
ESTABLISHING A COMFORTABLE CLASSROOM FROM DAY ONE

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE RECIPROCAL INTERVIEW

Kim Case, Robert Bartsch, Lillian McEnery, Sharon Hall, Anthony Hermann, and David Foster

Abstract. The authors examined student reactions to an activity in computer science, psychology, women's studies, and education courses. The reciprocal interview involves the instructor gathering information about the students, followed by students collectively asking questions of the instructor. The interview aims to make students more comfortable in interactions with the instructor by soliciting student input. Student responses indicated they enjoyed the activity and recommend faculty use it in various courses. Participants also reported the interview process helped create a more comfortable classroom environment and helped clarify instructors' expectations of students.

Keywords: *class interview, comfortable classroom, first day, instructor and student expectations*

Nearly every college teaching advice book emphasizes the importance of the first day of class. Experts suggest that the outcome of the first day of class can strongly impact subsequent student satisfaction with and performance in the course. Consequently, most experts suggest that instructors use first-day activities that accomplish one or more of the following goals: establish warm interpersonal relationships between instructor

and students, communicate clearly about key elements of the course, and actively involve students from the start. Common suggestions for activities to accomplish these goals include using ice breakers to foster rapport (e.g., Lucas 2006; Royse 2001), communicating expectations in a clear and concise way (e.g., Curzan and Damour 2000), having students engage in behaviors desired during the rest of the term such as discussion and writing (e.g.,

Nilson 2007), conducting activities that involve a wide variety of students (e.g., Provitera-McGlynn 2001), and sharing information about yourself (e.g., McKeachie and Svinicki 2006). Some experts even suggest involving students in the construction of course rules of conduct on the first day (DiClementi and Handelsman 2005). The purpose of this article is to report student reactions to a single activity designed to accomplish all of these goals.

The activity was originally developed for the teaching of industrial/organizational psychology to demonstrate effective communication between employers and employees during an initial employment interview (Harvey and Brown 2000; Osland et al. 2006). This exercise, 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. The interview activity also provides the opportunity for positive interactions between the instructor and students.

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These positive interactions help establish rapport while actively involving students in the course (Harvey and Brown 2000; Osland et al. 2006).

This interview activity appears to be a valuable way to actively involve a large number of students as well as learn about students' preferences, attitudes, and knowledge about the course. Previous research suggests that students react positively to the interview activity. For example, Hermann and Foster (2008) found that students strongly recommended that other faculty should use the activity and clearly indicated the activity was a good use of class time. Following the interview, students reported greater comfort with approaching the instructor for course-related and other academic issues. They also felt the activity helped to create a more comfortable learning environment and, perhaps most importantly from their perspective, helped them to understand what was expected of them in that particular course.

Hermann and Foster's research, however, was conducted with a predominantly female Caucasian sample taken from psychology courses. Therefore, conclusions about how students from more diverse racial backgrounds and academic disciplines would react to the activity cannot be drawn. Likewise, the activity may be more or less useful in courses within disciplines where students do not expect dialogue and classroom interaction. Consequently, this study examined students' reactions to the reciprocal interview with a more racially diverse sample. In addition, students' reactions from a variety of disciplines including computer science, education, psychology, and women's studies were also examined.

Method

Four instructors in education, psychology, women's studies, and computer science conducted the interview activity at the beginning of the fall 2006 semester. Eight different courses and nine sections were represented in the study: Corrective and Remedial Reading, Language Arts in Elementary School, Introduction to Women's Studies, Psychology of Race and Racism, Psychological Research and Statistics, Advanced Social Psychology, Operating Systems, and Internet Protocols.

A total of 146 students (106 women and 40 men) completed surveys in the nine classes. This total included 85 undergraduate and 59 graduate students (2 did not specify). The sample was ethnically diverse: 51 percent of the sample identified as white; 13 percent Latino/Hispanic; 13 percent African American; 12 percent Asian American; 7 percent Arab American; and 8 percent other or did not reply.

Classroom Interview Activity

The interview activity occurred at the beginning of the semester. Instructors using this exercise aimed to clarify course expectations for both the professor and the students. For the majority of the courses, the activity was done immediately after a brief introduction to the course and a quick pass through the syllabus. Students engaged in the activity during the first class meeting in seven of the courses and at the third week in two of the courses.

The activity consists of two sections: the instructor's interview of the students and the students' interview of the instructor. For each of the two sections, individual students completed activity handouts and then gathered in groups to consolidate their responses. Groups then selected a spokesperson to ask and answer questions in front of the class.

Students were given five minutes to answer the student interview questions as individuals, ten minutes to discuss them in small groups, and fifteen minutes to report their answers to the class and the professor. The questions included:

1. What are your goals for this course?
2. How can the instructor best help you achieve your goals?
3. What reservations, if any, do you have about this course?
4. What resources do you bring to this course?
5. What norms of behavior or ground rules should we set up to ensure that the course is successful?
6. What are some of your pet peeves of professors and classes? What are some annoying traits of professors that you've had?

The handout suggested question topics for the interview of the professor, such as

the instructor's objectives for the course, approach to grading, expectations of students, and role in the course. Students were given five minutes to respond to the handout on their own, five minutes to formulate questions in their groups, and ten minutes to ask the questions of the instructor. They were also prompted to ask about anything else important to them. The class time spent engaged in each portion of the activity varied by both professor and section. After completing both interviews, professors collected the written comments and handed out the research survey.

We asked students to evaluate the activity using 39 Likert items and 3 open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were answered on a 7-point (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) scale, with higher scores indicating more agreement. The closed-ended questions were divided into five subscales. The first subscale contained nine questions that evaluated the entire activity (e.g., "I recommend using this activity in future sections of the course"). The second subscale had nine questions that concentrated on whether a positive class environment was created (e.g., "Because of this exercise, I am more likely to participate in class"). The third subscale contained six questions that measured whether students were more aware of classroom expectations (e.g., "I feel I better understand the professor's goals for the course"). The fourth and fifth subscales had four questions each that assessed attitudes about the interview of the students and the interview of the professor (e.g., "This portion of the exercise helped me reflect on my own goals for this course," and "The instructor's expectations of me were clearer to me after the activity"). Analyses indicated that all five subscales were reliable (all Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$).

Students also answered three open-ended prompts for qualitative feedback: (1) What did you like the most about the activity? (2) What would you change about the activity? (3) Additional comments?

Results

We examined the overall score on each of five subscales (general evaluation, improvement of classroom environment, understanding expectations, evaluation of interview of

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Five Subscales Assessing the Intervention

| Subscale | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|----------------------|----------|-----------|------|------|------|------|
| General | 5.67 | 0.92 | .81* | .80* | .86* | .83* |
| Class environment | 5.70 | 0.85 | | .73* | .71* | .71* |
| Expectation | 5.70 | 0.91 | | | .77* | .75* |
| Interview of student | 5.79 | 1.00 | | | | .82* |
| Interview of faculty | 5.79 | 0.91 | | | | |

* $p < .001$.

the students, and evaluation of interview of the professor) by averaging all of the items within the given subscale. Across all courses, there was a high level of approval on each of the subscales (see table 1).

Qualitative comments from students on the questionnaire provided feedback supporting these findings. One student “loved the activity” and wished “more professors would take the time to do this.” Unexpectedly, another shared that the “activity is making my opinion of [the university] go up.”

Classroom environment appeared to be affected by this particular activity. Several students specifically credited the interview exercise as a “very good way to create a comfortable educational environment.” Although there were no formal icebreakers in these classes, the dynamics involved in the group activity whereby students discussed the interview questions served to help the students get to know each other. Many students expressed their appreciation for “getting the chance to know everyone a bit” and “the interaction with fellow students.” The fact that each group reported to the larger group gave a sense of community already in the making. They also indicated they felt more “connected to the course and the instructor,” and several mentioned a sense of “openness” from the professor and classmates. In general, the students were actively engaged in their group discussions and seemed comfortable asking questions and giving answers. For the classes that engaged in the exercise on day one, it appeared they felt empowered by being encouraged to talk and interact on the first day of class. One student valued being “able to break the ice the first day so we don’t feel self-conscious about speaking out in the future.” Structur-

ing the first day in this way also allowed the professor to get a stronger sense of the students’ backgrounds.

Students indicated the interview activity informed their expectations for the course as well. Overall, students appreciated the “opportunity to clarify assignments,” understand “the instructor’s grading and focus,” and “ask questions not answered in the syllabus.” Several students reported that clarification of the instructor’s perspective and grading style during this activity was extremely valuable for them.

The participants reported their views concerning the portion of the activity when the professor interviews the students. Some students enjoyed getting to “know the views of others.” Simply “knowing others had the same questions and concerns” was also meaningful to several students. One shy student shared that the activity allowed her “to tell my personal concerns and fears to my group members.” A few students seemed grateful that the instructor “actually wanted to know how we felt about the class” and “took the time to discuss with them.”

The interview of the professor received fewer comments overall. One student recommended rewording the instructor’s questions for clarification. Others wanted “more time to ask the professor questions” and liked “learning about the background of the professor.” Another stated the “interaction and especially the honesty of the professor” made this portion of the activity worthwhile.

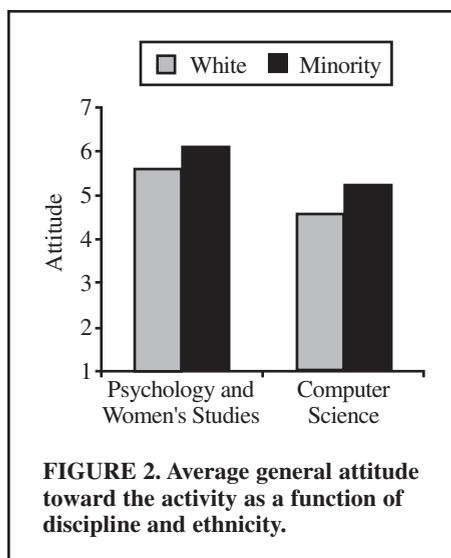
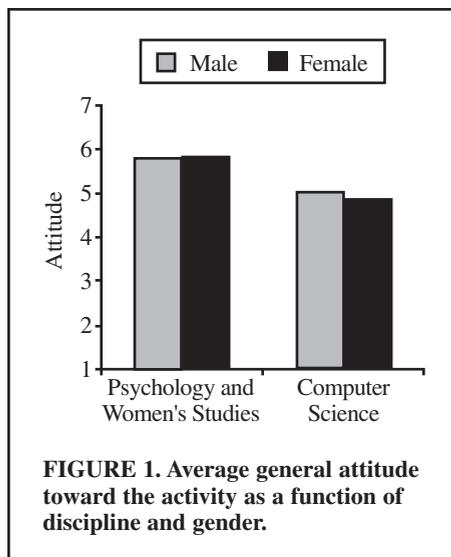
Although instructors teaching education, psychology, and women’s studies courses overheard students insisting this activity be done in more classes, the instructor of the computer science courses had a divergent classroom experience. In

fact, prior to data analysis, she suspected that many students felt the activity was a waste of time. There was a significant difference in overall ratings among the three types of classes (computer science, education, psychology/women’s studies), $F(2, 146) = 11.0, p < .001$. A Scheffe post-hoc test revealed that the difference was caused by higher ratings in the education ($M = 5.85$) and psychology/women’s studies ($M = 5.84$) classes than the computer science classes ($M = 5.02$). Although the computer science students did not like the interview as much, they still had an overall positive attitude.

In the computer science course, answers focused primarily on learning course content, fulfilling course requirements, and getting a good grade, whereas in the women’s studies course students, cited taking the course for a better understanding, to hear other perspectives, and to attain good grades. In the psychology courses, students reported the desire to learn the course content, to learn about the world around them, and to attain good grades, and in the education courses, students cited learning new strategies and theories of teaching, to gain knowledge of and experience with working with different student populations, and to get a good grade.

As indicated in table 1, there was a high correlation between all five subscales. Because analyses for the other four subscales demonstrated the same significant effects as the General subscale, we report only the General subscale scores for the remainder of the analyses.

Examination of responses revealed whether gender or ethnicity affected the ratings after taking discipline into consideration as a confounding variable. We conducted a 2×2 ANOVA with discipline and gender as the independent variables. (Demographic information for the education courses could not be linked to individual students, and therefore, they were excluded from this analysis.) The means for this analysis are displayed in figure 1. The analysis indicated the previously found difference between disciplines, $F(1, 104) = 12.9, p < .001$, such that students in the psychology and women’s studies courses liked the intervention more than the computer science. However, there were no overall differences between men and



women, $F(1, 104) = 0.05$, *ns*, and there was no Discipline \times Gender interaction, $F(1, 104) = 0.31$, *ns*.

To examine the relationship between ethnicity and attitudes, we conducted another 2×2 ANOVA with discipline and racial status as the independent variables. The means for this analysis can be found in figure 2. As expected, we again found the difference between disciplines, $F(1, 104) = 22.2$, $p < .001$. We also found that minority students had more positive attitudes toward the interview activity than white students, $F(1, 104) = 8.46$, $p < .01$. There was no interaction between discipline and minority status, $F(1, 104) = 0.16$, *ns*. Although we found differences related to disciplines and minority status, even the group with the lowest scores (i.e., white computer science stu-

dents) still had a positive attitude about the interview activity.

Student suggestions for improving the exercise most commonly recommended “nothing” or were left blank. Additional suggestions included conducting the activity on the first day of class, completing the interviews within one class session, and allowing more time to prepare answers and questions at home prior to the activity. One student found that new questions came to mind as the group representatives were reporting to the instructor and requested that the instructor open the floor to final questions after each interview.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that for many students in our classes, the first-day interview is very useful in providing information about class requirements, gaining an overall impression of the professor’s “standards,” and initiating the creation of a supportive classroom community. The level of engagement in the part of the activity that involved the professor interviewing the students about goals for the course differed according to school. Perhaps some of these differing responses are because of the prevailing culture that exists in the respective schools. Regardless, however, of the different responses offered by students, the points mentioned are all concerned with student involvement and engagement with the course. Numerous researchers (Astin 1999; Mallette and Cabrera 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini 1980) point out that students’ involvement with the course and the college increases the likelihood that they will be successful in college.

As noted in the results section, the data indicates that minority students especially found the activity to be worthwhile. Perhaps creating the space for students to share in their groups helped to promote communication of the sort that Schoem and Hurtado (2001) identify as intergroup dialogue. This type of dialogue brings students from diverse groups (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) together to practice constructive intergroup relations.

While the first day interview requires a considerable amount of time, we felt that it was time well spent in that it explicitly set the stage for expectations and, in some

ways, set the tone for the semester. As we seek to find ways to facilitate environments for students where they begin to ask important questions, this exercise provides a backdrop for the transition we hope to see occur throughout the semester. That transition involves a shift from the professor being the “key questioner” to the student participating in the formulation of important questions as well. Our findings support the notion that “knowledge is composed and reconstructed continuously through learners’ cognitive activity and participation in the group where they belong” (Choi 2006, 143).

It is interesting to note that initially many of the students geared their questions around superficial subjects such as the course requirements or attendance policies. However, in several classes such as the women’s studies class and the language arts education class, students posed questions that spoke to the professor’s philosophy and stance on certain issues. They also asked questions about the backgrounds of the professors. This speaks to the need for students to connect with professors on a more personal level. One student noted, “I’ve never really had the opportunity to ask a professor questions in this way about the class, about her philosophy on certain issues; it makes me feel that this class will be a good one.” Indeed, research points to the fact that engagement with the professor appears to be especially important to student development (Astin 2005).

The first day interview activity used in isolation is not the definitive piece in creating a community of learners. It does, however, have the potential to express to students from the start of the semester that their voices will be respected and heard in class. It sets up the expectation that we are somehow all invested in contributing to and defining the type of learning environment in which we function. We found that conducting the activity the first or second class day worked in that it provided students more opportunities to ask questions. However, this activity could also be used a few weeks into the semester, as one professor did, which allows students to draw on their experience of the class environment. The activity might not work as well with larger classes, although the class could be sectioned off into smaller groups, and then

the professor could report results from the entire activity. The interview activity might be especially helpful for professors teaching sections of the same two courses in that it would allow for some “fine tuning” of the course based on feedback received in the interviewing process. There are a number of things we each plan to do differently in administering the interview in the future. In the portion where the students interview the instructor, some of us decided to provide fewer guidelines and a shorter time frame. Some instructors felt that the objectives section did not elicit as much rich discussion, so, for the sake of streamlining, some plan on omitting that section in the future. One instructor framed the activity as a sort of panel where students actually moved to the front of the class and reported out on their discussion; several of us plan to implement this small change in the future as well.

Based on the results of our study, there are several important implications. One is the idea that the activity serves to start the semester on a note of mutual respect between the instructor and students in the class. Students seem to genuinely appreciate the opportunity to communicate and express their thoughts and specific needs as learners. The idea that students are given the message from the start of the semester that their feedback will be an integral part of the class also emerged as important aspect. It sets the stage for the

fact that the professor will listen to their thoughts and concerns. Although this does not mean that the instructor will change or modify her policies or procedures, it does provide the opportunity for instructors to explain their rationale for certain procedures. The fact that the activity can be easily modified allows for flexibility and adaptability depending on class size, discipline, time, and course content constraints. Overall, the activity provided members of the classroom community with a clearer vision of instructor expectations and modeled open communication between students and faculty.

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