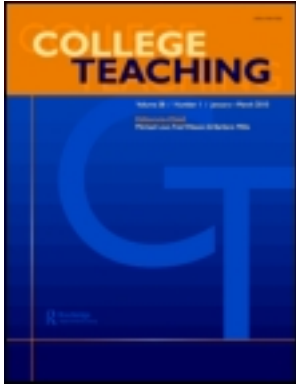


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### Linking the First Week of Class to End-of-Term Satisfaction: Using a Reciprocal Interview Activity to Create an Active and Comfortable Classroom

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# Linking the First Week of Class to End-of-Term Satisfaction: Using a Reciprocal Interview Activity to Create an Active and Comfortable Classroom

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We present a reciprocal student-instructor interview activity as a means for establishing a positive classroom environment on the first day of class. This activity allows the instructor to clearly and concisely communicate the course practicalities to students while simultaneously providing students with the opportunity to share their course-related goals and concerns in an open and supportive environment. Previous research suggests that this activity is associated with many positive short-term outcomes, including initial changes in student comfort in the classroom. This article provides instructors with detailed information for conducting the activity and explores the degree to which changes in comfort are related to end-of-term student satisfaction. Data were collected from 77 students before and after they participated in the reciprocal interview activity during the initial class sessions and at the end of the term. Changes in student comfort were positively correlated with student satisfaction with the instructor and course. These findings support the use of this reciprocal interview activity in creating and maintaining an effective learning environment.

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

Conventional wisdom for effectively teaching college courses suggests that the initial class sessions are critical for establishing an effective learning environment. Common suggestions for successfully beginning a college course include fostering instructor-student rapport through ice breakers and other activities (e.g., Lucas 2006; Royse 2001), communicating clear and concise expectations (e.g., Curzan and Damour 2000; Davis 1993), conducting activities that involve a wide variety of students (e.g., Provitera-McGlynn 2001), sharing information about yourself (e.g., McKeachie and Svinicki 2006), and involving students in the making of course rules of conduct (DiClementi and Handelsman 2005). In addition, McKeachie and others (e.g., McKeachie and Svinicki 2006; Nilson 2003) have long advised instructors to craft their first day activities to promote the types of behavior desired during the rest of the term. Such advice

underscores experts' beliefs that the first days of a college course are particularly important in creating an effective learning environment and that students are strongly affected by these initial meetings.

We addressed this myriad of goals for the initial class sessions with a single reciprocal interview activity between students and the instructor. 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 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 students with the opportunity to share their course-related goals and concerns in an open and supportive environment. This activity appears to be a valuable way to actively involve a large number of students as well as to learn about students' preferences, attitudes, and knowledge about the course. It also promotes behaviors we

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as instructors desire in our classes throughout the term (i.e., active participation, dialogue with the instructor, and small group discussion).

A small but growing body of research suggests that this activity is an effective way to begin a college course. For example, Hermann and Foster (2008) found that using this reciprocal interview activity was associated with a favorable *short-term* impact on students in a variety of domains that promote an effective learning environment. Immediately after the activity students reported that they enjoyed the activity, that the activity clarified the instructor's course-related expectations of them, and that they felt more comfortable participating in class and interacting with the instructor. Similarly, Case and colleagues (2008) found that students felt the activity was 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. Furthermore, Case and her colleagues (2008) found that minority student ratings of the activity were particularly favorable and that they were especially likely to believe it helped to create a favorable learning environment and to clarify course expectations.

No empirical evidence, however, exists regarding whether the use of this activity is linked to any long-term outcomes. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to provide a preliminary investigation into whether the initial positive changes in the classroom associated with the activity as noted by Hermann and Foster (2008) and Case et al. (2008) lasted beyond the first days of class and were, in fact, related to long-term course outcomes. For this study, we focused on the changes that occurred over the initial course periods in two domains valued by many instructors (e.g., instructor approachability and promoting class participation) and examined their relationship to student satisfaction at the end of the course. We chose overall satisfaction with instructor and course as outcome measures for our first test of our hypotheses because (1) the industrial-organizational psychology literature suggest that similar procedures in employment settings impact job satisfaction (Rousseau 1995); (2) such satisfaction has real-world consequences for both students and instructors; and (3) we could easily collect such measures while maintaining complete confidentiality for our student participants. Although satisfaction may not be the ultimate goal for all instructors in all courses, considerable research indicates that global measures of satisfaction are significantly related to objective assessments of student learning and teaching behaviors (for reviews, see Abrami 2001; Frick, Chadha, Watson, Wang, and Green 2009; Kulik 2001; Renaud and Murry 2005).

We revisited our 2008 study (Hermann and Foster 2008) and incorporated additional data from the end of the term to examine the degree to which *changes* in students' comfort participating in class and interacting with (approaching) the instructor predicted satisfaction both with their instructor and the course at the end of the term. In doing so, we hope to provide an important step toward a more comprehensive em-

pirical understanding of the impact the reciprocal interview activity has on college courses.

## METHOD

### Participants

Students in five different psychology courses required for graduation (introduction, 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 first week of class. The use of human subjects in this study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of both universities. Of the 80 female and 23 male participants, 52 were seniors, 42 were juniors, 7 were sophomores, and 2 were first-year students. The mean age of participants was 22.5 ( $SD = 5.7$ ), with 89% under 24 years, and 31% reported having had a course with the instructor before. For analyses including end-of-term satisfaction ratings, a total of 77 participants provided complete data sets that could be matched to their first-week responses. Fifteen of the 26 cases missing end-of-term data were due to problems with participants reporting the correct anonymous matching code at term's end; 11 were due to withdrawals or absences.

### Measures

#### Comfort

We assessed comfort with approaching the instructor and participating in class both before and after the activity using multi-item indices. 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 "e-mailing the professor with questions." 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." 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*).

#### Satisfaction

At the end of the term, as part of a larger questionnaire used for other purposes, participants rated their "overall satisfaction with this course" and "overall satisfaction with this professor" on single items designed to be similar to university evaluations of instruction on a scale ranging from 0 (*not satisfied at all*) to 4 (*extremely satisfied*).

### Procedure

#### Initial data collection

Prior to conducting the activity, students completed a questionnaire including demographic measures (i.e., 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.

#### 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. Each group selected a representative to field the instructor's questions and to represent the groups' thoughts on the previously discussed topics. The instructor emphasized that the representative's job was to convey the group's views rather than his or her 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 whiteboard or notebook) and by asking clarifying questions. The instructors made an effort to strike a balance between responding immediately to student concerns that arose during the interview and simply listening and taking notes.

After completing the instructor 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 were given 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.

#### Post-activity data collection

Immediately after the activity, students rated their comfort on the same items again and evaluated the activity on several dimensions. Lastly, data on satisfaction with the course and instructor were collected at the end of the term. The

anonymity of all responses was emphasized during each data collection, and individual participants' responses were matched via an anonymous code.

## RESULTS

As reported previously in Hermann and Foster (2008), students showed significant increases in both comfort approaching the instructor and comfort participating in class after participating in the interview activity (See table 1 for details). These results also showed that neither change in comfort approaching the instructor nor change in comfort participating in class were affected by previous class experience with the instructor, indicating that previously taking a course from the instructor did not lessen the amount of change in comfort students report experiencing after the activity.

For this study, we used partial correlation analyses to determine the degree to which these changes in student comfort were related to student end-of-term satisfaction using procedures recommended by Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003). The aim of partial correlation analysis is to find the correlation between two variables after removing the effects of other variables. We obtained partial correlation coefficients by correlating each post-activity index of comfort with student end-of-term satisfaction after removing the effects of the corresponding pre-activity index. Significant post-activity partial correlation coefficients indicate explained variance in student satisfaction not accounted for by pre-activity comfort. Such a finding indicates that differences between pre- and post-activity indices of comfort (i.e., change in comfort) are statistically significantly related to satisfaction.

Analyses of *satisfaction with the instructor* at the end of the term revealed that, after controlling for pre-activity comfort, the post-activity index of comfort approaching the instructor was indeed positively correlated with end-of-term satisfaction with the instructor (partial  $r = .322$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The post-activity index of comfort with participating in class, however, was not significantly related to end-of-term satisfaction with the instructor (partial  $r = .178$ ,  $p = .12$ ) after controlling for pre-activity comfort. This result indicated that increased student comfort approaching the instructor was associated with increased student satisfaction with the instructor at the end of the term. Further analysis showed that this effect was not impacted by students having previously taken a course from the instructor.

Analyses of *satisfaction with the course* at the end of the term revealed that post-activity comfort with approaching the instructor and comfort with participating in class were both also positively correlated with end-of-term satisfaction with the course after controlling for the corresponding pre-activity comfort levels (partial  $r = .297$ ,  $p < .01$  and partial  $r = .240$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively). These results indicated that both increases in student comfort approaching the instructor and participating in class were associated with increases in

TABLE 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations for Predictor and Criterion Measures

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
Preactivity								
1. Comfort with Approaching Instructor <sup>a</sup>	4.07	0.72						
2. Comfort with Participating in Class <sup>a</sup>	3.55	0.76	.32**					
Postactivity								
3. Comfort with Approaching Instructor <sup>a</sup>	4.32	0.68	.69**	.19				
4. Comfort with Participating in Class <sup>a</sup>	3.86	0.71	.27*	.62**	.40**			
Satisfaction								
5. Instructor <sup>b</sup>	2.87	1.19	.28**	.14	.42**	.22*		
6. Course <sup>b</sup>	2.58	1.03	.27**	.07	.39**	.22*	.61**	

Note:<sup>a</sup> ( $N = 103$ ), <sup>b</sup> ( $N = 77$ ), \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . All based on Hermann and Foster (2008).

student satisfaction in the course at the end of the term. Further analysis showed that neither of these effects was impacted by students having previously taken a course from the instructor.

## DISCUSSION

Previous research has shown that beginning a college course using a reciprocal interview activity can initiate an effective learning environment (Case et al. 2008; Hermann and Foster 2008). The results of this study provide preliminary evidence that the initiation of an effective learning environment during the first week, as indicated by changes in students' comfort in participating in class and interacting with the instructor, can be related to important outcomes at the end of the term. For example, students who became more comfortable approaching the instructor after participating in the activity were more satisfied with the instructor at term's end. Additionally, students who became more comfortable participating in class after the activity were more satisfied with both the instructor and the course at term's end. These findings are consistent with experts' assertions regarding the importance of the initial class sessions of a college course and suggest more generally that these dimensions of course functioning can be significantly related to measures of satisfaction often found on student evaluations of instruction.

The correlational design of our study, however, does not allow us to make specific inferences regarding which aspects of the initial class session impacted student attitudes; nor does our design allow us to determine the exact mechanism responsible for increased student satisfaction at the end of the term. A myriad of factors could be responsible, including the open attitude conveyed by the instructor, the opportunity for students to discuss their concerns with peers, time to get to know the instructor, or even simply becoming more comfortable over the course of the period. Additional studies using experimental designs with appropriate control conditions are needed to clarify these issues, but the current findings provide initial empirical support consistent with a long-held assumption, namely that the way the first days of a

college course are conducted can have a long-lasting impact on the students' attitudes about the course.

In addition, it is important to note that the effects observed in this study may depend on the congruence between the behaviors that the activity encourages and the behaviors promoted by the instructor throughout the term. As McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) note, modeling and promoting the types of behaviors, activities, and style of interaction that are desired throughout the semester during the first class meetings can provide a valuable jumpstart for classroom dynamics and fosters a clear set of expectations for students. Although we value and promote dialogue and discussion in these courses, the activity can also be used to foster open communication about other classroom styles. For example, if a course relies heavily on lecture, an instructor could include a discussion prompt about the characteristics of a good lecture to solicit student reactions and create an opportunity to discuss their own lecture style and the pedagogical theory behind it. Likewise, if the course tends to attract introverted students, the discussion prompts could be used to initiate a discussion about expectations regarding the degree to which in-class participation is expected and if there are alternate ways of participating (e.g., blogs, journaling, etc.).

Reformulating the discussion prompts in the handout can be a tool to address many other course issues as well. For example, if a course deals substantially with culture or race issues, the instructor could include a prompt like, "What are the challenges that people face when discussing issues related to race in an open and constructive way?" in order to promote consideration of these concerns at the outset. Likewise, in a math course, an instructor could include, "What are the challenges you might face in a course like this?" to open up discussion about math anxiety and prior math experience. We have found that these types of discussions can not only help to set the proper tone for the course, but also create an opportunity for the instructor to learn about their students' perspective on their course in a direct and unmediated way. Here the group representative's role seems to be key in that it allows students some degree of anonymity when raising potentially sensitive issues. Likewise, these conversations also

allow the instructor to address student questions and concerns right from the outset and in a setting in which students are actively listening and receptive to the information.

Although nearly all the courses included in this study were required courses for the major, we have successfully used the activity in elective courses as well. Our dialogue in these courses tend to focus more on what students and instructor would like to achieve in the course and less on allaying concerns and “selling” the course, but we have found it to be valuable exercise to engage students early in these courses as well. We also have anecdotal evidence that the activity can be effectively used in introductory psychology courses of 70–80 students. An interested colleague made minor modifications to the activity (e.g., created groups of 6 or 7, shortened the list of discussion prompts) and conducted it on the first day of two large lecture classes. She reported that although she was not able to have dialogue with every group on every issue, students responded enthusiastically to the activity, and that it seemed to quickly develop a sense of community and rapport in a course where students are more typically reserved and disconnected because of the course’s size.

Additional research should examine how this activity may impact a variety of other dimensions of the classroom learning environment. For example, many writers mention the importance of the instructor being organized, clear, and enthusiastic, and it seems likely that these perceptions are also strongly influenced by the activity (e.g., Nilson 2003; Provitera-McGlynn 2001). Another intriguing possibility is that this activity fosters a sense of student empowerment, which creates favorable impressions of the class and the instructor, and in turn the course as a whole. Some proponents of student empowerment argue that it may be desirable to shift the balance of power completely and create a class structure in which students take complete responsibility for learning and performance (e.g., Costello, Brunner, and Hasty 2002). While our activity does not go to these lengths, asking students to reflect on their own goals and actively listening to them may communicate to students that they are partners in the course and should take some ownership of their learning. Consequently, this activity may serve as a means to promote a more empowered learning environment in a more traditional classroom setting.

Additional research can help identify which types of first-week activities are likely to have a long-term impact and whether this impact is facilitated or inhibited by the degree to which they match the instructor’s pedagogical style. Regardless of the outcome of this future research, the reciprocal interview activity presented here is a flexible and effective way to promote many factors associated with an effective and positive classroom environment. Furthermore, the analyses presented here represent an important step in developing a more sophisticated empirical understanding of both the role that the first-week activities play, but also the factors that predict student satisfaction in a college course.

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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 thing 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.)