectations. Study 2 further examined the im-

pact of the activity on course perceptions by conducting an alternate content introduction and measuring course perceptions in the class period following the activity.

Method

Study 2 examined six sections over three semesters at the same institution as Study 1. The sections were independent of Study 1 and the schedule was the same every semester with back-to-back sections. The group conditions were counterbalanced by meeting time in the first two semesters and randomly assigned in the third semester. Three sections ($n = 142$) received the activity instructions described in Study 1. The other three sections ($n = 139$) were not asked to write down any questions, but rather, at the same time in the class period when the students would begin the activity, the instructor continued the discussion: "As a psychology professor, I get asked all kinds of interesting questions. For example, I was just recently asked . . .," and the instructor covered the same set of questions that another class wrote down. The instructor purposefully covered questions with similar content in all six sections. Class participation and discussion were encouraged, and every attempt was made to present with the same enthusiasm and class involvement. The discussion and student involvement were essentially equivalent to the student-generated question classes. The primary difference was one set of students generated their questions while the other students received those same questions from their instructor. At the beginning of the next class period, students received a survey about the previous class session. The survey was slightly modified from Study 1 and emphasized that the students were to base impressions on the first day of class. Again, several related items combined into an engagement score aggregate-if the students thought the course will be fun, their excitement for the upcoming course, if they thought the course will be stimulating, and if they were more excited after the first day ($\alpha = .88$). Two related questions on the instructor - if they appear knowledgeable and a good teacher - combined for an instructor aggregate score ($\alpha = .82$).

Results

The student-generated group consistently rated higher favorable impressions across virtually all categories coming into the next class

Table 2
Mean Evaluations of the Activity by All Students

Question	<i>M (SD)</i>
I enjoyed the class activity.	3.54 (1.39)
The class activity was a good use of class time.	3.49 (1.59)
I learned a lot from the activity.	2.81 (1.79)
The activity was a good introduction to the field of psychology.	3.55 (1.37)
The activity was fun.	3.17 (1.54)

period than the students who were presented the same questions by the instructor. The aggregate score showed that students who wrote down their questions ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.99$) rated the engagement aspects more favorably than those who heard the same questions from the instructor ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.49$), $t(279) = 3.58$, $p < .001$, $d = .44$. The student-generated group also showed a higher rating on mean aggregate related to the instructor ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .55$), than the instructor-generated ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .93$, $t(279) = 2.83$, $p = .005$, $d = .34$). The other two questions on expected course performance and course difficulty were not significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons.

Discussion

The activity appears to be an effective tool for increasing expectations and setting a more positive tone for the upcoming course. The subjective evaluations indicate students enjoyed the activity and thought it was a good use of class time. While others have suggested presenting the class questions as an overview of introducing content (e.g., Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005; Erickson et al., 2006), asking individual students to generate their own questions appears to have an added effect on course expectations and perceptions. Although students in both groups generally rated all aspects positively, there is a consistently higher rating when conducting the activity, suggesting that performing the activity further addresses the need for class engagement on day one (Handelsman, 2011). Subjective responses also align with student preferences of an ideal first day (Eskine et al., 2017; Perlman & McCann, 1999) as students report the activity is a good use of class time, that they enjoyed the activity, and that it was a good introduction to the field.

Study 1 examined if performing the activity had a positive effect on students. Students in the nonactivity group received their survey on first day impressions well before the Activity group. Although not stated outright, giving a survey asking about the first day might give the impression that class was about to end 30 min into an 80-min session, aligning with student preferences of a shortened class period (Perlman & McCann, 1999; Eskine et al., 2017). However, students in the Activity group still give higher ratings after a longer time in class. It is possible

that the other preferences of a fun class tone and not wasting class time outweigh the preference for a shortened class period. Study 2 suggests students who generate their own questions have more favorable impressions in the following class period than students presented with the same topics, which indicates the active component of writing their own questions is a key factor in increasing student engagement.

In addition to establishing an engaging and fun tone for students, there are several other advantages to the student-generated questions. No special materials are needed as students use their own supplies. The activity stimulates heavy class participation, and the exchange between the instructor and class can lay the groundwork for open communication, critical thinking, and scientific explanations throughout the course. Some of the student-generated questions are quite insightful, while others are humorous but still result in good discussions on psychological science. When performing the activity, instructors should remain cognizant that some student questions may have a very personal meaning and be sensitive in their responses.

Although typically performed on classes of 40 students, the student-generated question activity is also conducted in classes of 80 and can adjust to larger groups of several hundred. For example, in a large class, the instructor could have teaching assistants collect questions and select a small amount to share while the instructor is discussing other items. The questions are generally very similar from class to class and using a question set from another class would most likely address many of the questions asked in the current section. Since the activity usually only addresses four to six student questions, the instructor may also choose to incorporate other questions during the appropriate lecture topic throughout the course. For example, if asked a question about dream interpretation, the instructor may choose to start off the consciousness discussion by reminding the students they asked that question on the first day.

Initially designed for general psychology, the activity may be easily adapted to many other introductory classes. Other areas of potential use and data collection might be in upper level psychology using a similar method and modifying the question to focus on the particular course content. Alternatively, students in a re-

search methods course may be given questions asked by the general psychology students and then be required to set up an empirical design for that question. In this scenario, the instructor would still conduct the activity with the General course so they would benefit from the experience. Perhaps the most rewarding variation is to revisit the questions toward the end of the term and have a similar discussion. However, this time, students can provide more cogent answers and realize the knowledge gained during the course.

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