

*The first day of class is an important time. This CDTL Brief on **Preparing for the First Lecture/Class** provides tips on pre-class preparations, ideas on approaching the first class session and hints in getting comfortable in front of the class.*

## The First Class— Getting my Act together

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### Introduction

Standing in front of a class to teach a module for the first time can be a terrifying experience. There is an exasperating anxiety of the unknown since one is charting an untrodden path with so many uncertainties. In such a situation, one tends to feel nervous about the myriad details that could possibly go wrong, although the fear does diminish with experience. I have personally gone through such experiences many times in my career, and must confess that even after having taught in NUS for 20 years, I still have apprehensions about teaching a new module.

### Preparation for first lecture

When I first joined NUS as a teaching staff, I was advised that one needs to spend about 10 hours in preparation for every hour of lecture. While there are really no hard and fast rules about preparing for lectures, the importance of preparation can never be over emphasised. This is because the more prepared a lecturer is, the more confident he/she will be in facing the class. Therefore, I have always abided by the unwritten rule that it is far safer to prepare more material to teach within what the allotted time allows than less. It is much easier to discard material that cannot be covered within the time frame than to cook up an extra topic on the spot if there is additional time.

I recently started teaching a module that I have never taught before. Although I managed to teach only about 60% of what I originally planned, the extra material was not totally wasted. Apart from using the excess material for my research on topics not covered in class, my rigorous planning stood me in good stead when my students asked questions (some beyond the scope of what was eventually covered in class). Rather than telling the students not to bother me (since they were veering off course), I was able to discuss with them the additional

topics and encourage the students in their meritorious habit of researching outside the syllabus. By doing so, I was promoting creative thinking, lifelong learning, as well as student-teacher interaction. Thus, I have learnt that being overly prepared can bring dividends to both the lecturer and the students.

### Preparation for first tutorial

The same principle of over-preparation also holds true for the first tutorial. I normally prepare a few extra questions for discussion, in case there is extra time during a tutorial. In fact, tutorials are far more unpredictable than lectures. While the lecturer can control the time quite effectively in lectures, how the tutorials progress often depend on the students' response (i.e. whether the students are actively asking questions or not). Therefore, I have found it useful to have on hand some questions that I can throw to the class if nobody is in the mood to say anything. There are occasions when I need pockets of time to revise a topic on which I have received many queries through the module website and through email. Such sessions can be slotted into a tutorial lesson quite easily when there are minutes to spare. Of course, for the benefit of the whole class, the lecturer may also address the students' queries during the extra time towards the end of a lecture.

### Assessment

Another point that the lecturer needs to bear in mind while preparing for a new module is the problem of assessment. The topics covered in the module should provide sufficient scope for setting exam or test questions, depending on whether it is an examinable module or one with only continuous assessment (CA). Ultimately, marks are still the workhorse of our assessment system. A lecturer cannot simply impart knowledge, stimulate creative thinking and instil lifelong learning among his students, but forget about grading the students in

a final exam or in regular CA. Since assessments are compulsory, they will, to a certain extent, affect the way we plan the syllabus and the way in which we deliver the lectures. It is therefore, important, during the first lecture (if possible), to tell the class explicitly how the module's assessment will be carried out. If this is not done, the students might complain that they were never told, or were told very late in the semester, how to prepare themselves for this module.

In NUS, teaching staff are required to set the exam questions and provide the solutions early in the semester. Very often, the exam question on a particular topic is set even before the topic is covered in class. This is not necessarily a bad thing since the syllabus and the examination ought to be viewed as a whole, so that they are relevant to each other. It therefore behooves the lecturer to start thinking about the examination while preparing for the lectures. The fact that teaching staff are not supposed to repeat tutorial questions in the final exam makes it even more necessary for the lecturer to consider all the module's components—the syllabus,

the tutorials, the CA questions and the final exam questions—in totality.

### Conclusion

By now the reader will realise that the rule of the thumb stating that 'one needs to spend about 10 hours in preparation for every hour of lecture' is just a guideline. To really be prepared for an hour's lecture, one probably needs to invest about 20–30 hours. The uncertainties of any new module are infinite and the possible outcomes unpredictable. It is therefore safer to prepare more material than less. With more preparation comes greater confidence in conducting the lectures and tutorials, and more competence in handling unforeseen circumstances. An early start in preparation is hence an obvious advantage and should be the aim of every first-timer who desires to do a good job. ■

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*Associate Professor Seah Kar Heng is a winner of the Outstanding Educator Award 2003.*

# Your First Class: Preparation and “Theatre”

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*Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths theater.*

—Gail Godwin

It surprises me that even seasoned artistes confess to having nerves before their first performance. As one of the roles we assume as teachers includes being a 'performer' of sorts, it bodes well for us to make sure that we do whatever we can to 'get our act together', particularly for our first class.

When I have my first class, my primary objective is to whet the students' appetites for what lies ahead in the rest of my module. In this article, I will deal with some of the matters that I am mindful of to ensure that my first class—most likely an introductory lecture—will be as effective as possible in sowing the seeds of interest in the students. There are of course, other matters<sup>1</sup>, which will be helpful, but the following can act as an initial checklist. For convenience, I have divided the list into three segments:

## 1. Before the class

The importance of preparation on your part cannot be over emphasised, particularly if it is your first time.

Knowing that you are prepared will calm your nerves and give you confidence. If you have lectured before, sufficient preparation will ensure that this class will be better than the last. Your preparation should include the following:

- Know the class size and study the class profile
- Decide on your modes of instruction and try to have a mix of the following:
  - Lecture-based
  - Tutorial
  - Webcast
  - Use of IVLE
  - Emails
- Prepare your module outline including:
  - Objectives
  - Syllabus
  - Reference list
  - Your expectations
  - Dates of tests/submission of assignments

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1. Royle, D. (2001). *Teaching Tips for College and University Instructors: A Practical Guide*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Decide on the dates for submission of tutorial assignments or project work.

## 2. During the class

Depending on the size of the class, it might be useful to have an icebreaker. There are many ways to do this:

- Introduce yourself
  - How you would like to be addressed
  - How you can be contacted
  - What your consultation hours are
- Introduce your module
  - What you hope to impart to the students (e.g. is the emphasis on students gaining mastery in a subject area, the development of critical thinking or problem solving abilities?)
  - How you intend to impart the knowledge (e.g. teaching methods/strategies)
  - What your expectations of the students are (e.g. class participation, turning in assignments punctually)
  - What the students can expect from you (e.g. teaching methods, handouts, types of questions)
  - What the ground rules are (e.g. latecomers, hand phones, interruptions in class, provision of feedback)
  - What the role of class rep/respective group reps is (e.g. as a medium of communication between yourself and the cohort so that problems can be nipped in the bud)
- Get interactive. At the first class, do not feel obligated to fill up the allotted time; rather it is far better to keep matters somewhat informal and fluid. For example, you can provide an overview of your objectives for your module and some content knowledge, casually seek students' thoughts on what they think your module is about and end early if need be. Whenever I conduct my first lecture on the Property Law module, I pose the following question to the students: "What do you think the Module is about?"  
Invariably I get a perky response: "This module is about Property Law."  
And the class goes: "Ha ha ha!"  
I say: "Yes and that is...?" Then as someone else's hand goes up to offer his/her view followed by another, the students' responses become more and more relevant. This always helps to lighten the initially serious and unsure mood in the lecture theatre.
- Take questions from the students and welcome feedback.
- I give handouts only after I have spoken (a personal preference). When I speak, I may use only a few slides

or transparencies but the handouts will provide the detailed information. In this way I have the students' undivided attention.

## 3. After the class

- Stay awhile; do not rush off promptly at the going of the bell. I find that students often prefer to approach you individually or in small groups to clarify doubts rather than in a large crowd, particularly at the first class. Besides, it gives them (and you) a better chance to get up-close and personal and for your students to see you as a 'real' person, not some distant and imperious ivory-tower professor separated from them by a podium or table marking the clear line between teacher and student. Let them know you are there to be their guide.

## Other matters

Of course, the above pointers will have to be varied according to:

- The composition of students (Are they a homogenous group with similar academic backgrounds and ages?)
- Level of the course (Is it an undergraduate Year 1 module, a senior Year or postgraduate module? If it is not a Year 1 module, was there an introductory course on the Module conducted previously?)
- Students' motivation (Is it an essential module or have students *elected* to do your module? The latter is an advantage but do ascertain the reasons for their choice)
- Students' attitude (Have the students previously taken a similar module at a basic level? This may affect the students' attitude towards your module positively or negatively.)
- The students' knowledge of you from an earlier module.

## Last words

I would like to conclude by referring to Gail Godwin's quote (see top of article). In my view, the preparation you make for your first lesson *is in fact* for the "theatre" that is to follow. I also try not to lose sight of this:

*The true aim of...a teacher should be, not to impart his own opinions, but to kindle minds.*

—Frederick William Robertson

I hope that by the end of my first class, my "theatre" will make my students eager for my next lesson, and I find that they usually are. ■

# Stimulating Student Interest in the First Lecture

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The first class meeting is often a defining moment in a course: it establishes expectations and an implicit learning contract on the part of both students and lecturer. Yet the first class also has a number of mutually contradictory requirements that have to be negotiated with some skill. Students need to know a considerable amount of information about the mechanics of the module, yet it is difficult to present this information in an easily digestible and entertaining way. An hour's lecture devoted to explaining the syllabus is hardly likely to tempt students who are 'shopping' into taking the module: furthermore, it is unlikely to provide a model for the kind of interactive learning or critical thinking that a lecturer wishes to encourage. An appeal for 'any questions' at the end of such an introduction is likely to produce a few raised hands, if any, and questions asked by students in such situations tend to relate to the mechanics of the module (e.g. "What exactly will we be tested on in the exam?" "Do we have to attend every tutorial?") rather than to the subject itself and the excitement generated through learning.

In an introductory lecture class, I negotiate these difficulties using a variety of strategies. I produce a comprehensive web site, which is ready (although never finished, since it is continuously evolving) before the beginning of the semester for students to browse<sup>1</sup>. On the web site, I invite students to think over a series of introductory questions, and to introduce themselves on an Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE) forum. The questions are deliberately pitched in order to be inclusive and to let me find out about the students' background: for an introductory module on literary studies, for instance, I might ask students what their best and worst experiences of studying literature have been, or ask them to respond to a proposal that the study of literature at secondary schools and junior colleges should be done away with. To make things easy, I ask students to answer only one IVLE question. I generally find that a fair number of students respond, before the first lecture, and I can then incorporate some of their responses into my introductory lecture.

I start the lecture itself at the time when I normally expect to start: for an English Literature module this is on time, perhaps allowing a minute or two for stragglers; for a General Education Module (GEM) or Singapore Studies

(SS) module, in which students are coming from all over campus, this may be five or even ten minutes past the hour. I leave getting to know names until the tutorials, although I do look at the photos on IVLE before class and try to match the names of those who have posted to faces. If the lecture theatre is (as is frequently the case for me) too big for the number of students, I encourage the students to come down to the first few rows. Humorously phrased threats to always call on those who sit right at the back normally provide sufficient incentive! Generally, I try to start the lecture with an 'attention grabber'. In a recent Singapore Literature module (EN3263/SSA2201: "Singapore Literature in Context"), for example, I and the two tutors each read out a poem—one condemnatory, one celebratory, and the other playfully ironic—by a Singapore writer, which commented on Singapore society. Reading the poems settled the class down, and also produced a sense of expectation.

I then introduce myself and the tutors, and give a brief discussion of the issues raised in the module. In the case of the Singapore Literature module, after pausing a little after the last poem was read out, I tied the subject matter of the poems into a brief lecture about questions that the module would raise—about representation or identity, for instance, or the relation of literature to the social world in which it is written and read, or the use of language. Using material from students' postings, I tried to show how the questions raised by the poems are central to discussions of literature in general, and are mirrored in the students' own experiences. I named the names of students who posted on IVLE while doing this, and mention some of the best responses in detail. In doing so, I hope to signal a couple of things to students. First, that their voices and opinions are important in the module, and that I will listen to them attentively and weigh them carefully. Second, that they frequently have tacit knowledge derived from personal experience of which they can become aware and then put to use, rephrased, in academic study.

I then move on to a discussion of the content of the module itself. While some explanation and orientation, is necessary, experience has taught me that students often suffer from information overload in an introductory session. Therefore, I do not give out module descriptions, but rather talk students through the syllabus on the web site using a LCD projector, and discuss the literary texts we will be studying in a way that attracts their interest. I emphasise that they should get into the habit of browsing

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1. For a sample course web site developed for EN2101E "Models of Literary Appreciation and Criticism", see <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellhpj/EN2101E-2003/index.htm>.

the site for themselves and emailing me if anything is unclear. Depending on the feeling I have about the responsiveness of the audience, I may pause at this point for questions. If I do so, I encourage students to turn to a neighbour, introduce themselves, and then ask each other if anything is unclear before reverting back to me. If questions focus on mechanical issues related to the syllabus, I answer them briefly but ask students to explore the web site more fully. If there are genuine difficulties in registration, readings, or timetable or exam clashes, I encourage students to talk to me after the lecture. If the problem raised is one that affects many students, I will later send out an email to the class distribution list.

By this point, I hope to have both inspired and motivated the students to see why the module's topic is important, and also to have given a basic explanation of the way the module works. Now the fun starts—I try to have a learning activity that is approachable to students, yet also serves as a precursor for future activities in both lecture and tutorial. Despite a packed syllabus, I do not try to cover essential module content in the first lecture. The activity thus serves as a model for future work, and is again designed to hook student interest and encourage closer engagement. Activities I have tried include:

- Giving the students a short, well-written text to read (a poem, or a prose passage of less than a page) and asking them to locate a word that seems most striking to them, and to indicate why;
- Comparing short literary and non-literary texts on the same subject;
- Answering a brief questionnaire on issues to do with the module; or

- Watching a short video on a relevant topic and then responding to a series of questions on it.

In each case, I ask students to first share conclusions with their partners and, having done so, report back to the class. Using either a long flex or a radio microphone, I'll then wander around the lecture theatre seeking responses, gradually pulling the responses together and, finally, relating them back to the overall issues that the module addresses.

In the final few minutes of the first lecture, I look forward to next week's lecture, first in terms of the content that we'll be covering, and then in terms of mechanics, listing what needs to be done next week. I make sure that the lecture finishes punctually, but make myself available outside the lecture hall to answer individual questions. I hope that students will go away from the first class with their curiosity piqued, eager to learn more about the content of the module itself, and knowing where to go to find out details of readings, syllabus and assessment.

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# Starting on the Right Track

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Preparing for the first lecture entails more than getting your materials or lecture presentation ready. It is also means preparing to meet your students for the first time and making a good impression. For the teacher, the first lecture is an initial attempt at creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, setting the tone for the rest of the term, marketing the course to motivate students to stay on and to actively participate in class, and inspiring students towards the achievement of mutually agreed upon goals and expectations. Clearly, the first lecture has far reaching consequences for the development of the course and, if not handled properly, the teacher may later experience difficulties in redirecting the course to its intended orientation.

## The first meeting

Teacher and students alike come to class with mixed feelings—anxiety surrounding the uncertainty of what lies ahead and the anticipation of meeting new challenges. First impressions are created as psychological contracts, reciprocity of beliefs and expectations are formed. From the teacher-student and student-student interactions, students get to find out if the course is interesting and fun. So how do we deal with the first lecture?

## Preparations

Be prepared. As first impressions are important, it is imperative for the teacher to come to class well prepared.

There is nothing like a good preparation to give a teacher an aura of confidence, which in turn encourages trust and credibility. Memorising your students' names will make it easier for you to eventually connect the names with the faces. If it is a small class, a seating chart is a good tool. In the case of a large class, ask each student to turn in at the next meeting, a 3 x 5 index card each with their photos and any other information that you may require from them.

There should be enough copies of the course syllabus to go around. Prepare a detailed and easy-to-understand calendar of activities for the course. Students can then refer to the 'roadmap' (course syllabus and calendar) for directions whenever needed. Make colourful and creative visual aids to attract attention and to improve retention of material discussed.

### **Set the tone**

The first meeting should set the tone for the rest of the term. Start right. Discuss the course outline with the students. Explicitly explain to the students your expectations. Some teachers draw up a *behavioural contract* that students sign. This 'contract' details the house rules (e.g. class starts and ends punctually, cell phones must be turned off, due dates are to be strictly followed). In addition, the teacher may remind the students of the College or University's academic policies, issues on intellectual property and ethics in research. Some teachers enter into a syllabus-based contract with the students.

Set high expectations and expect excellence from everyone. Your expectations of your students will affect how you conduct the classes. Expecting excellence from your students motivates you to come to class well prepared and motivated. However, low expectations hardly inspire the teacher and the students to do their best and realise their potential. If you expect your students to be active learners, get the students to participate actively on the first day. If your teaching strategy requires regular group discussions, allow the students some time to form their own groups.

Discuss the grading system and the course requirements. If your institutional policies allow for participative decision making, this is the best time to agree with the students on matters such as deadlines, number of test items, how often and even the weightage of each requirement. Students are more likely to obey rules they helped set up.

### **Establish credibility and market the course**

Dress to impress. The way you dress creates an impression on your students. Some teachers prefer casual clothes to formal attire. You may dress according to your personal style so long as your dressing does not distract the students from the coursework and class activities.

Spend some time introducing yourself in a way that will not only create a good impression but also build rapport with the students. To establish credibility with

your students, you might consider preparing a short PowerPoint presentation of your resume, emphasising your credentials, experiences and expertise in teaching the course. Remember that there are students as nervous as, or probably more nervous than you are on the first day of class. To ease the tension and enhance rapport with the students, share something personal about yourself, such as your educational philosophy, your inspirations as a teacher, your strengths, weaknesses and the like.

Motivate your students by showing enthusiasm for the course. Give the students an overview of how the course relates to other courses. Students are motivated to learn when they perceive what they are learning is relevant and applicable to their own lives. If you are teaching freshmen, impress upon the students the difference between high school and college courses, what college courses prepare them for and encourage the students to look forward to a career in their chosen field.

### **Get to know one another**

As the class will be spending the rest of the term together, it is a good idea to include some activities for the students to get to know one another. 'Getting to know you' games or icebreakers facilitate classroom management and support related teaching strategies. The following are some suggested sites for icebreakers: <http://www.angelfire.com/ks/teachme/firstday.html> and <http://www.kimskorner4teachertalk.com/classmanagement/icebreakers.html>.

### **Students' role**

What is the student's role on the first lecture? Students are held accountable and responsible for their own learning. Administer *learning styles* questionnaires. The results will help students manage their learning better and guide the teacher on teaching strategies he/she will need to employ to address all learning style needs. Allow active participation in the discussion of the course syllabus to help students raise any questions or clarifications. Break them up into groups and get each group's representative to report to the class, what they find most interesting among the course topics, their learning expectations and ask them to suggest ways to enliven the conduct of the course and maximise student participation.

### **Concluding the session**

The first lecture can conclude with a brief introductory lecture and the assigning of homework. A first lecture that is fruitful, interesting and fun should inspire the students to look forward to the next ones.

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# Making or Breaking a Course— the First Lesson

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The motto of the Scout Movement "Be Prepared" tells us that things do not happen by chance in life. Instead, in order to accomplish any task successfully, it is important to plan and prepare a course of action. Preparation, which is part of planning, is the pre-requisite and foundation of good management. Success stories of people from different spheres and disciplines owe their achievements to careful preparation, which precludes the execution of their work.

In any professional activity, sufficient preparation ensures the smooth conduct of business. For example in a restaurant, the amount of planning and preparation that goes into creating the menu is often taken for granted. Unknown to many, menu planning is an intricate process. The chefs have to reckon with such complex factors as client choice, nutritional standards and regulatory requirements along with practical matters such as budgetary constraints, culinary expertise of employees, production equipment and eye appeal of the finished meal.

Likewise as lecturers, we need to be adequately prepared before the delivery of our lessons. In fact, it is quite unthinkable for any teacher to be unprepared before a class. In the context of education, preparation includes planning the course objectives, learning outcomes, curriculum and mode of delivery. Failure to make

substantial preparations, especially for the very first lecture or lesson, will undermine the credibility of the lecturer whom the audience look to for professional conduct and practice. While leaving a good first impression can stimulate students' interest in the subject, the lack of preparation may result in negligence which could undermine or ruin our images as professional educators. Thus, the first lesson can make or break the course.

Lecturers who have been teaching for a long time should not be complacent and think that with ample teaching experience, it is therefore not necessary to prepare for lessons. It is every lecturer's responsibility to make the appropriate essential preparation, just as other professionals would before executing a project. Lecturers who are well prepared are meticulous in their lesson plans and are clear about the lesson's objectives. They are able to introduce new ideas and concepts through appropriate learning activities. Conversely, lecturers who lack preparations often come late for classes, lecture in a disorganised manner and fumble when using audio-visual equipments and other teaching aids. Below are some areas for preparation:

**Course objectives and lesson plans.** The first stage of preparation involves careful consideration of the purposes and objectives of the course, which will lead

to the development of the curriculum. Each lesson is then designed to meet the overall objectives of the course. For example in the Human Resource Management course on “Interpersonal Relations: Theory & Practice” which I have taught, I engaged the students in reflective activities to know more about themselves and their course mates at the beginning before I introduced (in subsequent lectures) other topics like motivation, communication, leadership, etc. As intended by the course objectives, the lectures and learning activities were prepared in such a way that students can learn progressively to appreciate the various dynamic forces in the ever-changing world of work and increasingly understand how they themselves could fit into the macro picture and also to be able to work well with others in a team.

**Learning activities.** It is also important to consider the type of tutorial activities which will support the learning objectives of the course. This is especially crucial at the start of the course because tutorial activities, if well planned, can motivate the students to learn. Some examples of learning activities that are appropriate for tutorials are: case-studies, discussions, role-plays, team-building exercises, videos, debates and personal and group project presentations.

**Facilities/teaching resources.** The preparation process would also involve consideration of the use of appropriate learning environment and facilities like lecture theatres, laboratories, overhead projectors and flip charts. Often, these are neglected and dismissed as unimportant. However, effective teaching and learning can be hampered by the lack of inadequate logistics and technical support. For example, it is common to see lecturers who do not know the seating capacity of the lecture theatre, or some who are not able to operate equipments such as slide projectors and video-recorders. These give the audience an impression that the lecturers are either not adequately prepared or do not know how to use these resources.

**Time management.** Good planning will ensure that lectures or lessons start and end punctually. It is also good practice to book the required facilities and resources in advance. On the day of the class, the lecturer should arrive early to ensure that the lecture theatre or classroom is opened, arrange the students’ name cards, chairs, get the audio-visual equipment checked and set the air-conditioners to the right temperatures. Being early also gives the lecturer opportunities to interact with the students.

In conclusion, adequate preparation is vital to facilitate effective learning. Failure to do so will not only undermine the professionalism and credibility of the lecturers but also hinder the teaching process and effective learning. In preparing for the first lecture, it would be helpful also to seek advice from fellow colleagues on how they conducted their lessons in the past. With such communal support, preparing for the first lecture or subsequent lessons may be less stressful and more enjoyable. ■



The Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL) engages in a wide range of activities to promote good teaching and learning at the National University of Singapore, including professional development, teaching and learning support, research on educational issues, and instructional design and development.

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