

# Fostering approachability and classroom participation during the first day of class

*Evidence for a reciprocal interview activity*

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**ABSTRACT** Students and faculty often have different goals for the first day of class. While teaching advice books recommend actively engaging students in the course from the start, students often 'shop' for classes and report being primarily concerned with gathering practical information. The aim of this article is to introduce a reciprocal interview activity that attempts to achieve both goals by creating a dynamic conversation in which the instructor inquires about the students' goals and expectations and, in turn, the students collectively interview the instructor about his or her goals and expectations. Preliminary findings indicate that students evaluate the activity favorably and feel more comfortable participating in class and more comfortable approaching the instructor about class-related and non-class-related issues after the activity. Additional benefits and uses for both students and instructors are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** *class activities, classroom techniques, college students, motivation techniques, teacher–student relationship*

## Understanding the impact of the first day of college courses

Conventional teaching wisdom suggests that what happens on the first day of a college class critically affects both student satisfaction with and performance in the course. Common suggestions for successfully beginning a college course include fostering instructor–student rapport (Lucas, 2006; Royse, 2001), communicating clear and concise expectations (Curzan and

Damour, 2000; Davis, 1993), promoting important behaviors right from the start (for example, discussion, writing; Nilson, 2003), conducting activities that involve a wide variety of students (Provitiera-McGlynn, 2001), and sharing information about oneself (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006). Some experts go so far as to suggest involving students in the making of course rules of conduct on the first day (DiClementi and Handelsman, 2005). Although some recommendations for the first day may cater to specific disciplines, the goals of most first day activities incorporate one or more of the following: establishing warm interpersonal relationships between instructor and students, communicating clearly about key elements of the course, promoting the behaviors the instructor desires from students during the course, and generally actively involving students from the start.

There is little empirical evidence, however, to suggest that an instructor engaging in such activities during the first day of class achieves these desired short-term results. In fact, some research evidence suggests that such activities may be in opposition to students' goals on the first day of class. Studies examining college students' attitudes suggests that students do not generally believe that first class session has much impact (Henslee et al., 2006) and appear to be mainly concerned with course practicalities such as class assignments, attendance policies, and class structure during the first class session (Henslee et al., 2006; Perlman and McCann, 1999). Such concerns suggest students may be 'shopping' for classes, weighing the relative costs and benefits of a variety of courses, and therefore be more interested in the pragmatic terms of the obligations articulated in the syllabus or by the instructor rather than building rapport or being actively involved with their classmates (Wolcowitz, 1984). Consequently, the goals of an instructor who tries to promote an effective learning experience on the first day may be in direct competition with students' goals for that day. In fact, an instructor who is interested in promoting good rapport and an active participation on the first day may inadvertently frustrate students as they may be more interested in getting a copy of the syllabus and leaving.

In this article, we present an activity that may resolve these seemingly conflicting first-day goals of the instructor and students. We adapted an activity developed for the teaching of industrial/organizational psychology designed to demonstrate effective communication between employers and employees during an initial employment interview. The activity, a reciprocal interview between students and instructor, allows the instructor to clearly and concisely communicate the course practicalities to students as an employer would describe job duties and responsibilities to a new employee; thus satisfying students' concerns with course practicalities. It also provides the opportunity for positive and dynamic interactions between the instructor and students. These interactions help establish rapport while

actively involving students in the course (Harvey and Brown, 2000; Osland et al., 2001) thus satisfying the instructor's goals of building rapport and involving students. Our experiences suggest this activity is a valuable way to actively engage a large number of students to learn about their preferences, attitudes, and knowledge about the course. Our experiences also suggest that it may have a number of different positive effects on our students and classroom environment. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to describe the activity in detail and provide some initial evidence regarding its effects on student perceptions and attitudes.

In this study, we examined two important research questions. First, given the apparent conflict between the first-day goals of instructors and students, we examined how students reacted to participating in the reciprocal interview activity. We also assessed whether the activity was evaluated differently by students who were experiencing the instructor for the first time in the classroom compared to students who had previous classroom experience with the instructor. Second, this study examined the immediate impact of the reciprocal interview activity on students' comfort with interacting with the instructor and their classmates. In particular, we were interested in the degree to which participating in the activity promoted two of our main goals for the first day: fostering positive attitudes about approaching the instructor and promoting classroom participation. We also examined the degree to which new students reacted more strongly to the activity compared to students who had experienced the instructor previously.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Students in five different psychology courses (introductory, basic research methods, personality, and two sections of statistics;  $N = 103$ ) in either a regional state university or a liberal arts college participated in the activity during the first week of class. Of the 80 female and 23 male participants, 52 were seniors, 42 juniors, 7 sophomores, and 2 were first year students. The mean age of participants was 22.5 ( $SD = 5.7$ ) with 89 per cent under 24 years, and 31 per cent reported having had a course with the instructor before. Data from two participants who did not fully complete the questionnaires were dropped.

### **Procedure**

#### ***Interview activity***

After a brief overview of the syllabus, students formed small groups of 5 or 6 and were given approximately 10–15 minutes to discuss several course-related issues based on a handout provided by the instructor

(see Appendix). The instructor and the handout explained that the discussion was preparation for an interview by the instructor. The groups discussed a wide range of topics such as: their own expectations, goals, and experiences related to the course; suggestions for classroom norms; and instructor behaviors that could help them achieve their goals. After the discussion, each group selected a representative to field the instructor's questions and represent the group's thoughts on the previously discussed topics. The instructor emphasized that the representative's job was to convey the group's views rather than their own views. After these discussions, the instructor interviewed the representatives from all the groups in the presence of all of the members of the class. Typically, only group representatives responded to questions, but occasionally other class members were allowed to respond when the instructor deemed that additional input was needed. Instructors conveyed they were listening carefully by taking notes of student responses (on a blackboard or notebook) and by asking clarifying questions. The instructors made an effort strike a balance between responding immediately to student concerns that arose during the interview and simply listening and taking notes.

After the instructor completed the interview of the students, the groups were instructed to elect a new representative. This representative would interview the instructor on the groups' behalf. The groups had approximately 5–10 minutes to agree on several questions they would like to ask the instructor. Students used the handout and the previous instructor interview to guide their selection of questions to ask the instructor. The instructor indicated that they were free to ask any question as long as it was related to the course in some way. Afterward, the group representatives took turns asking the instructor questions. Instructors made an effort to answer the questions thoughtfully and sincerely and to promise to return to issues or questions for which they either did not have an answer or were not prepared to discuss at that point. Instructors also used the student questions as an opportunity to raise important course issues that may not have been addressed up to this point, like the challenging aspects of the course or the ways students could get assistance.

Prior to conducting the activity, students completed a questionnaire that included demographic measures, including gender, age, class standing, and whether the instructor was new to them, and measures assessing their level of comfort with approaching the instructor and participating in class activities. Immediately after the activity, students rated their comfort on the same items again and evaluated the activity on several dimensions. The anonymity of all responses was emphasized during each data collection, and individual participants' responses were matched via an anonymous code.

## Measures

### *Measures of comfort*

Two different dimensions of student comfort with approaching the instructor were assessed immediately before and after the activity: comfort with approaching the instructor about class-related matters and comfort with approaching the instructor about general advising. Students rated their comfort with approaching the instructor on class-related matters on three items: 'talking with the professor about assignments', 'talking with the professor during office hours', and 'emailing the professor with questions' ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Comfort with seeking general advising was also measured with three items. Students rated the degree to which they felt comfortable 'discussing non-class academic issues', 'discussing non-class personal issues', and 'seeking advice' with the instructor ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Student comfort with class participation was also assessed. Students indicated the degree to which they felt comfortable 'participating in group activities during class' and 'sharing ideas and opinions during class' ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ). All comfort items were measured using a 5-point scale with the following anchors (1 = 'not at all'; 2 = 'slight extent'; 3 = 'some extent'; 4 = 'great extent'; 5 = 'a very great extent').

### *Evaluation of activity*

After the activity, participants completed items assessing the degree to which they thought the activity was worthwhile and their beliefs about its effects. Participants indicated their level of agreement on two items: 'Would you recommend other professors do this activity at the beginning of the term?' and 'Did this activity seem to be a waste of time?' Students reported their beliefs about the activity's effects on their attitudes on four separate items. Students rated the degree to which they believed the activity helped them: 'to understand what was expected of them in class', 'to work hard to do well in the class', 'to become more comfortable participating in class', and 'to share concerns with the professor'. All items were measured using a 5-point scale with the following anchors (1 = 'not at all'; 2 = 'slight extent'; 3 = 'some extent'; 4 = 'great extent'; 5 = 'a very great extent').

## Results

The instructors were able to complete the activity within the time frame suggested in the appendix (that is, 45–60 minutes). They did, however, notice that the instructors' interview of the students often took up the most time because the student groups often had many different responses to the questions and these responses would often prompt clarification questions and substantial responses from the instructors. The time frames in the

appendix are suggestions and each instructor should adjust them according to their preferences and purposes.

### Measures of comfort

We assessed changes in students' levels of comfort in approaching the instructor and participating in class by comparing ratings made before and after the activity. We also compared differences in comfort between those students who had taken a previous course from the instructor and those taking a course from the instructor for the first time. Finally, we examined whether changes in comfort after the activity differed between those who had the instructor before and those who had not (that is, an interaction between the two variables). A mixed 2 (time of measurement) X 2 (experience with instructor) repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted to make the comparisons. Analyses indicated that participants felt more comfortable on all dimensions after the activity (see Table 1). Specifically, students felt more comfortable approaching the instructor about class-related issues after the activity ( $M = 4.31$ ) than before ( $M = 4.06$ ;  $F(1,99) = 19.2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.36$ ). Likewise, students felt more comfortable approaching the instructor about general advising issues after the activity ( $M = 3.46$ ) than before ( $M = 3.21$ ;  $F(1,99) = 9.8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $d = 0.28$ ). In addition, students felt more comfortable participating in class activities after the activity ( $M = 3.86$ ) than before ( $M = 3.54$ ;  $F(1,99) = 20.1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $d = 0.43$ ). Thus, we observed medium-sized effects on those items most directly related to the activity and a small effect on the advising item, which was less directly related. There were no significant differences for whether students had the instructor before ( $p < 0.20$ ) and the changes observed did not differ between the two groups; in other words, no interactions between these two variables ( $p < 0.40$ ).

### Evaluation of activity

Analysis of student evaluations of the activity revealed a positive response overall and beliefs that were consistent with the changes we observed (see Table 1). Over 80 per cent indicated that they would recommend the activity to other professors to 'a great extent' or 'a very great extent' ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ). Likewise, less than 4 per cent of students indicated that they considered it to be a waste of time to a 'great extent' or more ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ). Students also reported that the activity had positive effects on their attitudes. They also reported that it helped them to understand what was expected of them in class ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) and that it motivated them to work hard to do well in the course ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). In addition, they felt that the activity helped them to be more comfortable sharing their concerns with the instructor ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) and

**Table 1** Students' mean ratings of comfort with approaching the instructor and class participation before and after the reciprocal interview activity

	<i>Comfort with instructor interaction</i>		<i>Comfort with instructor as advisor</i>		<i>Comfort with class participation</i>	
	<b>M</b>	<i>SD</i>	<b>M</b>	<i>SD</i>	<b>M</b>	<i>SD</i>
Before activity	<b>4.06</b>	0.72	<b>3.21</b>	0.87	<b>3.54</b>	0.76
After activity	<b>4.31</b>	0.69	<b>3.46</b>	0.89	<b>3.86</b>	0.72
<i>F</i>		19.2***		9.8**		20.1***
Cohen's <i>d</i>		0.36		0.28		0.43

*N* = 101; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01, \*\*\**p* < 0.001

participating in class ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). Independent samples *t* tests indicated no difference in the evaluation on any of these dimensions between those students who had the instructor before and those who had not ( $p < 0.35$ ).

## Discussion

The current findings are consistent with the idea that this activity promotes positive attitudes about approaching the instructor and class participation. This may be unsurprising given that the activity models these kinds of behaviors by not only creating an opportunity for students to ask the instructor honest questions about the course in a safe environment and get thoughtful responses, but also by creating opportunities for all students to easily participate in group discussions. Conversely, it is somewhat surprising that such an activity could move students' attitudes on these dimensions so decisively in the span of one class period. Moreover, it is equally surprising that these attitude shifts would be equivalent for students who were familiar with the instructor compared to those students who were not. It is equally interesting that this positive attitude shift appeared to generalize to approaching the instructor about issues not specifically related to the course (for example, advising). It may be that instructors who are willing to place themselves in the unusual and somewhat vulnerable position of being interviewed in front of the class may come across as particularly approachable in general.

Students also responded very favorably to the activity. They strongly recommended the activity to other faculty and clearly indicated that they

believed it was a good use of class time. Moreover, they believed that it helped to create a more comfortable learning environment and, perhaps most importantly from their perspective, it helped them to understand what was expected of them in the particular course. This activity may, in fact, be a particularly effective way to engage students at the beginning of a college course. The activity serves to directly address students' primary concerns about course expectations and requirements, as well as providing them a good opportunity to size up the instructor in an environment that promotes the interaction and positive rapport with which many instructors hope to start their courses.

We believe this activity may foster other positive classroom dynamics as well. First, the activity seems to prompt students to think about the course in a relatively deep way right from the outset. For example, students are prompted to consider their goals for the course beyond simply getting a good grade. Second, the activity also promotes communication and interaction *between* students. This interaction provides the opportunity to begin forming relationships with their peers early in the course. These budding peer–peer relationships may serve to promote greater levels of commitment to and participation in the course. Third, the activity also provides a unique opportunity for students to learn about other students' concerns and perspectives in a relatively non-threatening forum. This may be particularly beneficial in courses that have a reputation for being particularly difficult, anxiety provoking, or burdensome. Finally, the activity may also serve to reduce classroom incivilities as it promotes many of the behaviors that are associated with fewer problematic interactions (Boice, 1996).

As instructors, we have also benefited from this activity beyond the positive effects we have observed in our students. First, conducting the activity provided us a valuable opportunity to better understand our students' perspective about college and our courses. Conducting the activity has also afforded us a welcome chance to restructure the student–instructor roles in a way that promotes more effective feedback and dialogue over the course of the term. Consequently, we believe our courses have evolved and improved in a myriad of ways that address student concerns and perspectives at a much faster rate than would have been possible without the utilizing the activity. Additionally, utilizing the activity has forced us to carefully consider the rationale for the format, assignments, and goals of our courses. We find the prospect of being interviewed by our students energizing and value the opportunity to speak about our intentions and goals at the beginning of our courses with a classroom audience that is particularly receptive.

It is important to note that this activity can be easily changed and adapted to serve any instructors' goals. The discussion prompts can be modified and/or reordered to address any issues that an instructor wants

to address during the first day (see Appendix). While our prompts are purposefully student-centered, an instructor could include items that were oriented more toward the content of the course (for example, 'What types of things do you expect to do in this course?'), fostering particular class dynamics (for example, 'How do you think your gender/economic/cultural background will influence your perspective in this course?'), or any other issue they deem relevant. Instructors who do not wish to appear overly 'warm and fuzzy' can use the activity to emphasize the challenging aspects of their courses and to communicate clear expectations about the nature of the work and effort required. Likewise, the items we include to prompt students to reflect on their goals and how the course is related to them could be eliminated to shorten students' discussion or replaced with prompts to consider methods of evaluation, writing requirements, or any other aspect of the course. The student-led interviews could also be conducted first if an instructor wanted to emphasize and promote student inquiry about course specifics at the outset.

It is important to keep in mind that the current study does not clearly demonstrate which specific aspects of the class session lead to changes in

**Table 2** Attitudes toward and beliefs about the reciprocal interview activity as a function of whether students had taken a previous course with the instructor

	<i>Item</i>	<i>Previous course with instructor?</i>				<i>Total</i>	
		<i>YES (n = 32)</i>		<i>NO (n = 69)</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Evaluation of activity	Should be used by other faculty	4.01	0.95	4.19	0.93	4.08	0.94
	Is a waste of time	1.59	1.04	1.42	0.77	1.47	0.86
Beliefs about activity's effects	Helps to understand expectations	4.28	0.63	4.20	0.69	4.20	0.69
	Motivates to work hard	4.40	0.71	4.25	0.86	4.28	0.82
	Helps to share concerns w/instructor	4.25	0.62	4.09	0.89	4.15	0.81
	Promotes participation in class	4.19	0.74	4.04	0.81	4.07	0.81

There were no statistically significant differences between the groups on any measure

student attitudes. While the activity seems a likely cause, it could be that simply spending a class session with the instructor or the instructors' personality was the primary causes of attitude change. These explanations, however, seem less plausible for two reasons: first, the activity represents a fairly sharp departure from a typical class session, one in which students spend a relatively small amount of time listening to the instructor; and second, the observed effects on students' comfort were the same for students who had already had the instructor for a previous course compared to students taking the instructor for the first time. This result suggests that the increases in comfort were not due to simply getting to know the instructor's personality or teaching style but rather something about the class session. Further research utilizing a full experimental design is needed to determine which aspects of the activity or class session are responsible for shifts in students' levels of comfort. In addition, it is unclear whether the observed effects were the result of the exchange of information in the interviews or the high degree of interaction between the students and between the students and the instructor. While the activity is specifically designed to incorporate both of these elements, it may be that engaging in open dialogue of this nature on any issue is sufficient to increase students' comfort in approaching the instructor and participating in class. Regardless, this activity appears to be able to accomplish both at the same time in a way that is satisfying to both students and the instructor.

Additional research should also be conducted to determine if the impact of the activity is affected by either the demographic characteristics of the students or the type of course in which students are enrolled (for example, psychology vs. computer science). The activity appeared effective in our sample. Our sample, however, consisted of predominantly Caucasian females on predominantly Caucasian campuses. It may be that students with more diverse backgrounds may be more or less receptive to the activity. Likewise, the activity may be more or less useful in courses in which dialogue and classroom interaction is not expected. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues who have used the activity in disciplines as diverse as biology, math, and art suggests that the activity has value in those disciplines as well. The activity, however, will likely need to be modified to address the important issues in specific courses.

Similarly, male and female instructors may experience varying degrees of success with the activity. In this study, both instructors were male and may have benefited from violating negative authoritarian stereotypes typically associated with male instructors. Conversely, students may expect more openness, dialogue and other types of 'nurturing behavior' from female instructors. These differing expectations could lead to a more positive or negative response from students depending on whether their expectations

are being fulfilled or violated (Bachen et al., 1999). Anecdotal evidence from female colleagues who have used the activity suggests positive outcomes for them, but additional evidence should be collected to determine the ways in which the activity may be more or less effective for male and female instructors.

Finally, other important short- and long-term classroom outcomes that may be affected by the activity should be examined. The short-term outcomes examined in the current study were limited to student attitudes and perceptions. As previously suggested, however, a variety of different processes may be influenced by this kind of activity. For example, students reported that the activity made them want to work hard to succeed in the class. It is unclear, however, the degree to which these desires were short-lived and whether they had any impact on their behavior and performance in the course. Additionally, the degree to which the instructor portrays the course in a realistic light and lives up to the explicit and implicit promises made during the interview is likely to have a strong impact on long-term outcomes such as student engagement and satisfaction later in the term. The literature in industrial and organizational psychology suggests that these types of expectation violations can lead to dissatisfaction, disengagement, and dissolution of working relationships and these relationships may apply to the college classroom as well (Rousseau, 1995). Further research examining both short- and long-term outcomes of conducting the activity is needed.

In conclusion, we have found a reciprocal interview between students and instructor to have a positive impact on students' attitudes toward the instructor and the course and to be a valuable way to learn about our students and their perceptions of our courses. Additionally, this activity may be a particularly useful way to approach the beginning of a course, as it appears to be a means of reconciling the first-day needs and goals of both student and instructor. We view both the technique and evidence we present as a promising first step in the development of more effective beginnings to college courses. We hope that future iterations of and research on this activity, and others like it, will refine and enhance our understanding of how to begin a college course effectively.

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## **Appendix: Interview Discussion Topics and Guidelines**

### **Instructor-led interview discussion topics (10–15-min. discussion; 15–20-min. interview)**

1. What are your goals for this course? To learn new skills? To become better educated? To learn the subject matter? To fulfill a requirement? To get a good grade? To apply your learning to other aspects of your life? Something else?
2. How can the instructor best help you achieve your goals? Lectures, exams, discussions, practice, office hours (think back to excellent professors/courses you've experienced)?
3. What, if anything, have you heard about this textbook and/or course from others?
4. What reservations, if any, do you have about this course?
5. What is the best think that could happen in this course? What is the worst thing?
6. What resources do you bring to this course (e.g. prior experience, prior courses)?

7. What norms of behavior or ground rules should we set up to ensure that the course is successful (e.g. mutual respect, question asking, punctuality, etc.)?

**Student-led interview discussion topics (5–10-min. discussion; 15-minute interview)**

1. The instructor's objectives for this course – what does he or she hope to accomplish?
2. The instructor's theory of learning (i.e. how do people learn?).
3. The instructor's approach to evaluating student's learning in the course.
4. The instructor's expectations of you.
5. The instructor's role in the course.
6. Anything else that may be important to you (e.g. aspects of the syllabus, assignments, text, exams, etc.).

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