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TOPICAL ARTICLES

Does the First Week of Class Matter? A Quasi-Experimental Investigation of Student Satisfaction

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Teaching experts suggest that establishing clear expectations and a supportive environment at the beginning of a college course has a lasting impact on student attitudes. However, minimal empirical evidence exists to support these suggestions. Consequently, we randomly assigned instructors to either begin their course with a reciprocal interview activity aimed at these goals or in their typical fashion. At term's end, students experiencing the activity ($n = 187$) reported greater clarity regarding their course responsibilities, more support from their instructor, and greater course satisfaction on both official evaluations and experimenter-administered measures, compared to students who had not ($n = 190$). These results contribute to a converging body of evidence regarding the effectiveness of reciprocal interviews and similar activities generally.

Teaching experts frequently assert that the first days of a college course have a long- lasting impact on the classroom environment and student attitudes. Wilson and Wilson (2007) were the first to empirically examine the effect of the first day of class on students' subsequent course evaluations and grades. Students who experienced a positive first day (i.e., a 15-min video of a friendly instructor who dismissed class early) reported more positive perceptions of the professor and more motivation for the course compared to those students who experienced a negative first day (i.e., a boring videotaped instructor who used all class time and assigned homework). The motivation differences persisted, and positive condition students had higher grades at term's end.

This innovative study suggests that the long-held belief in the importance of the first day of class is appropriate. More specific guidance is needed, however, regarding how instructors can effectively establish a positive and productive environment. It remains unclear, for example, whether Wilson and Wilson's (2007) findings resulted from the differences in instructor warmth, homework assigned, or how class time was utilized. They crafted their positive and negative sessions based on students' stated preferences, but there is little evidence connecting these preferences to student satisfaction and other outcomes. Moreover, there is great variability in the content and form of first-day activities. Although there is some evidence that students dislike icebreakers (Henslee, Burgess, & Buskist, 2006), some ice-breaking activities might be more effective than others. Thus, it is important

to investigate what specific activities create favorable environments.

Common expert suggestions for establishing a positive and productive learning environment include both making instructor course expectations clear (Curzan & Damour, 2000; Davis, 1993) and creating a dynamic and supportive classroom community (Lucas, 2006; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Royse, 2001). To accomplish these goals, Hermann and Foster (2008) proposed a reciprocal student–instructor interview activity, adapted from organizational psychology textbooks (Harvey & Brown, 2000; Osland, Kolb, & Rubin, 2000), in which the instructor solicits information from the students and the students then collectively ask questions of the instructor. In addition to clarifying course expectations, the interview aims to make students more comfortable interacting with the instructor and each other.

Two studies have explored the immediate impact of reciprocal student–instructor interviews (Case et al., 2008; Hermann & Foster, 2008). Among the findings, students reported that (a) they enjoyed the activity; (b) the activity clarified the instructor's expectations; and (c) they felt more comfortable participating in class and interacting with the instructor. To date, however, no research has demonstrated the long-term impact of this or any other first-week activity. Given the favorable responses observed in previous studies, we predicted that students who had experienced the activity would be more satisfied with the course at the end of the term than students who had not. Second, given the activity's main goals, we hypothesized that student perceptions of instructor support and expectation clarity should also be greater for those experiencing the activity and that these variables should account for a significant portion of the activity's effect on satisfaction. To answer these questions, we used a quasi-experimental design and randomly assigned 16 sections of introductory psychology students to experience the activity or not and then assessed outcomes at the end of the 15-week term.

Method

Participants

Participants were 377 undergraduate students (age $M = 19.8$ years, $SD = 3.8$ years; 56% female) enrolled in 1 of 16 sections of introductory psychology at a large Southwestern university. Ten graduate teaching assistants taught 16 sections. Seven of the sections met twice weekly for 80 min over a 15-week term, whereas the remaining met three times weekly for 50 min. Instructors (and hence their students) were randomly assigned to an activity ($n = 187$) or no activity condition ($n = 190$). The instructors were relatively inexperienced ($M = 1.6$ semesters prior teaching, mode = 2), and prior experience did not differ between groups, $p > .40$.

Measures

Clarity and supportiveness. These measures assessed the degree to which students had come to expect particular behaviors from their instructor at the end of the term. Students rated the degree to which the instructor communicated specifically and unambiguously regarding course expectations on five clarity items (e.g., "I expect from my instructor that he or she . . . specifically describes the evaluation criteria in this course"). Likewise, they rated the degree to which the instructor supported and appreciated student effort on five supportiveness items (e.g., "treats me as a person, not a number"). All items were assessed using a 5-point response range from –2 (*entirely disagree*) to 2 (*entirely agree*). Both scales yielded adequate internal reliabilities ($\alpha = .84$ and .88, respectively).

Satisfaction with course. Participants also indicated their "overall satisfaction with this course" on a single item using a 7-point scale of –3 (*very dissatisfied*) to 3 (*very satisfied*). We also collected mean ratings for all 16 items on the official university student evaluations of instruction for each section, which were rated on a 5-point scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We were particularly interested in items about course satisfaction and the activity's goals of clear expectation and establishing dialogue (see Table 1).

Procedure

Instructor training. During the week before classes, each group of instructors participated in separate orientation sessions. Both groups were instructed to conduct a typical first day (i.e., syllabus overview, brief icebreaker, brief introduction to course material) and the experimental condition was also given instruction on conducting the reciprocal interview activity. To keep instructors blind to the study's purpose, all were asked not to speak with other instructors about

Table 1. Effects of Experimental Condition on University- and Experimenter-Administered Measures

Items and Source	Activity Condition		No Activity Condition		Cohen's *d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
University items					
Overall this course was a valuable learning experience.	4.55	0.27	4.12	0.32	1.20
The instructor welcomed and encouraged questions and comments.	4.81	0.10	4.50	0.33	1.09
Expectations were clearly stated either verbally or in the syllabus.	4.76	0.10	4.38	0.23	1.45
Experimenter items					
Expectation clarity	1.21	0.62	1.02	0.69	0.29
Supportiveness	1.14	0.64	0.84	0.78	0.42
Satisfaction with course	2.31	1.04	1.94	1.32	0.31

Note. Sample sizes for university items were 8 in each condition and 187 and 190 for the experimenter items (activity and no activity conditions, respectively).

the study until it was completed.[1] All instructors were informed of the importance of student perceptions and expectations and that these perceptions would be measured. All sections used the same textbook, were required to cover certain content, and gave similar assignments.

Activity. Students participating in the reciprocal interview activity formed small groups of 5 or 6 and had approximately 10 to 15 min to discuss several course-related issues. The instructors explained that the discussion was preparation for an interview, and each group selected a representative to field the instructors' questions and represent their groups' responses. Guided by a handout, the groups discussed a range of topics including expectations, goals, and experiences related to the course; suggestions for classroom norms; and instructor behaviors that could help them achieve their goals. Immediately afterward, the instructors interviewed the group representatives in the presence of the class. Instructors conveyed interest by taking notes (on blackboard or notebook) and by asking clarifying questions.

Immediately after the instructor interview, the groups were asked to elect new representatives to interview the instructor on the group's behalf. The groups were given 5 to 10 min to agree on several questions, guided by topics on the handout (e.g., the instructor's expectations, evaluation practices). Students were encouraged to ask any question related to the course. When responding, instructors answered thoughtfully and sincerely and promised to return to issues if they needed additional time. This also provided opportunities to cover important issues that had not yet been addressed, like the challenging course aspects or the ways to get assistance with course material.

During the last week of the course, research assistants administered the dependent measures to all students. After the term ended, the researchers collected official course evaluation summaries from each section.

Results and Discussion

We assessed differences between the experimental and control groups using MANOVA on the measures collected at term's end. First, we analyzed mean ratings from each section ($N = 16$) to examine differences on the university evaluation items. Second, we examined mean differences on the ratings of expectations of clarity, supportiveness, and satisfaction that we administered to students individually.

University-Administered Measures

As Table 1 displays, on the university evaluations, sections that experienced the activity reported more favorable attitudes about the course. For example, activity sections rated the course as a more valuable learning experience ($M = 4.55, SD = .27$) than the nonactivity sections ($M = 4.11, SD = .36$), $F(1, 14) = 8.59$, $p = .01$, $d = 1.20$. Likewise, activity sections perceived that

[1] Although instructors in the no activity condition were not given specific instructions to avoid other introductory activities to avoid alerting suspicion to the study's purpose, there is little reason to believe these instructors engaged in a similar activity on their own. The course supervisor (who is also the third author) reviewed all syllabi to ensure uniformity in content and requirements and found no evidence that any instructor in the no activity condition devoted a significant amount of time to any type of extensive expectation-clarifying activity.

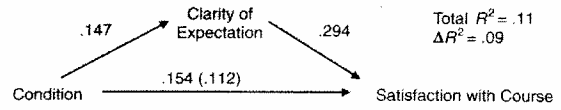
their instructor welcomed questions more ($M = 4.81$, $SD = .10$) than the nonactivity sections ($M = 4.50$, $SD = .33$), $F(1, 14) = 6.43$, $p = .02$, $d = 1.09$, and that expectations were more clearly communicated ($M = 4.76$, $SD = .10$) than in the nonactivity sections ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .23$), $F(1, 14) = 17.69$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.45$. Moreover, the same effects were observed on 12 of the remaining 13 university-administered items ($ds = .99$–1.50; all $ps < .05$) with the only exception regarding ratings of workload (a constant across all sections; $d = .83$, $p = .10$). This consistent and robust set of effects is particularly noteworthy given that conducting analyses on means (rather than scores) reduces the effects of outliers and using section as the unit of analysis afforded limited statistical power.

Experimenter-Administered Measures

At the individual level, as expected, students who experienced the activity also reported more satisfaction with the course on the experimenter-administered measures ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.04$) than those who did not ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.32$), $F(1, 369) = 12.77$, $p < .01$, $d = .31$. Additionally, as expected, students experiencing the activity had come to expect more clarity ($M = 1.21$, $SD = .62$) than those who did not ($M = 1.02$, $SD = .69$), $F(1, 369) = 7.73$, $p < .01$, $d = .29$) and more supportiveness ($M = 1.14$, $SD = .64$) than those who did not ($M = .85$, $SD = .78$), $F(1, 369) = 15.82$, $p < .001$, $d = .42$.[2] These differences were not moderated by student gender ($ps > .20$). Ratings of supportiveness were strongly and positively correlated with ratings of expectation clarity ($r = .59$, $p < .001$), whereas each of these variables was moderately correlated with course satisfaction (supportiveness $r = .38$, $p < .001$; clarity $r = .31$, $p < .001$).

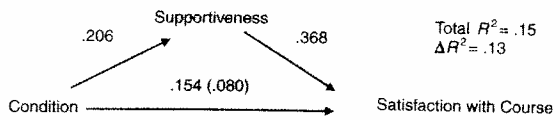
Next, using linear regression, we performed mediational analyses on the experimenter-administered items to determine whether the activity's effect on student satisfaction could be explained by either clarity or supportiveness. Without mediators entered, activity condition was positively related to course satisfaction ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$) and accounted for 2.4% of the variance. Expectation clarity partially mediated this relationship (partial condition $\beta = .11$) with condition accounting for a significantly lower portion of the variance regarding course satisfaction with clarity added to the equation (1.2%; Sobel's test $z = 3.57$, $p < .001$; see Figure 1). Similarly, supportiveness also partially mediated the relationship between the activity condition and satisfaction with the course (partial condition $\beta = .08$) with condition accounting for significantly less portion of the variance regarding course satisfaction with supportiveness added (0.6%; Sobel's test $z = 2.57$, $p < .05$; see Figure 2). Finally, stepwise regression analyses showed that both clarity ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p < .05$) and supportiveness ($\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p < .001$) explained unique variance in satisfaction with course, even when controlling for the effects of the other (total $R^2 = .16$).

These findings suggest that, by using a fairly simple intervention in the first week, instructors can create a positive environment that has long-lasting effects on student perceptions of the instructor and course satisfaction. Students who experienced the reciprocal interview expected a more supportive learning environment and more clear communication from their instructors at the end of the term, which accounted in part for their higher level of satisfaction. The findings reported here and those of previous studies demonstrating the positive proximal effects of this activity (Case et al., 2008; Hermann & Foster, 2008) provide converging support of teaching experts' recommendations



Note: Beta in parentheses indicates strength of relationship after mediator added to regression equation and ΔR^2 indicates proportion of variance uniquely accounted for by mediator.

Figure 1. The relationship among experimental condition, students' perceptions of instructor supportiveness, and students' end-of-term course satisfaction.



Note: Beta in parentheses indicates strength of relationship after mediator added to regression equation and ΔR^2 indicates proportion of variance uniquely accounted for by mediator.

Figure 2. The relationship among experimental condition, students' perceptions of expectation clarity, and students' end-of-term course satisfaction.

[2] Analyses of these variables using course section as the unit of analysis yielded a very similar pattern of findings with activity sections reporting more satisfaction ($M = 2.36$, $SD = .31$ vs. $M = 1.96$, $SD = .61$, $d = .78$), more clarity ($M = 1.25$, $SD = .16$ vs. $M = 1.03$, $SD = .13$, $d = 1.21$), and more supportiveness ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .19$ vs. $M = .88$, $SD = .24$, $d = 1.09$) than nonactivity sections, $F(1, 14) = 2.67$, $p = .12$; $F(1, 14) = 9.08$, $p = .01$; and $F(1, 14) = 6.45$, $p = .02$, respectively.

regarding the importance of the first week of class.

Although it is clear that this activity has a demonstrable impact on student satisfaction, it remains unclear whether the activity also impacts student performance. Likewise, although it seems plausible that clearer communication of expectations and a more supportive environment could translate into better performance, these factors could also lead to higher expectations on the part of the instructor or happier but less productive students. It also remains unclear which aspect of the activity is responsible for the observed effects. It could be the instructor's attention or the reciprocal exchange that is the key ingredient. Moreover, it might be that students' perceptions of the instructor's intentions for the activity matter most. Future research can and should provide more evidence about which aspect of first-week activities has the most impact. Likewise, future research can elucidate which types of courses benefit from which types of activities. This study focused on a lecture-oriented introductory social science course targeted at first- and second-year students, but it remains unclear if the activity would have more or less of an impact in smaller, upper level courses or courses where interaction might be less common (e.g., history and systems, physiological psychology).

The reciprocal interview activity explored here addresses a number of student issues that might also contribute to a more satisfying experience. Giving students an early opportunity to meet classmates, requiring early and active participation, and normalizing concerns through public discussion might all affect their experiences (see Henslee et al., 2006). Regardless of how instructors strive toward these objectives, more research is needed to gain an empirical understanding of the mechanisms by which the first days of class impact long-term course outcomes.

Another intriguing issue raised by the reciprocal nature of this activity is the degree to which it might affect instructor behavior and motivation. Like their students, instructors who use the activity might better understand others' perspectives (e.g., concerns, valued behaviors, goals). As a key component of caring for others, such understanding could have measurable effects on student outcomes and evaluations (Teven & McCroskey, 1996). Moreover, such caring has shown to be related positively to instructor motivation (Teven, 2007). Although little empirical work links instructor motivation to student outcomes, one study of secondary students demonstrated that teacher motivation positively predicted future student achievement, even controlling for baseline achievement (Knowles, 1999). Thus, the reciprocal interview might not only provide information helpful in creating an effective learning environment, but also induce a stronger commitment to do so. Anecdotal evidence from this study's instructors and our own more seasoned experience suggests that the activity has an energizing effect. The activity requires the instructor to think deeply about his or her objectives in preparation and then creates a direct and lively exchange about those objectives with a receptive student audience.

Although this study used only relatively new instructors (and the current findings might only apply to them), the activity can be useful for different reasons depending on the instructor's level of experience and how many times he or she has taught the course. For relatively new courses or instructors, it might accelerate the learning curve about student perspectives on the course. For instructors with more experience, it could be a way to gain fresh perspective on and motivation for a well-worn course. We look forward to future research that will shed light on the impact of the first week of class on student satisfaction and achievement as well as innovative ways to promote clear communication and a supportive environment in the college classroom.

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Notes

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